Several Conceptual Clarifications on the Distinction between Constructivism and Social Constructivism

Antonio SANDU & Elena UNGURU

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/po/2017.0802.04

Covered in: EBSCO, ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabell, Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet, Journalseek, Scipio, Crossref, WorldCat
Several Conceptual Clarifications on the Distinction between Constructivism and Social Constructivism

Antonio SANDU¹, Elena UNGURU²

Abstract: The present paper aims to contribute to the theoretical and operational understanding of the distinction between social constructivism and social-constructivism, both theories being referential for the foundation of a new ontology and social epistemology. In literature, the two models are often used in the same sense, both of which are used as theoretical references in research on the social construction of an institution or social phenomenon.

Keywords: constructivism, social constructionism, postmodern sociology.

Introduction

Language is social reality because it is not pure objectivity, it appears to us as a world of meanings, institutions, interpretations. Social reality is subjective and multifaceted, the individual actors in the process of creating meaning actually establish their own reality (Creswell, 2007). Social reality has as many facets as how many subjects are involved in its co-construction (Sandu, 2016).

The present paper aims to contribute to the theoretical and operational understanding of the distinction between social constructivism and social-constructivism, both theories being referential for the foundation of a new ontology and social epistemology. In literature, the two models are often used in the same sense, both of which are used as theoretical references in research on the social construction of an institution or social phenomenon.

¹ Professor Ph.D, University of Suceava, Romania, Professor Ph.D (associate) University of Oradea & Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania.
² Ph.D Student, Doctoral School in Sociology, University of Oradea, Romania & Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania.
The origin of the two theories regarding the social construction of social institutions and phenomena

The theories on the construction of social reality come from two different sources, the first being of a sociological nature, originated in the work of Berger and Luckmann (2008), and the second in social psychology, in Payne's work (1999). The sociological perspective addresses how social problems are created, while the psychological dimension aims at the emergence of constructs such as identity, personality and perception, in the psychological sense of social-constructivism, and in narrative sociology, the emphasis is on the construction of social stories (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Gergen, 2005). The meta-narrations generate the local culture in which the individual is immersed and within which he builds his speech and bases his decisions (O'Donoghue, 2010). Social reality is built through a process of interaction between the various social and communicative actors. In the process of communication, individuals establish meanings in the social environment they come into contact with. Professional identity, for example, is such a construct, resulting from the communicative interaction between professionals, beneficiaries, and various interest groups and institutions involved. Participants in the social construction process are brought together in various interpretative contexts, called "courts" of social construction.

Semantic Perspectives of Constructivism vs. Social Constructivism

The idea of a social construct represents the structural-functional unity of the process of social construction of a certain reality, being equivalent to the idea of operational definition, based on which the social actors act.

The social construction of reality is understood in two ways:

- An analysis of constructs that are formed in the interaction between social actors. Constructs are operational definitions of the various elements of reality resulting from the interaction between the social actors (Berger & Luckmann, 2008). These combined constructs become the "reality itself" for the individuals who adopt them. These constructs, beyond the primary perception of individuals, were called "quasi-transcendental" (Sandu 2015, 2016). This approach to social construction of reality is called social constructivism.

- An analysis of constructive interactions and instances of the social construction of reality. This approach is based on the contribution of Kennet Gergen (2005), focusing on the constructive process itself, in other words
how the constructs are formed. Social constructional analysis focuses on the context in which social construction takes place and the discursive mechanisms that generate it. In this case, we are interested in the discourse about social practice "success stories about a certain practice", but also the stories about the practice in which social participants build their professional identity and mutual reporting. Mutual interactions become institutionalized (Galbin, 2014), this approach being called social constructionism.

O'Donoghue (2010) shows that conceptual constructional framework includes both social constructionism and constructivism, distinct meta-theories (Franklin, 1995), both attentive to the "voices of the participants in research" and "the stories they show about their own practice and on which they build their meaning about it" (O'Donoghue, 2010). Social constructional analysis allows, in the author's view (O'Donoghue, 2010), to analyze the influence of discourse on social and / or professional practice.

Social constructivism in the context of postmodern social theories

Constructivism starts from an idea of Kelly (1955), called personal construct theory, according to which individuals create their own version of social reality, without objective social deeds outside the continuous interpretation that individuals do on their own experience (Butt & Burr, 2004). Constructs are the tools through which individuals find meaning, configure and shape their own social world. For example, in the analysis of professional practices, Solas (1994) shows that the supervisor and the professional have different constructs of supervision because of their different perceptual positions. The supervisor is oriented towards the content of communication, while the supervisor, on process and interaction (O'Donoghue, 2010). Also, the differences in values, beliefs, opinions on beneficiaries derived from the theoretical perspective adopted, or from their own practical experience can pose challenges for the supervisory relationship in creating a common understanding of the oversight process (O'Donoghue, 2010).

Social constructionism is an integral part of the postmodern perspective from which it takes over the idea of "negotiated social reality" and consensus of language (Hacking, 1999, p. 196; Sandu & Ponea, 2010a). This approach focuses on meaningful stories, being more interested in the process of creating meaning, than in the created meaning. According to Gergen (2005), the researcher who adopts a constructive social position aims to understand and then explain how individuals take action, explain and
describe the world in which they live. In other words, the constructionist approach puts the idea of social reality and the possibility of objective knowledge in brackets, focusing on the significance that individuals attribute to the world and the social facts to which they are part. Constructivism in the manner proposed by Kennet Gergen (2005) is at the same time a social ontology - the world is a product of negotiating the meanings that social actors attribute to the social phenomena (Sandu, 2012; 2015; 2016). The meanings that individuals assign to the world may differ from one social actor to another, but the process of deconstruction-reconstruction of meanings (Sandu, 2016) makes individuals identify common meanings of the terms by which the social reality is defined.

**Interpretative drift and fractal constructionist perspective**

Constructionism, just as constructivism are paradigms about how the individual operates with constructs - operational definitions on reality itself. While constructionism places the construction of the constructs at the level of the individual, constructivism places them at the level of interactions in the social environment, the individual acquiring them and re-projecting them on the environment. We propose a particular version of constructionism that takes into account Habermas’ (1987) theory of communicative action (Sandu 2016). We consider that the process of constructing the reality takes the form of a communicative action, to obtain the interpretative consensus between the rationality of the individual and the communicational constructive structures designed by the environment towards the individual. The social construction of reality takes place even in / through communicative action as a process of negotiating interpretations. Once the interpretative strategies are set up, these become operational constructs, and the action of the individual becomes social action (Caras & Sandu, 2014a; 2014b). The social construction of reality can be analyzed, in our opinion by combining the constructional paradigm with the theory of communicative action from ontological, epistemological, axiological and ethical perspectives.

On an ontological basis, the social construction of reality can be analyzed starting from its levels and the intervals of transparency to knowledge (Sandu, 2016). Transparency of knowledge as formulated by Basarab Nicolescu (2007) is nothing more than the result of communicative action as a process generating meaning, that has the goal of creating constructs. It is therefore a regional ontology of creating the world by creating constructs (Sandu, 2016).
At the epistemological level, the postmodern and transmodern communication paradigm can be brought into discussion as particular forms of relating to knowledge. The unity of the world deconstructed by the followers of postmodernism is rebuilt as a communicative network. The unit is not managed by transcendental metanaratics, but by semiotic pacts, communicative actions constituting new forms of narratives and meta-narrations as epistemic references, valid within the interpretative universe (Sandu 2016).

Knowledge of the world is essentially a human creation, and not a mirror of an independent reality. The central premises of constructivism are: the world cannot be known as it is, but rather a multi-faceted series of socially built realities; language, communication and discourse have the central role of the interactive process through which we understand the world and ourselves; social actors build social realities through relational processes; it is particularly important to reflect on the historical cultural background of our assumptions and constructs, and to maintain openings on other possible realities built (Haar, 2002; Sandu, 2016).

Synthesizing the two approaches, constructivism and social constructionism (Sandu & Ponea 2010a; 2010b), a model called fractal constructionism (Sandu, 2016) can be realized, which emphasizes the constructive drift of a construct when passing through successive constructive instances.

Fractal constructionism represents a methodological approach that aims to analyze the interpretive derivation of some key concepts that have, in fact, value of social constructs. The method involves analyzing a construct, as well as transforming its meanings into the various interpretative contexts in which it occurs. Constructs are the result of communicative, or meaning-negotiating processes. Once established, they become mandatory for social action, with the constructs' meanings rarely being discussed otherwise than in intentional deconstructive processes. As an example, the term of supervision, coming from vision from above, is associated with the sense of surveillance. The process of constructing supervision as surveillance takes place in professional environments, where administrative supervision or supervision of persons in the training period, predominates. Based on this sense of the term supervision, in the literature there are described situations in which the supervised social assistants reject the effectiveness of supervision as being nothing more than bureaucratic action (Wilkins, Forrester & Grant, 2017). In the supervision model, the shift from
administrative supervision to formative supervision can be considered in the context of introducing supervision as a mandatory practice in social services.

Deconstructing the strictly administrative sense of the supervisory idea, Kadushin (2014) introduces the idea of educational supervision as a mutual training of practitioners and supervising support as an instance to provide professional support and to limit or eliminate the burnout phenomenon. This interpretive drift of the meaning of the term *supervision* enriches the construct of supervision with new functions, thus making the reporting differ in both the perception of the importance of supervision and the supervisory methodology, by introducing a supervisory way derived from the specific non-directional counseling (Cojocaru, 2005; Kadushin, 2014; Sandu, 2016).

**Criticisms of the two theoretical models**

Criticisms of the constructionist perspective refer mainly to the non-acceptance of an objective social reality, and to its transformation into a social consensus in the case of social constructivism, respectively in a construct in the mind of the individual (Speed, 1991; Franklin, 1995; Beckett, 2006; Sheppard, 2006). Although the social world exists, it is a "self" that cannot be known as such (Kant, 2009), knowing how consciousness takes note of social reality, either in the form of individual constructs or the outcome of a negotiation of interpretations (Sandu, 2016).

Antonio Sandu sees both social constructionism and constructivism as post-kantian theories, and discusses the classical new-phenomenon relationship. For knowledge of the social phenomenon, constructional sociology is directed to methods such as social phenomenology (Creswell, 2007), narrative sociology (Franzosi, 1998; Erol Isik, 2015) and Constructionist Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; 1998; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

Another criticism of the social use of constructivism is brought by Payne (2005) and refers to the narrowing of the field of research in social sciences to the process of knowledge formation. Moreover, Payne points out that the strict interpretation of social constructivism excludes oppressive experiences from being purely linguistic constructs, which is incompatible with the practice of social assistance and its foundation on human rights, social justice and the elimination of vulnerabilities and social oppression (2006). Payne (1999) proposes a soft social construction that admits the importance of the social context in the formation of social knowledge and
reality, but does not exclude the existence of an objective social reality, identical to all social actors (O'Donoghue, 2010).

In his turn, Cooper (2001) points out that a radical constructive approach would put an end to the assistential practices, be it psychological, psycho-pedagogical, social assistance, nursing, whose professional practice starts from the idea of unconditional acceptance of the client’s reality. If this idea can be understood in the sense that the professional has to understand the reality of the client as being different from his own or other people, this is hampered by the idea of the absence of any social reality different from the subjective or inter-subjective one of his client. The subjective reality is - metaphorical - incomprehensible, the professional cannot basically take note of it and interpret it. The reality being accessed by the individual through their own constructs, they are personal and only approximate by the communication partner. This non-communicability of constructs is overcome from a constructive social perspective, constructs are communicable precisely because they are formed in the interaction of social actors.

Another criticism addresses the anti-absolutist character of social constructionism, which puts the ethical practice of the assistant professions into difficulty, and a universalist moral ground cannot be considered. The ethical principles and ethical basis of the assistant professions are undermined by the inexistence of a universal moral truth (Parton & O’Byrne 2000). Moral relativism considers O'Donoghue (2010), does not hinder the value-based practice of social assistance, since a pragmatic perspective of social assistance can be formulated, based on the existence of certain degrees of truth that can be applied to social reality, in order to privilege certain knowledge such as the ethical constructs, allowing social assistance to be a practical profession that operates with specific values, abilities and knowledge that can approximate the needs of the client even if the social assistant cannot fully understand the inner world of it.

It is possible to respond to these criticisms of the use of the constructive social model through the idea of a dual deconstruction-construction process (Sandu 2015; 2016), so that the constructs are placed at the level of the intersubjective reality, being formed in a process of creating meaning that even it does not describe the social world, but rather an institution for the individual, the constructs once established become frameworks of the social universe that can be determined as such because they act as operational definitions with which a class of social actors - an interpretive community - act.
Conclusions

The social researcher will need to identify significant voices, not just those that are manifested, but also those latent in the social reality. The researcher, starting from a constructivist or constructive assumption that social reality is multiple and is the result of a negotiation of interpretations, will epistemologically privilege the understanding of the phenomena as represented in the consciousness of the social actors, rather than a supposed objective, neutral axiological reality, and outside the social actors. The synthesis is proposed between the social construction theories of reality, especially social-constructionism, and the theory of communicative action. Communicative action overlaps the social one, but at another constructive level of reality, the first constructing the normative institutional frameworks of social interactions, while the second constructs the social order within the normative institutional limits already drawn in the higher constructive level. Social constructivism and social constructionism represent two models of understanding the social construction of reality, which differs by defining the process of formation and interpretive derivation of the constructs at the level of the individual, or that of the interaction between the individuals. The constructive perspective can generate a new paradigm in social ontology and epistemology, a paradigm of postmodern, anti-structural and anti-objectivist paradigm.

Acknowledgment


References


Several Conceptual Clarifications on the Distinction between Constructivism and Social Constructivism. Postmodern Openings, 8(2), 51-61. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/po/2017.0802.04


