# What does the constructionist perspective help us to understand about the creation of difference?

## Introduction

In social science, it is a common practice to distinguish between the concepts of Essentialism and Constructionism. Essentialism holds that every object or being has a set of characteristics that are essential to its character and functions. Modern Essentialism comprises a conviction that certain occurrences are inescapable, natural and biologically designed (or regulated). In contrast, Constructionism claims that reality is subjective, that reality is "socially constructed", and language is identified as the primary tool through which we interpret reality.

Social constructionism studies how individuals perceive the reality of the world around them. It is the interaction with the social and cultural norms that give meaning to things that are otherwise meaningless. So what makes reality? Or what makes anything real? Most of the time, the objects and events we interact with and experience around us are just ‘constructs’. With time we develop opinions (based on our perceptions and interpretations) and judge things according to that lens only.

Social constructionism stipulates that our understanding of self and many facets of the world around us are not real. They appear 'real' to us only because we perceive them to be real through agreed social norms. Take the terms nation or money, for example. We consider a group of people to be a nation who seems to share a common dialect and/or a common history, money bills are simply pieces of paper and will not hold any value except for the one we as a society has assigned to it. Who are you? Who are we? The understanding of one's self can also be considered a social construct, as our identity is what is produced by our social and cultural exchanges.

There are two branches within the framework of social constructionism; the weak and the strong; the former entails that social constructs depend upon fundamental facts; facts that are of the most basic level and are independent of other facts for their explanation. In the world we live in, its hard to comprehend something that is not or cannot be explained by something else. So, for example, If you are looking at a television screen, the screen shows us images because of changing energies, which in turn can be explained by a function of sub-atomic particles called quarks (the most fundamental particle of an atom). So now, the most fundamental fact here is the explanation of quarks. Weak social constructionism separates these from institutional facts, which are formed as a result of social agreements and depend on other facts/explanations as the case of money bills mentioned above. On the other hand, Strong social constructionism promotes the idea that reality as a whole is structured on social norms and language, that every aspect of our knowledge is a social construct and not even the most basic of facts exists on their own, even quarks (mentioned above) are what we call them or how we understand them. ‘*Facts’ just simply do not exist* (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 3).

## Essentialists Vs. Constructionists

If we look at how gender is regarded in both schools of thought; As per Essentialists different sexes (genders) are to be treated differently; that is men and women are supposed to have their particulars roles within a family or workplace setting assigned to them, and they should function accordingly this, in turn, paves the way for ideas that perhaps members of one gender should be treated better than members of the other. In contrast, Constructivism is considered as liberating, because it provides that one’s identity is the result of social constructions that could have been different from what they are now and similarly could modify in the future (continually changing with changes in social trends).

## Dichotomizing

Many factors contribute towards the formation of cumulative groupings of individuals. Frequently, these groupings appear as dichotomies. Sociologists have argued that the conception of such groups is a regular feature of social life because it is a way to resolve life's routine problems, such as allocating tasks by gender” (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 20).

In practice, two segments of a dichotomy can certainly not be equivalent. "Categorical inequality arises and continues, because some benefit from it and because there is a social cost in withdrawing from its use. Therefore, the two parts of the dichotomy must be recognized and treated fairly. The degree of disparity between dichotomous pairs can vary; the criteria for defining distinctions can vary, and attempts to minimize such disparities will modify; however, certain inequalities have been persistent throughout the communal existence.

## Gender – a ‘Creation of Difference’

The creation of difference is how groups of individuals are regarded and treated as different from each other and how these formations of difference shape individuals' lives.

If we look at the segregation of gender, a master status (so-called as it has a very significant effect), one can ponder if gender is an essentialist bifurcation, or is it a social construct? (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 2). Experiences of privilege or stigma supplements such master statuses. According to the philosophies of constructionism, the idea of gender goes beyond the primary classification and studies the connections of multiple identities and crossover the marked borders between the said (essentialist) categories. This is especially true with regards to the classification of sexes as male and female, which the society typically views as dualistic and opposite.

Gender alone cannot or should not define the entire being of a person. However, we see that individuals end up performing gender roles based on stereotypes fixated by society, as depicted by the norms like color pink for girls and blue for boys. A newborn baby's parents would automatically shop for clothes that are specifically gender-based; a girl would look cute and appropriate wearing a frock, whereas a boy wearing the same would be considered weird (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 123).

The classification of gender does not only require individuals to behave in a certain way, but it creates a set of boundaries that forces one to be engaged in lifestyle choices that coincide with the said norms. Hence when one accepts and embodies these norms, the notion of mutually exclusivity is reinforced. The taught fact that men and women are fundamentally dissimilar is what makes men and women act in principally diverse ways (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 120). Gender is not a valid category but is maintained as such through socially constructed displays of gender.

## Gender – Constructionist’s Perspective

Constructionism argues that gender is a social notion. We act and expect others to act in ways that are pre-defined by the culture and societal trends. Social constructionists would say that gender is interactional rather than individual; it is developed through social exchange. Gender is also said to be Omni-relevant, meaning that people are always judging our behavior to be either male or female. Like masculinity, men are supposed to look masculine, indulge in practices that build on the same (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 37). So a man’s or a woman’s identity and their consequent behavior is a reflection of the expectations that the society places on their individual roles. Playing the gender role requires a complex set of social, interactional, and politically guided tasks that marks a particular act as expressions of one's masculine or feminine ‘nature’. Modern conceptualizations view gender as something that exists only in its depiction, that is, gender is ‘*something that one does, and does concurrently, in interaction with others.*

## Gender Inequality

## The bifurcation also gives rise to privileges and inequalities. The unjust world we live in is widely characterized by deep-rooted inequality with the burden of atrocities tilted towards women. Gender inequality exists in most parts of the world, from the developing nations of Asia and Africa to the developed countries of Europe and America. Gender Inequality cannot be defined as a single phenomenon; in fact, it exists at various levels and takes various forms. It is a collection of different but intertwined issues (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016, p. 405). For example, it is a common practice in South Asian countries that girls are given much lesser opportunities for education as compared to boys. Gender inequality at the workplace exists everywhere and is proven through empirical research, whether it is the employment terms, promotion opportunities, or pay scales women are challenged with greater hurdles than their male counterparts. In many societies, women are either not entitled to ownership of assets such as houses and other property or get an unequal distribution (if given a share).

## Conclusion

Social forces and master statuses tend to exert an overwhelming strong influence on our conceptions of things around us, everything from self-identity to global events, categories of difference confronts us everywhere. However, it does not mean that we cannot change it or at least do something about it. It is quite possible and well within our capability to challenge and defy the constructions of difference. Alliances can be forged. When more people come forward and speak up, especially those with privileges (e.g. whites speaking for people of color or men speaking up for women) against undue privileges and inequalities on behalf of those who are treated unjustly, there exists a higher chance of making a difference, mostly because there is not any conflict of interest. Such interventions can shift the status quo; they are a relief to those suffering from the stigmas and social injustice and pave the way for future social reforms.