CPT 898: Lecture 3a, 3b. 13/10/2016

Social constructionism: an insider's view.

An extract from Gurney, C.M. (1999) Lowering the drawbridge: metaphor and analogy in the social construction of home ownership. *Urban Studies* 36 (10) 1705-1722.

The social constructionist perspective

There has been a resurgence of interest in interpretative perspectives in urban research during the 1990s (Franklin 1990, Jacobs 1993, Ratner 1996). Within housing studies this trend can be seen in a number of contributions (Clapham 1997, Gurney 1997, Franklin 1998, Hastings 1998) which have argued for a social constructionist perspective influenced by the work of Schutz (1962), Berger and Luckman (1966), Garfinkel (1967), Strauss (1978) and Fischer and Forester (1993). It must be made clear that there is no unified social constructionist perspective in housing studies as authors have variously sampled from ethnomethodology, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism in their arguments. Despite these important differences in interpretation (Sismondo 1993, Velody 1994) the social constructionist tradition can be defined as one which refutes positivist epistemologies in which social reality is an objective fact to argue that social reality is variable between social actors located in specific social contexts, times and places. The perspective suggests that people play an active role in constructing and enacting their own realities of the 'common-sense world of everyday life', (Garfinkel 1967: 35) and that the construction of this 'common-sense' stock of knowledge about everyday life is enabled through interaction with others in the form of talk, text, ritual, dress or negotiation. Whilst the perspective is undergoing a revival across the social sciences, criticisms of the extreme relativism and reductionism it can imply remain well-founded. This has led many commentators to express disillusionment with social constructivism. Burr's comments, below, are typical in this respect.

> Abandoning the idea of an ultimate truth appears at first a liberatory move, but brings with it the question of how one is then able to decide between alternative perspectives. In wishing to advocate some change for ourselves or for others, the usual foundation on which to base this is removed. How can we say, for example, that certain groups are oppressed, if these "groups" and their "oppression" are constructions which can have no greater claim to truth than any other? (Burr 1998: 14).

However, the priveleging of social action over social structure need not necessarily seek to deny the existence of structural inequalities nor the promotion of reductionist explanations. Recent contributions within housing studies have drawn upon Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to argue for a 'duality of structure', whereby agency is inevitably contingent upon competing interests and the outcome of political and ideological conflicts at the structural level (Clapham 1997) and upon Foucaultian and post-Saussurian linguistic theory (Foucault 1972, 1980, Fairclough 1992, Lemke 1995), to argue a connection between language and the exercise of power (Hastings 1998).

The social constructionist perspective in housing studies has been used in a number of different ways. Franklin and Clapham (1997) use it in an examination of housing management as an occupational role, Franklin (1998) uses it to highlight the ambiguities and uncertainties in professional discourses which bedevil the delivery of a coherent housing service, Clapham (1997) uses it to challenge the taken for granted assumptions about the scope of housing management research, Allen (1997) draws on it in a multi-level analysis of decision making in community care and housing policy and Gurney (1997) and Somerville (1997) adopt social constructionist perspectives in papers on the meaning of home. A specific focus on language and discourse is exemplified in a number of other contributions. Jacobs and Manzi (1996) outline a methodological framework for an analysis of the vocabulary of housing policy, whilst close textual studies of policy documents undertaken by Hastings (1998) Gurney (1999) and Saugeres and Clapham (1998) demonstrate the exercise of knowledge and power in housing policy discourse. Thus far, this emerging social constructionist tradition in housing and urban research has neglected the significance of metaphor and analogy. The possibilities offered by a specific consideration of these linguistic devices is outlined below.

Analogy, metaphor and the social constructionist perspective

This section of the paper draws on a wide-ranging literature to establish the significance of metaphor in the social construction of reality. Analogy and metaphor are common linguistic devices which allow one concept or object to be explained in terms of another through cross-domain mapping. Analogy allows an explanation of an unfamiliar concept by directly likening it to a familiar one (a [bird's] nest is like a [person's] house) whilst a metaphor is an explanation of an unfamiliar concept made by likening it to the *characteristics* of a familiar one (an Englishman's [sic] home is his castle). Despite an extensive literature on the significance of analogy and metaphor elsewhere (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Morgan 1986, 1993, Lakoff and Turner 1989, Barnes and Duncan 1992, Demerrit, 1994, Holyoak and Thagard, 1995, Grant and Oswick 1996, Cresswell, 1997, McCourt, 1997, Drummond, 1998) the recent focus on language and discourse in urban and housing studies has remained silent on the role of these devices. A reading of the existing literature in this area suggests that analogy and metaphor are crucial in the social construction of reality in four ways.

First, metaphors both constrain and enable creative thought. Morgan argues that metaphor is much more than a stylistic affectation to embellish discourse and that its use 'implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally' (Morgan 1986: 12). The literature on metaphor suggests that the persistent use of one metaphor over another constructs a partial account of the concept under consideration. Metaphors simply highlight points of correspondence between phenomena but can never offer exact replicas otherwise the metaphor becomes redundant (Drummond 1998: 744). Metaphors are, therefore, necessarily partial in the comparative understandings they offer.

Second, metaphors and analogies define and hold social groups together to make 'common place scenes visible' (Garfinkel 1967: 36). Holyoak and Thagard demonstrate this in a review of the *metaphorical extension* of fables, proverbs and aphorisms, arguing that they play a prominent role in building and maintaining a 'shared web of culture' (1995: 211-216). They argue that everyday aphorisms act as a

shorthand for 'common-sense' social relationships and that they sometimes become so familiar that the original metaphor is lost sight of. Thus, an understanding of the expression 'sour grapes' does not require a knowledge of Aesop's fable in which a fox wants to reach some grapes, but on failing claims (s)he doesn't want them anyway because they are sour (Aesop 1996: 1). Crucially, the expression 'sour grapes' is widely understood even by people with no knowledge of the fable.

Third, metaphors can be deployed as an inherently political project. Hastings (1998: 196) has recently pointed out that elements of language such as metaphors and analogies are not only 'ideologically significant' but that their selective and deliberate deployment lets them do 'ideological work' for the people that use them. Similarly, Cresswell (1997) argues that the selective use of some metaphors rather than others is of huge significance in enabling the exercise of power and resistance relations. Cresswell's focus on metaphor/analogy is much more explicit than Hastings' and he is thus able to elucidate his argument in relation to a range of metaphors of displacement where 'out of place' populations are constructed as marginal by more powerful groups. He draws heavily upon an analysis of American inner-city anti-poverty strategies which seek the removal of out of place social groups and which are legitimised by reference to 'weeding' and 'seeding' metaphors.

Fourth, metaphor and analogy can be conceptualised within a framework of the so-called 'rhetorical turn' in the social sciences (Simmons 1990) which has seen a revival of interest in the classical rhetoric of intellectuals such as Aristotle and Protagoras (Billig 1991). Aristotle's (1909) rhetorical theory, for example, explores the connections between common sense and opinion-giving. Aristotle argued that successful appeals to common sense could be achieved through value-laden and cliched maxims or aphorisms which add a moral quality to our speech (Billig 1991: 20-21, 129). The 'argumentative' aspect of rhetoric is crucial and is summed up in Protagoras' maxim *there are two sides to every story* (Billig 1991: 46). The central feature of Billig's rhetorical psychology is a focus upon the everyday phrases which express values within argumentative discourse and, in particular, the social construction of racial prejudice. This association of common sense with morality and prejudice appears crucial for any analysis of discourse, but particularly metaphor and analogy, for although Billig does not focus on them explicitly, these linguistic devices offer enormous rhetorical possibilities.

In demonstrating that analogies and metaphors provide a means by which reality can be socially constructed the foregoing review has illustrated that these linguistic devices are neither an affectation, nor trivial nor benign. Moreover, when used as part a value-laden aphorism it is suggested that they might also contribute towards the social construction of deeply prejudiced opinion. [.....]

On the meaning of home ownership

Below, I suggest four distinct questions for further research. First, research which considers the social construction of home ownership as a commodity, both at the point of sale; through an examination of the construction of home ownership in the discursive practices of estate agents and, in the mode of access; through an analysis of the construction of the tenure in mortgage products and lending practices. Such an approach would offer new possibilities for a comparative understanding of the power

relationships constituted by the production, consumption and exchange relationships of housing.

Second, research into the social construction of home ownership in mixed tenure neighbourhoods. It has been suggested that, as a consequence of privatisation and commodification that some British state built housing estates constitute new zones of transition 'where the rules of competition for (access to) housing are changing' (Forrest and Murie 1995: 409). It is within such zones where challenges to the meaning of home ownership might be most keenly felt, and where we might observe changes in the way that home owners construct a prejudicial tenure specific housing reality.

Third, research into the social construction of home ownership amongst younger people. We have already seen how, in St George the housing choices of some people may have in part, been an outcome of a powerful socialisation process. A comparative examination of the way in which young people learn about housing choices and the sort of advice and information they might be offered by their parents, teachers or peers would enable us to understand the extent to which future demand might reflect the transmission of a previous generation's stock of socially constructed housing knowledge. The transmission of socially constructed housing knowledge from one generation to another may be a key to understanding differences and similarities in comparative housing research; do Swedish parents give the same advice to their children as English, Dutch, or German parents for example?

Finally, research into the social construction of home ownership *folklore*. Kemeny argued that attempts to challenge the *myth of home ownership* encounter a formidable problem because of an 'ideology which is deeply entrenched in the housing folklore as well as in the housing policies' (Kemeny 1981: 158) of English speaking countries. The debate about the possible existence or nature of this ideology was developed by housing researchers in the early 1980s. This debate largely operated at the level of vested interests and *dominant* ideologies. However, the identification of contemporary housing fables told by housing *consumers* may provide a way to enliven a rather moribund debate. There are clear opportunities to refute or replicate the necessarily illustrative findings from St George in other milieux, particularly in comparative research to identify housing folklore or morality which might conceptualise home ownership or rental tenures in relation to stories.

Before concluding with some more general observations about metaphor and analogy, a note of caution should be sounded regarding the possibilities for comparative research. For any analogy or metaphor to function effectively there must be a widespread understanding of the *source analog* - that is 'a known domain that ... [an actor] ... already understands in terms of familiar patterns', (Holyoak and Thagard 1995: 2). For example, in Great Britain, the notion of a housing career being analogous to a ladder is dependent upon a shared understanding of a ladder being a vertical structure with sequential ascending rungs. Yet, the emergence of negative house price inflation and negative equity in the 1990s does not easily correspond to this source analog. If comparative research is to make sense of home ownership as a social construction it must involve a thorough consideration of the techniques which hold true in specific locations at particular times. Analogies and metaphors used to make sense of housing choices in a highly collectivised social structure might be so culturally specific as to render them meaningless to householders in a highly privatised social structure.

On metaphors in urban studies

Metaphors and analogies are universal and inescapable devices of expression and understanding. They provide an effective mechanism for understanding unfamiliar concepts and ideas, but may also offer rhetorical and prejudicial accounts. This paper has illustrated the importance they have in the social construction of home ownership. It is important to note, however, that their use extends to *all* social constructions and that this includes some fairly fundamental building blocks of urban and regional research. It is somewhat surprising that housing and urban research has remained isolated from this literature given that so many of the concepts which it takes for granted are metaphorical in their origin. For instance, housing policy research is frequently underpinned by the metaphor of the journey. Thus we speak of a housing *career, ladder, trajectory or pathway*. The pervasiveness of the journey metaphor in housing studies can be seen in recent contributions which suggest 'steering' (Bramley and Watkins 1996) or 'moving' (Forrest and Murie 1990b) the housing market. Urban policy research has frequently been underpinned by biological development metaphors. Thus cities are represented as *growing, regenerating, decaying,* in *sclerosis* or *malaise*. It has even been suggested that the inner city, is itself a metaphor; 'for poverty and race' (Hill 1994: 167). The biological development metaphor was easily identifiable in UK and US urban policy between the late 1960s and early 1970s where *cures* were sought for spatially discrete contagious pathologies. But perhaps the best example of the taken for granted metaphor in urban studies is the system. Contemporary undergraduate text books are littered with references to the housing or planning *system*. Yet it is almost impossible to find an adequate explanation or justification for the use of this metaphor. The system metaphor - which itself extends the biological metaphor of the city as an ecology (Gaziano 1996) - is now used with such regularity that it has ceased to have any metaphorical meaning and instead has become literal. It is a dead metaphor. This has not always been the case. Of the housing system metaphor it was argued that several 'identifiable *parts'* exist 'and that these parts are more or less closely *linked* to each other' (Murie *et al*. 1976: 248). Of the urban social system metaphor it was argued that it 'must be recognized as artificial' (Course Team 1973: 5) Of the planning system metaphor it was argued that 'a system is *not* the real world, but a way of looking at it' (Mcloughlin 1969: 79). There is, literally speaking, no such thing as the planning system, nor indeed the housing system. They are only metaphors. Arguments in this paper have suggested that when metaphors are taken for granted by those who use them then there is a danger that the things being understood are *only* understood in terms of these metaphors. Unless more attention is paid to the taken for granted metaphors which permeate urban and housing research the ability of the academic community in these areas to respond to new problems or to shape new policy may be diminished.

Further Reading

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Social Constructionism. General Reading

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