Social Constructionism & Discourse Analysis

Pertti Alasuutari

Academy professor

University of Tampere

Topics covered during the course

- Social constructionism
- Social theory & human reality – Introduction
- Language
- Discourse analysis – some examples
- Identity construction

What is social constructionism?

- Berger & Luckmann: The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (1966)
  - Persons and groups interacting together in a social system form, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions
  - These concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other
  - When these roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized
  - In the process of this institutionalization, meaning is embedded in society
  - Knowledge and people's conception (and belief) of what reality is becomes embedded in the institutional fabric of society

Social constructivism

- Social constructivism is closely related to social constructionism
- However, *social constructivism* focuses on an individual's learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group

According to constructivism, particularly radical constructivism, the child functions in relation to its environment, constructing, modifying and interpreting the information s/he encounters in her/his relationship with the world (von Glaserfeld 1995). The individual's capacity to construct his/her own understanding of the world is connected with thinking and with the fact that the individual is able to construct his or her own thoughts and interpretations. From an educational perspective, a constructivist view of learning neither seems to need the educator's activity, nor does such activity seem possible. Constructivism is based on the assumption that the individual's construction processes cannot be influenced from the outside. (Sutinen 2007,1)

Weak social constructionism

"Some categories really are social constructions: they exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist. Examples include money, tenure, citizenship, decorations for bravery, and the presidency of the United States." (Pinker 2002, 202)

- Such objects can be described as part of what John Searle calls "social reality"
  - They are, in Searle's terms, ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective
  - "Social facts" are temporally, ontologically, and logically dependent on "brute facts"

Strong social constructionism

- Strong social constructionists oppose the existence of "brute" facts
  - That a mountain is a *mountain* (as opposed to just another undifferentiated clump of earth) is socially engendered, and not a *brute* fact
  - That the concept of mountain is universally admitted in all human languages reflects near-universal human consensus, but does not make it an objective reality
- All scientific constructs, physical laws, or concepts like mass, or quark, are essentially arrived at by consensus, and are social constructs

The tension between realism and constructionism: moral grounds

- According to Ian Hacking (The Social Construction of What?) those arguing that X is a social construction imply:
  1. In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable
  2. X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable

- Hacking adds that the following claims are also often implied by the use of the phrase "social construction"
  3. X is quite bad as it is
  4. We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed

The tension between realism and constructionism: moral grounds

- C.f. Hacking's example about child sexual abuse as a social construction
  - Is it a real evil, or a social construct, asked Hacking
- The concern that postmodernist constructionism leads into morally questionable cultural relativism
  - Relativism assumes that certain cultural groups have different modes of thought, standards of reasoning, and so forth, and it is the researcher's task to describe, but not to evaluate the validity of these principles and practices of a cultural group
  - →Hence e.g. the genital mutilation of girls and boys becomes acceptable in the name of respect for cultural differences(?)

The perspective of the sociology of knowledge

- When accumulated and passed on from generation to generation, knowledge is necessarily socially constructed
- Also objects we consider real and theories we deem truthful are socially conditioned

The "Copernican revolution" in this area of inquiry consisted in the hypothesis that not only error or illusion or unauthenticated belief but also the discovery of truth was socially (historically) conditioned. As long as attention was focused on the social determinants of ideology, illusion, myth, and moral norms, the sociology of knowledge could not emerge. It was abundantly clear that in accounting for error or uncertified opinion, some extratheoretic factors were involved, that some special explanation was needed, since the reality of the object could not account for error. In the case of confirmed or certified knowledge, however, it was long assumed that it could be adequately accounted for in terms of a direct object-interpreter relation. The sociology of knowledge came into being with the signal hypothesis that even truths were to be held socially account-able, were to be related to the historical society in which they emerged. (Merton 1973 [1945], 11)

The practicality of knowledge

- The moral undertones in insisting that X is socially constructed, or in opposing social constructionism reveal
  - Degeneration of the paradigm of the sociology of knowledge
  - Prestige of natural science
- Not all constructionist analyses need to shatter or question our belief in facts and real conditions of living
  - Most of our constructs work for all practical purposes
  - As Marx put it, the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question

The practicality of knowledge

- Yet from the viewpoint of sociology it is important to point out *how* forms of knowledge are entwined with existing practices
  - How habitual practices are conceptualized, brought into discourse, and consequently remodeled
  - How acknowledged truths are constructed and how they are used to justify political decisions
  - How notions of society and classifications of people, activities and institutions are put to practice and gradually turned into tacit routines
  - How forms of knowledge correspond forms of power and vice versa