Social Constructionism in the Contemporary Society: Theory and Practice

Date & Time: 24th October, 2019, between 17:10-19:10
Venue: 4031 Global Front at Meiji University

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Objective: To expand the understanding of social constructionism which could be applied effectively in research and practices.

1)   Basic concepts of social constructionism with relational theory

Social construction, as an idea, primarily has grown in the last five decades. The ideas of social construction were not owned by any one person or any particular discipline. They represented the cumulative work done by the different faculties such as the history of science, social studies of science, sociology of knowledge, literary theory, political science, communication studies, among others. It was the result of different theories and ideas joining together.

In other words, within academia and science in general, the primary objective is to generate knowledge which is value neutral, cumulative, and reliable. Other disciplines, including organizational studies, then started to study the world and its existence to make predictions about it and to rationally plan the future in ways that are efficient and effective for all. From the philosophy of physics, this idea in the beginning of the 20th century gave rise to social sciences, mushrooming of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science within the domain of science and the model of physical science.

Due to the development of all these faculties in about 1960, there was a heavy reliance on measurement, statistics, and on accumulation of material, leading to grand theories which have tied things together. I found this concept very interesting in my graduate school days. It is a very compelling idea because you can contribute knowledge to the building of the future.

My curiosity about these various intellectual movements led me in the direction of having to educate myself in a much broader way and develop what I thought were interesting ideas within this mix.

2)   How to apply social constructionism to empirical studies

As an example, a neutral, objective description of this room would differ broadly depending on the field one belongs to. A lighting engineer would have a vocabulary related to the placement of the lights, luminosity to read at various parts of the room. Similarly, an interior decorator would have a vocabulary related to the paint and its shades, the coordination of the colors

with the color of the desks and the row. A professional cleaner coming into this room would have an entirely different vocabulary related to how difficult is it to clean this room, the cleaning fluids needed for the desks, etcetera. A group of modern dancers who never saw the room before, having to do a dance performance here, would rapidly develop vocabulary for every space in this room, which as a unified thing doesn't even exist for us.

The important point here is that everybody has a different perspective which might not be related to or irrelevant to any of those other perspectives. Hence, the differences in opinion about this room are just different perspectives, everybody is correct in their own way, but each perspective is tied to some kind of a value. All the different perspectives are value loaded. The vocabulary is a want, a desire. They seem to be objective only if you want something, and we could make up new ones like that.

However, if we do not belong to any of the groups mentioned above and just use this room as a group of people who are studying or teaching having no perspective at all, there would be nothing to say, which would mean there is no knowledge. Therefore, things come into being only when there is a perspective.

Although these ideas are still controversial, they primarily say you can't have a language without a perspective. I have to already be part of a community for that to come alive as what.

This means a number of things to different kinds of people in different disciplines. For someone, it could be humility, and for someone else, it could be boasting about the objective knowledge contribution regardless of culture or history. There are different ways of looking at a particular thing, which arises out of the curiosity about other understandings. When I grew up in psychology, it was a battle between different theories and different perspectives. Similarly, in economics, it is a battle between perspectives or theory of the organization and theories of leadership.

However, with the constructionist ideas, there is nothing right or wrong. It is just a perspective and what matters is only what comes out of that perspective. If we take our reality for a moment as a possibility, as opposed to asking whether it is true or false, we can just say, "you look at it that way and you might be able to do some things I can't do with my way of looking at it." It is an invitation to be curious about the perspectives of other disciplines, groups, or professions. This has led in many ways to a blurring of disciplines, which makes us very interested in what we can do vis-à-vis the theories and ideas coming from other disciplines and not staying within one framework. This also means a return to the confrontation with values, politics, and what we care about.

For me, science was value neutral when I got involved in this. It was about politics. In the case of the groups discussed above, if every group wants to do something; it has utility for somebody. This leads us to not look so much for the truth, but look for the utility, pragmatics with a very strong eye to who value, what values are there, who benefits, who loses, and what is this doing in terms of its implications for the future of the way we live.

3) How you realize to change your perspectives from positivism to social constructionism in your academic career

In the case of the education system, measuring the performance of all the students means coming down to one scale after taking into consideration all the different complexities such as the different interests, the different skills students possess, or the different lives students lead from different places. Everybody, including the teachers and the parents, know that the students' whole future depends on that. This measurement is not necessarily reflective of who they are. However, if we measure it like that and put everybody in a continuum, we create people who look at themselves who are treated as superior, medium, not very good, and failures. Using the grading creates a society where we come out with a whole lot of change and a sense of who we are, always perhaps concerned maybe somebody is better, struggles with parents when we were young, didn't study enough, colleagues in school we don't talk to.

Measurement doesn't reflect the qualities of the object. Measurement is an imposition on the object to create it in a certain way. The object has no qualities. It depends on your perspective, and your perspective might yield measurements, but that isn't the object, and one has to be careful about how things get measured. One has to be sensitive of whether it is good or bad and for whom and what you care about.

Therefore, it is not about studying social science for knowledge of a major kind. However, it is about what we can do with what we study with research and reflection on its value consequences for what we care about and what we think the world should become. It's a kind of reflective pragmatism. The need of measurement, prediction, or anything that we already do still remains, but just not being limited to the perspectives of doing things in a certain way. We shouldn't try to squeeze everyone into those perspectives, but convince them to expand the possibilities for what we do.

Considering the more general audience, my initial plan was to spend some time on research methods, but since in the organizational studies, it has made less difference so far, I will talk about creativity on what counts as a methodology in the social sciences field.

4) How the theory (research) of social constructionism is strongly linked with practices

In the past, case studies were usually used for educational purposes as you could think about what is happening in a case and then do research. However, now you can look at case studies in a different way. Case study is about learning from each other's perspective and seeing things in a different way. A case study becomes a whole learning of possibilities.

More interestingly, there has been a long tradition of ethnography going into an organization and studying the way in which that organization functions. However, there is always the issue of who is doing the study and the perspective. This may not be a big deal in organizational studies, but

it is very important for anthropologists. Going into another culture and studying that culture does not mean leaving our own culture in terms of our understanding of it. Every culture has some unique values. This is a huge problem in anthropology. While doing anthropology now, we almost have to apologize for the way of looking at a particular thing in a certain way.

There is a new method called autoethnography, which necessarily means providing the flexibility to everyone to put forth their own perspective. United States faces this major problem of people categorizing others based on their own perspectives. This new methodology called autoethnography helps resolve this issue to a great extent. This study is starting to get popular in some parts of the social science, including the UK.

As an example, if I use the academic language that I normally use to write an academic paper, people outside of academia might not be able to understand it, and it is very boring often. It is hard to read what we write. We are trained to write in ways that nobody can understand except us. It took me 20 years to unlearn that and even now I am like a little afraid to simplify. So, in some sense, we don't speak to anyone outside ourselves. This led academics to think of finding out other efficient ways to communicate by the way of writing. However, having a performance is a much more powerful way compared to writing. Poetry, for example, used to be a very powerful way as an indicator than a discourse analysis. But a very academic discourse analysis will be read only by probably the reviewer and five other people. Hence, having a performance outweighs writing in today's world.

In terms of theory of research, theory had been looked up in some way as integrative reflection. We should take all of the pieces of data and try to find out how they all fit together so that some theories would be better than others. From a constructionist perspective, theory doesn't pick up the data but it absorbs the data. It tries to work linguistically in a way that brings everything into itself. Generally speaking, in social sciences, if you have a theory, you can absorb the world. People who are writing dissertations, by the time you finish that dissertation, the whole world will seem to be at your fingertips because it will be so real. So, we have to look at theory as a perspective which absorbs the world for some purpose. It is not a reflection of the world, but a way of understanding it, which allows you to do something in some other way. It creates a different way of understanding for a purpose, and there are some values attached, not just because it is a different way but what you want to do with it.

A social constructionist privileges the social groups creating the real and their perspectives on what exists. Generally speaking, we have got two major ways of understanding the social. One is individual persons who make up the group or groups. We have psychology of individuals and sociology for groups. They are both about individual units, but we need to look at what it does. If we presume the social world is a unit of any kind, it presumes we are all separate, bounded persons who function in our own space with our own experience separate from each other, trying to take care of oneself. That is in a Darwinian sense to live in a way you can survive. If we understand that the room begins to shake with an earthquake, we are

going to fight for the door, and each of us is going to fight the other one to survive. Or if we are in a classroom, we are going to fight the other ones to make a better grade, or if we are in an organization, we are going to fight each other to get the promotion because we have to take care of self first. Most of our theories about people are like that.

Microeconomic theory is totally based on individual search for reward or gain and minimize loss. We just assume everybody is out for their own survival and for their own gain. In the process, we have created a world of enormous distrust, separation, fighting because that is the theory built into understanding units. However, we need to understand that the world doesn't come in units. The challenge in some way for a number of us has been to understand it and make it intelligible. One way could be understanding that the world is not units, in which we cannot be separated, in which we are each other, and it is an optical illusion to look at us as separated.

One cannot be a helper alone. Your study was a helper, but if that person doesn't find it helpful, you haven't helped. So, you can't be a helper unless there is someone who agrees that your study was great. That person can't be somebody who needs help without someone else who agree that they need help. I can't teach unless there is someone who wants to learn. I can't be a learner unless I have got a teacher. So, they co-create each other. For everything that is meaningful and that you can relate to, I did not bring it here as myself. I am just a representative of the whole process and you now are part of it as well. It is a process of coordination, out of which virtually everything which we do comes. Without the process of coordination, you can't say anything.

With an organization made up of individuals, all trained do a certain function, all examined to make sure that that function is perfect, all organizational schemes are based on individual functions and almost nothing without the coordination, which makes it work. The whole organization is within the coordination. It is then that you begin to realize that the problem is not just the organization as a whole or the organization is composed of individuals, it is the issue of relationships.

What that means for organizational leading, what does it mean for a leader, what does it mean for decision-making, what does it mean for personnel evaluation, what does it mean for the kinds of our ability to have a dialog are all interesting questions, and there are people who are on to those questions who are doing really interesting things, but based on the idea that it is the relational process, it counts. That has really got to be the prior and not the individual unit.

In summary, to do science, understand, and have a perspective of any kind is to create the world. We are not object observers. The moment we start talking, we are a part of the creation, and we should be part of that creation in the future in terms of what we value and what we care about. So, it is a call to organizational science or people who are studying, whether it is commerce, marketing, human resources, etcetera, to realize that you are creating a future of life and organizations in the world.