Introduction: Varieties of Social Constructionism and the Rituals of Critique

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Abstract. The articles in this issue represent a broad range of positions that nonetheless coalesce into a set of clearly defined but contested claims concerning the ritual of debate, the realism–social constructionism divide, and the relational nature of human sociality. I foreground these issues by contextualizing the question of academic debate and historicizing the social constructionist movement. Much remains to be done to understand the psychological and moral dimensions of social and personal being as these are articulated in the social constructionist literature, not least of which involves understanding the ‘double participation’ of the professional in the world.

Key Words: realism, ritual of critique, relational, social constructionism.

In June 2001, a special issue of Theory & Psychology entitled ‘Social Constructionism and Its Critics’ consisted of a collation of papers received over the previous year. An invitation to continue the debate was included at the time and this issue now carries papers received in reply to that invitation as well as several that were individually solicited. Although we could not publish all of those that we received we have included papers in this issue that address the most contentious questions raised in the June 2001 issue as well as several that highlight the sheer breadth and variety of social constructionist thought.

In my editorial accompanying the June 2001 issue I noted that the range of positions on social constructionism in psychology alone were hardly exhausted by the papers we published there (Stam, 2001). I would be the first to admit that the issue before you now is likewise incomplete but it goes some way to indicating the range of problems and positions captured by the term. Furthermore, this issue also introduces a number of new questions into the debate, including those meant to illuminate the nature of academic debate itself.
The Ritual

What Shotter and Lannamann (2002) refer to as the ‘interaction ritual of academic theory-criticism-and-debate’ (p. 578), or what Gergen (2001) referred to as ‘the Ritual,’ is a way of grasping the seemingly inexhaustible disagreement that has come to characterize some academic debates. Shotter and Lannamann conceive this to be a consequence of the discursive style in which this debate has been couched, as one arising from a self-contained consciousness instead of the avowed relational form espoused by social constructionists. Likewise, Katzko, worrying about the puzzling structure of this debate, argues that it is conducted in a way that confuses first-order analysis (focused on a phenomenon) with second-order or ‘Movement’ talk. This second-order debate rapidly collapses into an adversarial stand-off. Katzko claims that what happens next is that participants may unwittingly become caught up in a form of debate wherein the first-order theory’s function becomes a way of drawing attention to the Movement rather than explaining the phenomenon at hand.

The Ritual can become a focus of the intellectual energies of many in a way that eventually comes to be seen as counter-productive. And perhaps there is even a maxim to be distilled from these papers: when the debate itself becomes the focus of debate, it is time to call it to a halt. Such a flippant remark hides a more serious purpose, to ask if it is possible to return to the matters of substance that preoccupy social constructionists. Indeed, on such matters there are considerable problems that do not require the resolution of all of the debates that are found in these pages. In an important sense, the authors of many of these papers are each trying to find their way back to crucial questions and some clearly would rather defer the resolution of the philosophical issues that continue to irritate the participants in the Ritual. This deferment is a classic social science response to issues of a foundational character; these are rarely resolved but can, at best, be clarified. Knock down arguments typically exist only in the mind of the pugilist and the field of science studies has alerted us in recent years to the rhetorical but often counter-productive structure of these debates. Nonetheless, the very articulation of the issues is not to be avoided, the expression of critique and the ensuing debate being, in one sense, as relational as agreement and cooperation. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any form of academic discourse concerning things that matter that is not controversial.

Roots and Branches

What once motivated the social constructionist position is not always obvious in these writings. Perhaps we need to recall that the kinds of issues that were important to this position preceded postmodernism and all that the latter entailed. Instead, a half-century of one line of social thought (a
complex amalgam of influences from phenomenology, sociology of knowl-
edge and social psychology) had come to a weak consensus that, among
other things, human psychological processes are conditional on the linguistic
and cultural practices and structures of human communities. An historical
symbiosis was said to exist between the psychological and the social (or
between what was sometimes called the subjective and the objective) that
manifests itself in such a way that the ‘reality’ we take for granted has a kind
of ‘constructed’ nature. It is constituted to make sense of the mundane and
everyday world we must inhabit while contributing to the making of the
social world. Constructed however did not mean ‘made up’ or infinitely
flexible; it referred to the requirements of a modern world wherein the
human imagination responds to the social structures within which it is
embedded with a praxis, a praxis that begins with the pre-reflexive and the
taken-for-granted. Such practices continuously restructure that very social
world that constrains and enables human possibilities.

These first articulations required some considerable development, an
effort begun in earnest by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). On
the other hand, it is considerably less controversial than some of its critics
now make it out to be, particularly when we consider that similar conclu-
sions were drawn elsewhere using very different conceptual tools (e.g.
Margolis, 1984). The affinities with the earlier work of Lev Vygotsky and
George Herbert Mead are obvious, a point made so often by Rom Harré
and others.

The sociology of knowledge carried over another issue, however, that has
not been entirely worked through. Karl Mannheim’s (1936) conception of
ideology was to be a non-denunciatory and amoral conception. It referred,
instead, to the manner in which ‘social structures come to express them-
selves in the structure of assertions and in what sense the former determine
the latter’ (p. 266). Knowledge was inevitably social and shot through with
purpose. All knowledge contains some element of (or points to) purposeful
action; an ‘irreducible residue’ which remains even after all attempts to free
it from explicit evaluations and bias (Mannheim, 1936, p. 296). Hence not
only is our everyday knowledge of ‘reality’ socially conditioned but, by
implication, our very claims about the manner in which we construct this
knowledge are itself subject to the same process. Note that what is at stake
here is nothing less than the cognitive authority of the professional academic
or psychologist.

For Mannheim, as it was for Berger and Luckmann, this was simply a
feature of knowledge in the modern world. Berger and Luckmann (1966)
extended their analysis to psychology when they argued, ‘the psychological
theories then serve to legitimate the identity-maintenance and identity-repair
procedures established in the society, providing the theoretical linkage
between identity and world, as these are both socially defined and sub-
jectively appropriated’ (p. 197). The adequacy of psychological theories as
accounts is equal to their applicability as interpretive schemes in everyday life.

It was only later that problems of the sort that now come to define the ‘realism–social constructionism debate’ came to the fore (and this issue of the journal continues this debate with Held, Hibberd, and Nightingale and Cromby, although in an increasingly more differentiated manner than we have perhaps hitherto seen). This debate may have been latent in earlier formulations but it was the consequence of the marriage of social constructionism to postmodernism that led to many of the more severe charges and countercharges. Once again, a subtext of this particular debate concerns the cognitive authority of the academic professional, a subtext rarely addressed by either side. In an effort to allay the worst of these concerns, social constructionism in psychology has retreated from its larger theses to the more manageable sphere of human relationships. This equally difficult domain now carries the conceptual freight of psychological categories, a move that has generated some support among various authors. It is far too early to gauge its success but this issue of the journal carries a number of fine examples of this work (Michel & Wortham; Shotter & Lannamann).

My purpose in providing some features of the history of this movement is, I hope, not pedantic but only to provide a partial answer to the question I raised in the special issue last year, namely, how to situate social constructionism historically. I am grateful for the articles that have looked at the relationship between these ideas and their historical forebears (Mather on Hegel; Hastings on James). Much remains to be done, of course, if we are to understand the emergence of social constructionism. For example, little has been said of the Anglo-American preponderance of social constructionist authors and hence the obvious reliance on empiricism and pragmatism as assumptive background forms (as Hastings notes here). Not only Vygotsky but also George Herbert Mead (James Mark Baldwin’s ‘socius’ lurks in the background) made social constructionism possible, yet the usual account in this tradition of the internal relation of thinking and speaking has been downplayed in favour of an external relation between speakers. How have contemporary formulations shed the phenomenological influences from Alfred Schutz, moving towards an entirely linguistic and lingual focus? The linguistic turn in analytic philosophy has been a major force but cannot account for this entirely, for analytic philosophy has largely oriented itself to the cognitive and neuro-biological sciences.

Double Participation

Intellectual crises do not occur in splendid isolation but accompany social change in multiple forms. Academic identities are built on resolving
dilemmas selectively appropriated from a broader world. However, they also reflect the ‘double participation’ of academics and researchers who interpret worlds in which they participate as researchers, worlds that can include settings varying from ordinary life-world contexts to psychological laboratories. The professional then brings these interpretations into the sphere of academic, theoretical discourses (Addelson, 1994). These discourses not only circulate outside the world they seek to describe but they also elicit loyalties different from the participants in the worlds so described. The loyalties elicited by professional and academic conventions are crucial however, to acquiring the proper rewards. For Kathryn Addelson this double participation also describes an intellectual and moral responsibility for the professional; so long as our work is done within institutions, it is a requirement that we account for this peculiar double-sided life. Whose interest is represented in our debates?

Another feature of the contemporary academy, however, may serve to weaken this double participation. As knowledge ceases to be the prerogative of those who are employed in universities, and knowledge-work becomes a feature of networks of under-laborers who inhabit a multiplex of formal and informal institutions, the conception of a network of flexible knowledge becomes not just an idea but also a material possibility. The knowledge economy is made manifest in the pronouncements of a host of management experts who themselves are reflecting the obvious commodification of knowledge made possible by the use of information technologies and their global reach. The idea that knowledge can be created from a grand theory or from first principles looks ever more remote and archaic. That knowledge is socially constructed is no longer strange at all, we can almost ‘see’ it happen, albeit not in a way that our theories prescribe. Are the cross-disciplinary debates on the nature of the constructed versus the real attempts to resist the globalization or even the proletarianization of knowledge?

Within psychology, the host of neuro-biologically inspired alternatives (including evolutionary theory) to an older, functional psychology provides another feature of the contemporary academy. In these perspectives, there is no longer a concern for the moral groundedness of our psychological being. However, psychological practices that require a morally suasive discourse with which to enter the lives of their intended recipients cannot be sustained by the brain–behavior talk of contemporary, neurally inspired psychologies. As an alternative, the relational framework and its associated premises of social constructionism should have no trouble finding a home in many corners inside and outside the academy. The challenge then is to make that relational psychology capable of supporting a psychology that can transform and not merely reproduce the social forms embedded in the commodified knowledge economy. It might also elucidate rather than hide the double participation of the professional.
References


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