Social Constructivism

An epistemology/theory that emphasizes the idea that society and knowledge are produced by humans. Thus, knowledge is “constructed” at a given time by people through collective or individual action. The social constructionist assumes that people create their society and seek to examine how this construction is accomplished.

See also
Hermeneutics (education), Qualitative Research

Social constructivism with respect to a given phenomenon is the view that the latter does not possess an independent existence but is “constructed”—that is, generated and maintained through collective human action, thought, discourse, or other social practices. Constructivism is thus antithetical to realism with respect to the same entities, which would ascribe autonomous existence to them. Social constructivism is primarily a position in philosophy of science, but it also informs and inspires a number of recently influential schools within the empirical social sciences themselves.

This entry introduces the various meanings and uses of social constructivism and reviews four main positions with regard to the ontological and epistemic versions of social constructivism concerning the social world and the physical world, respectively.

The term social construction was first used by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 work, The Social Construction of Reality. In this book, what is declared to be a construction is, albeit ambiguously, the social realm. Subsequently, the constructivist stance has achieved a widespread following and has been extended to other spheres. While social constructivism as defined above is trivially true for many human phenomena and artifacts, it becomes controversial when applied to areas of reality, or features thereof, that are normally held to exist autonomously.

Social constructivist positions often harbor normative or ideological overtones. As stressed by Ian Hacking, claims that a certain phenomenon is “constructed” carry the implication that the latter is not part of “the natural order of things;” it is not eternal and immutable, let alone necessary. Hence, such claims are often raised in connection with efforts to effect societal changes. Favorite areas in which constructivist claims have been raised in order to promote normative agendas pertain to divisions of gender or race.

Underneath its general nominal definition, social constructivism is a very diverse intellectual trend, and its adherents across the fields would not often claim any communality. Moreover, there is often considerable disagreement between constructivists within any particular field, as they draw upon many and diverse philosophical traditions ranging from phenomenology and Marxism (both of which inspired Berger and Luckmann's seminal effort) to philosophy of language. Still, the label is useful in identifying a characteristic collectivist and anti-realist mode of thinking, local or global, that has recently enjoyed considerable popularity.
Two intersecting distinctions among constructivist claims will help create an overview of this complex field.

The first distinction is that between the *material or physical* sphere and the *social and human* sphere, as objects of construction. The second distinction is that between *ontological and epistemic* constructivism. According to ontological constructivism, the object of construction is the world itself, while according to epistemic constructivism, it is our knowledge of (beliefs about) the world, including our scientific knowledge. (Knowledge, of course, also belongs to the world but constitutes a special subpart that is subject to evaluative, rational constraints and, hence, may usefully be placed in a separate category.) The import of claiming that (scientific) knowledge is a social construction is that it is shaped by societal forces rather than through a process of “tracking” the reality that is its nominal object.

When the two distinctions are combined, social constructivist positions may be organized as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
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<tr>
<td>The material (physical) world</td>
<td>Our knowledge, including our scientific knowledge, about the material world is constructed by collective human thought and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social and human world</td>
<td>Our knowledge, including our scientific knowledge, about the social and human world is constructed by collective human thought and practice</td>
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**Ontological Constructivism with Respect to the Social and Human World**

That the social world depends for its existence on the thoughts, language, and actions of its inhabitants is hardly controversial; what is of interest is rather what precise mechanisms are held responsible for its generation. In recent discussions, emphasis has been lain on the linguistic sources of such construction, a development that is in line with the general “linguistic turn” in 20th-century philosophy and social science. Two major traditions may be distinguished, which may be referred to as the analytical and continental arguments, respectively.

1. The *analytical argument* is represented by authors such as Margaret Gilbert, Raimo Tuomela, and John Searle, who hold society to be constructed through the collective intentionality (“we-intentionality”) of its members. Searle's version in particular utilizes and extends insights from speech act theory. The most important social facts are institutional rather than “brute” (i.e., natural), and the analysis of such facts provided by speech act theory can be extended to all societal institutions. A core notion is that of constitutive rules, which state that some person, thing, or action *counts as* something else under certain conditions. They thereby acquire a certain status that enables them to serve a certain social function, since various normative powers (rights, duties, obligations) flow from the imputed status. These powers motivate specific collective actions and thus instigate and direct social

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interactions. When a body of constitutive rules defining status functions is recognized in a given population (a case of collective intentionality), collective institutions and, thus, social reality are created. Money is the classical example, in which a certain power—“purchasing power”—is bestowed upon pieces of paper that are in themselves valueless.

This type of constructivism has affinities with classical liberalist political philosophy and its conception of society as formed and legitimized through a social contract. In their later work, Searle and Toumela have attempted to link their constructivism with aspects of this tradition, such as the notions of political power and human rights.

2. According to the continental argument (so called), social reality is also generated by the linguistic categories in which we talk about it, but in a less specific manner. The philosophical underpinnings of this argument are typically derived from Michel Foucault’s writings. The fundamental line of thought harks back to structuralism, which holds that language (langue) is an arbitrary structure of differences that, when manifested in concrete discourses (parole), generate a semantic system—that is, a system of categories under which objects in the world are subsumed. When these objects are human actions and their products, a social reality ensues, structured according to the categories of that particular discourse. In Foucault and other continental authors, these ideas are taken through a “poststructuralist turn,” which emphasizes that the linguistic structures are not completely rigid but dynamic and subject to transformations through discourses articulating social interests—interests that, however, are themselves transformed in the process. In empirical social science, this view of social reality has, for example, been adopted in the influential theory of democratic politics by the political scientists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Laclau and Mouffe, along with other representatives of the continental argument, draw upon Wittgensteinian ideas as well, in particular the notion of “language–games,” with its implication of an irresolvable fusion between language and social practice that makes language constitutive of social reality.

There are representatives of the same mode of thought in the anglophone academic world as well. Within philosophy of social science, it has been articulated by Peter Winch, while Ian Hacking adopts a similar position, albeit on a rather more concrete and empirical level. This position was anticipated in a less philosophical vein by the labeling theory in the sociology of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, in the work of Howard Becker.

**Epistemic Social Constructivism with Respect to the Social World**

Epistemic social constructivism is, in particular, the position that social-scientific knowledge is shaped by societal forces. The classical example is Marxism, which asserts that knowledge concerning the “superstructure” of society is shaped by the class interests of societal subjects; this is in contrast to natural science, which is held to be resistant to such influence. Marx’s view paradigmatically manifests the normative aspect of constructivism in that the demonstration of the ideological nature of societal knowledge is meant to generate “critical consciousness” with respect to the latter. Another classical example of epistemic constructivism is Max Weber’s claim that the concepts in which we describe the social world, in the form of “ideal types,” are shaped by societal “values.” In recent social science, a constructivist stance is represented by “discourse analysis,” which holds that the semantic system in which societal knowledge is articulated (if not its detailed content) is shaped by social interests and serves to promote the latter. The representatives of this position often go on to draw ontological implications from this argument (cf. Laclau and Mouffe above).
Epistemic Constructivism with Respect to the Physical World

This stance has been the hallmark of the recently influential discipline of *science studies*, a radical outgrowth of classical sociology of science. The founding representatives of the discipline are David Bloor (a contributor to this encyclopedia) and Barry Barnes, who are core members of the so-called Edinburgh school. According to the school's Strong Program, as opposed to the weak program of traditional sociology of science (vide Robert Merton), theories even within the natural sciences are generated and shaped by social interests (a claim that extends the Marxist tradition) or by general societal but historically variable modes of thought (the Durkheimian tradition).

This position is in part based on a number of celebrated case studies, but it also draws support from familiar critical arguments within analytical philosophy of science. Chief among these is the instrumentalism of authors such as Willard Van Orman Quine and Baas van Fraassen. While these authors are satisfied with vague references to “pragmatic considerations” in specifying what forces decide the choice of theoretical models in the absence of a decisive influence from reality itself, science studies focus upon precisely this question and deliver the answer: societal forces. Another important influence is Wittgenstein's “rule-following argument” from the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is held to show that the correct application of all descriptive terms, including those of science, is a matter of social agreement and is, hence, subject to the social interests that shape such agreements.

Ontological Constructivism with Respect to the Physical World

Epistemic instrumentalism with respect to theories of natural science is often pushed to an extreme within the field of science studies. The reality toward which natural scientific knowledge is directed is claimed to exert no epistemic pressure whatsoever upon our scientific theories; hence, the idea that experimental testing can push us toward an ever more accurate depiction of physical reality is dismissed. A radical ontological constructivism ensues, which holds that theoretical entities such as atoms and black holes are purely pragmatic posits that only exist within the conceptual frameworks and societal practices in which they are embedded. Their ontological status is thus akin, for example, to that of money, which does indeed exist within a given monetary system, where slips of paper really do possess exchange value but have no existence outside the system. A position along these lines is adopted, for example, by Bruno Latour in his actor-network theory (although, in later works, Latour objects to being labeled a *social* constructivist, since the agents of construction include nonhuman “actants,” e.g., scientific measuring apparatus).

Within science studies, too, the constructivist stance often goes along with a normative agenda that is normally tacit but sometimes quite explicit (e.g., in Latour's work). The classical conception of natural science with its realist ontology and rationalist epistemology is held to bestow an illegitimate societal privilege upon scientists; by contrast, a social constructivist interpretation is thought to lead to a more democratic way for science to function in society.

See also

Actor-Network Theory
Collective Intentionality
Instrumentalism of Scientific Theories and Constructive Empiricism
Language-Games and Forms of Life

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Realism and Anti-Realism in the Social Sciences

Searle and the Construction of Social Reality

Social Construction of Reality

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Social Studies of Science and Technology

Strong Program in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge

Structuralism and Poststructuralism

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