

If we are to build together toward a more viable future then we must be prepared to doubt everything we have accepted as real, true, right, necessary or essential (Gergen, 2009, pp. 12-13).

This essay addresses the core elements of social constructionism and how it has developed. Firstly the essay discusses its roots in anti-essentialism and how postmodernism and its theorists are shaping the social constructionist movement by deconstruction (Dillon, 2014). Secondly the essay concentrates on the sociology of knowledge, patterns of thinking and identities (Burr, 2015). And finally the essay concludes by focussing on language, culture and history. Whilst crossing over many disciplines and approaches, social constructionists challenge the scientific understanding of progress within society (Burr, 2015) and hope to discover better ways of life (Gergen, 2009). Social construction is focussed on how people actively create society through different understandings, interpretations and viewpoints of the world around them (Scott, 2014). This essay unpacks the essence of social constructionism and critiques what is already believed to be real, true and right regarding knowledge, ways of understanding the world and language (Burr, 2015).

To begin with, this sociological phenomenon has its roots in anti-essentialism as social constructionists argue that the way we get to know the world and decipher its intended meaning will be specific to time in history, past and present (Burr, 2015). Essentialism ‘assumes some universal feature that identifies the phenomenon under study’ (Bilton, *et al*, 2002, pg. 133). So, an essentialist view believes there to be underlying realities in life which no one can see physically, with their eyes, but which contribute to the unchanging natural essence which is discovered and determines identity. Essentialism seeks to close off the possibility that human behaviour can change (Gelman, 2005). Anti-essentialism, in contrast, rejects the definitive narrative and emphasizes the influence society has upon subjects, taking into account what is deemed to be ‘normal’ or not (Dillon, 2014). Applying these arguments to childhood, a constructionist approach has developed and strengthened by the strive for equality, which believed would remove the possibility for unjust attributions, however it does so at the expense of recognizing the variety offered in humanity (Lee, 2001). The essentialist approach, on the other hand, argues that while children are learning to understand and discover the world and their finding of natural order through classifications (Gelman, 2005). Childhood has been studied off the back of adulthood, ‘which has often drawn a division between adult human beings and child human beings’ (Lee, 2001, pg.7). Thus, the study of childhood involves a tension between recognizing human variation and discounting human variation (Lee, 2001).

Influenced by the past, social constructionism has emerged through philosophical development, including modernism, the Enlightenment and now postmodernism, with all contributing towards its constant evolution (Burr, 2003). Modernity was about maintaining a strong sense of who and what you are, however a shift of knowledge and culture was being superseded by what exactly was not clear so was called postmodernity and this postmodern world aims to avoid the stability and commitment of the modern world (McGuigan, 1999). Postmodernism is described by Gergen (2009) as a powerful force of combinations of scholars from different domains of study, learning of developments from another and uniting them together; yet also points out that tensions remain as not all scholars have the same viewpoint (Hicks, 2011). Postmodern methodology however has been widely criticized for embracing an understanding of knowledge that is dependant upon viewpoints, personal interpretations and perspective (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Postmodernism often described as anti-philosophical and anti-realist, rejects modernism and central to the growth of postmodernism is a concept named deconstruction (Hicks, 2011) that was introduced by Derrida, a philosopher who sought to dissect any meaning of truth and would avoid giving words a definition, aimed ‘to avoid centred modes of thinking- such as phonocentrism and logocentrism’ (Hepburn, 2008, pp. 209). Explained a little more, Derrida debates what is known to be rational, its paradigms and the belief that there is one centre of truth and an ultimate reality (Gergen, 2015). Derrida therefore believed that everybody including scientists, should be questioned and not deemed as having absolute truth (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Postmodern theorists ‘deconstruct the very rules and principles on which language is based, as well as the semiology that gives signs particular meanings’ (Dillon, 2014, pp. 433). Objective social reality is processed and interpreted through an individual’s

micro level lens, which means once the individual makes objective reality their own, it becomes subjective reality (Dillon, 2014). One version of reality cannot be said to be more real than another (Burr, 2003) as what is real to one person may not be real to another (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Reality is discovered but also created (Cronley, 2010). This challenges the view that knowledge is objective and unbiased and highlights the importance of analysing personal perception and assumed understanding of the world (Burr, 2003). Gergen (2015) states that constructionist ideas are not owned by anyone and everyone is free to participate. Individuals and groups construct social worlds (Scott, 2014), where reality is agreed upon through relationships with one another, and through such relationships a personal world is constructed and lived within (Gergen, 2015). Therefore, when individuals share the same values, such values typically will not be noticed (Gergen, 2009) as both parties accept that knowledge is relevant and right through their shared social reality. This is called social relativity (Dillon, 2014). Discursive psychologists suggest that every individual has motives and interests which should be analysed instead of explained (Whittle and Mueller, 2010). Micro social construction sees the potential existence of various versions of the world through everyday interaction between individuals (Burr, 2003). Discourse is situated in a particular time and place, and is the main way we manage and conduct ourselves in social action. Meaning discourse is constructed by words and constructive because such words are selected and decide the course of action towards that individuals' view of the world, making that individuals version unique (Whittle and Mueller, 2010). Micro social constructionism understands that individuals gain knowledge through different encounters, investigates how reactions and language differ in different situations because of what is deemed as acceptable in that situation, which then suggests that individuals have a tendency to fall back onto their shared cultural experience and knowledge (Burr, 2015).

The sociology of knowledge emerged around the 1920s with German philosopher Max Schelers and was later developed by sociologist Karl Mannheim (Hruby, 2001) who's controversial writings defines that a person's complete ideology is determined by historical and social setting (Coombs, 1966). Social factors, such as, social interactions and social processes shape the way every individual understands the world and for this reason, there is no universal truth or reality and what is believed to be truth will vary over time and across cultures (Burr, 2015). A pattern of thinking pre-exists however as ways of thinking and society changes so will the pattern of thought (Burr, 2015). Family, for example, what it means and signifies has developed over time along with society and is now seen as a rather fluid institution creating different boundaries and dynamics to past family arrangements (Shaw, 2013). To name a few, industrialisation, individual freedom and globalisation have been contributing factors towards the changes we see within modern families and traditional families (Dillon, 2014). The advances made within society, mainly by capitalism, changes how family life operates. The growth of personal voice and rights has changed the constitution of family and its meaning, which naturally challenges what is known to be 'normal' and acceptable within the boundaries given by that society (Shaw, 2013). As these changes take place within society, so does the way individuals interact with one another and therefore different identities and ways of thinking emerge (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Thus, identities are social constructs achieved by a subtle interweaving of many threads that direct and contribute towards the growth and development of a person. Such strands include a person's occupation, class, family, sexual orientation, age, gender, ethnicity, the education they have had, etc. Every individual therefore is the end product of discourses produced by the social realm not internally. (Burr, 2015). Identities are formed by social processes and identity types are social products. This means that who one is and how one thinks are formed and modified by the changes produced with society which then in turn reflect in personality and beliefs (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Durkheim states that society with its own reality constrains how we feel, think and act through its various social structures which exist independently, and no person can discontinue its existence (Dillon, 2014). Discourses become the structure towards social shared language, shared understanding and shared experience of the world through symbolic systems, such as written texts and images (Burr, 2003). Like a newspaper reading for example, as the text mediates a perspective, it then has the power to influence its readers, yet in turn, those who produce such texts are constrained by the social context, as their aim is to engage the readers for whom they write (Lee, 1992). Language is used then,

‘to construct and to label and to maintain our reality. And when the language we have no longer works to label our experiences, we devise new words, new ways of labelling those experiences’ (Dillon, 2014 pp. 307).

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge and postmodern epistemology has language at its core. This differs from modern epistemology in its content and its methodology, and for the postmodernists it is all about unmasking language over and over (Hicks, 2011). Our social and psychological worlds are constructed through language which is paramount for thought and connects the way a person thinks and contributes meaning to them in a mutually understood social situation (Burr, 2015). Foucault, a French philosopher who has been a major influence in macro social constructionism, explored themes such as power, knowledge and sexuality in modern society. He was always pushing the boundaries of what was available, seeking new alternatives while criticising and utilizing the methods available at the time (Calhoun *et al*, 2007). Postmodernism lends itself to many different types of methodology and many postmodernists like to acknowledge the contrast between their methods and that of modern epistemology (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Epistemological postmodernists cannot reject any knowledge as being untrue and believed every story to be equal to another (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). The macro constructionist approach may allow for more fluidity in identities however Foucault believes that society is influenced by the way issues, like sexuality or disability are represented. This is then reflected through how people are treated in response and by the way people talk and think about such issues (Burr, 2003). Taking sexuality as an example, the way people respond towards it and acknowledge its different variables is very different now to 20 years ago. From an essentialist perspective the ‘natural’ view of sexuality is between a man and woman however from a constructionist viewpoint, sexuality is socially constructed and in turn reflects social patterns instead of natural patterns, which as a result accepts many different variables (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). In modern western society today, being able express oneself freely in their sexual orientation is important regarding identity and towards discovering who one is (Caplan, 1989). ‘Sexuality assumes an identity that changes based on the culture in which the idea is presented’ (Jeffson, 2005, pp.187) Culture is woven into every area of our lives and displays itself through ways of thinking, structures, attitudes, moral and religious beliefs, and social norms. Considering this, different cultures may have diverse and distinctive ideas which will be displayed through understanding and knowledge (Connor, 1997). Gergen (2015) expresses how individualism has been a strong focal point in Western culture whereas other cultures are more communally focussed, which is more compliant and agrees more with social construction. Rousseau argues that Western cultures through their success in civilization, with reason at its forefront, has lead to a lack of compassion and provoked a rise in egocentrism, leading to an individualistic culture (Hicks, 2011). Britain's national identity is rooted and developed out of imperial expansion (Hall, 2001) and imperialism gave the UK a rich past (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). Taken for granted knowledge is specific to culture and the time period in which one lives, with knowledge acting as an historical keep-safe of culture and understanding, challenging the scientific understanding of progress within society (Burr, 2015) as every individual ‘learns to interpret and negotiates the world individualistically’ (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). Through history, culture and development, it is humankind's function to create a code of behaviour, which happens by developing social and political norms and moral self-ennoblement (Gregg, 2012). Now, in postcolonial Britain, globalization has made its mark and ‘has given rise to, potentially at least, a new, more accommodating and open ended kind of Britishness’ (Morley and Robins, 2001, pp.319). Human rights culture is a cultural particularism, specific to culture and history (Gergen, 2015). The social construction of human rights for example is explained as ‘competing histories that are not only valid in universal priori but can also be grown locally within communities that embrace them’ (Gregg, 2012, pg. 3). This said, the Western belief of superiority still presumes that their truth, belief system and their way of reasoning is a better way than that of developing nations (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). British cultural identity is changing along and has changed with society transitions, however if we want to reconstruct cultural identities there is a need to look back into history (Hall, 2001). Acknowledgement regarding the acceptance towards equality and diversity is present however

such changes need to be handled with care, so as not to develop wider inequalities gaps and a greater polarisation (Bilton, *et al*, 2002).

Considering this information, understanding of the world develops through active personal relationships, linguistic, cultural and historical contingencies, not by observation (Gergen, 2015). Language, words and experiences are realities created by humans developing social constructions which evolve alongside society, meaning their definitions over time will change as new ways to label reality are constructed (Dillon, 2014). Deconstruction examines and dismembers texts and any written language, specifically critiquing other source and data instead of creating new knowledge. However deconstruction leads to reconstruction as the structure is exposed to its core gradually, which is later rebuilt critically through analysis, research and reflection. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Postmodernism is more likely to have global social connections and less likely to be locally based as it is entangled with globalisation, the progression of capitalism and the expansion of global culture (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). Cultural formations, post-structural theory and popular culture are all part and involved in the creation and expansion of the philosophical ideas behind postmodernism. Whereas postmodernity refers to 'societal or civilizational claims which arguments that we are living through the transition from modern to postmodern period in history'(McGuigan, 1999 pp.306). 'The Enlightenment reshaped the entire world, and postmodernism hopes to do the same'(Hicks, 2004, pag.21) as it rejects the Enlightenment and opposes modernism, focussing on anti-realism, social subjectivism, individual identity and autonomy as well as calling for communalism (Hicks, 2011). Kant argued that reason is 'clueless to reality... where reality cannot set the terms for knowledge but conforms to reason and not vice versa' (Hicks, 2011, pp.29,39). The nature of society is changing and as a result so is the nature of those people who populate that society. Contemporary societies are directionless and as a result, so are identities, with no secure foundations on which to be constructed and where identities are constantly being negotiated in light of the rapidity of social change (Bilton, *et al*, 2002). Focused on how people actively create society through different understandings, interpretations and viewpoints of the world around them (Scott, 2014), social construction brings to the forefront a kind of humility which is keen to understand other people's way of life, their perspectives and what they value. This creates an open way of thinking and fosters a viewpoint of creativity that finds answers in stripping every aspect of society down to the basic core and reconstructing it in a new way (Gergen, 2015). To conclude,

'We are not what we are, but what we make ourselves across times and space
– identities are inherently insecure' (Bilton, *et al*, 2002).

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