

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM and SOCIAL WORK: Implications for Social Work

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SUMMARY

Social constructionist approach is based on the studies of Berger and Luckmann. According to this approach, all knowledge is socially constructed, including our knowledge of what is real. In this article, the bases of social constructionism is explored and the implications of social constructionism to the social work profession has been examined with the example of Turkish social work conceptualisations.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of social work is to strengthen people's ability to cope with the task and problems they face in life and to promote improvements in the environment to more adequately meet human needs (Macht and Quam, 1986, p. 4). Definitions of social work refers to the change agent function which is the basic mission of social work. In order to change something, the first thing to be done is to understand the client system comprehensively.

In modern age, the basic instrument to be used to understand the situation is absolutely scientific knowledge. While trying to accomplish its mission, social work uses theories, models and approaches. Knowledge and theoretic approaches which helps to define the situation of problem and need of client system elements can affect the tool, point and nature of intervention. Because of this important effect on intervention, the theoretic preferences is in the key point in social work practice and theory.

It goes us to the point that understanding the reality about the client system is crucial. There are two polarised answer to the question of what the nature of reality is. The first answer advocate that truth about world is out there and independent of the individual. The second holds that truth about world is not independent of the individual but depends on beliefs, thoughts and perception of the individual. The first answer is called classical empiricism, the second is also called social constructionism which is also the focus of this article. Mastering the social constructionism stating that reality can only be understood within

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the beliefs, thoughts and perception of the individual will make huge contribution to the social work giving great attention to the individualisation, participation, starting where the client is, self-determination, human rights and social justice. Because, social constructionist approach, like social work, sees the participation to the process who are subjected important in order to be successful in trying to accomplish the change. Because of this reason, In this article, social constructionist approach and its current effect on social work has been explored in the context of Turkish social work conceptualisations.

THE BASIS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism, rests on the belief that reality is socially constructed and emphasises language as an important means by which we interpret experience. According to the constructionism, we can not know reality apart from our interpretations of it. According to the objectivist, we make discoveries about the “real” world thorough building hypotheses and testing them; the observer is believed to be neutral. Constructionist state that our interests and values can never be disentangled from our observations (Dean, 1993).

The similarities between constructivism and social constructionism are much greater than the differences. Both view reality as relative to social interaction and the social context rather than as completely objective and "out there" waiting to be discovered. Constructionism emphasises the social aspects of knowledge development: although it portrays individuals as having cognitive structures (schemas) that are integral to this process, it contends that these structures are social in origin rather than hard-wired into the human organism (Gergen & Semin, 1990). In constructivism, history and culture are thought to affect the social construction of reality, but to a lesser extent than the self's system structure. The terms constructivism and constructionism are frequently used interchangeably in the literature, with constructivism often referring to both (Dean, 1993). Despite a difference in emphasis, both constructivism and social constructionism not only see reality as socially constructed through language use, but also see language itself as socially constructed. Language use and social dialogue and discourse are central to both constructivism and social constructionism.

The impetus for the development of social constructionism has been the social psychology of Gergen (1985), who elaborated the social psychology of Mead (1934). Social constructionism emphasizes that our generation of knowledge and ideas of reality is sparked by social processes more than individual processes (Gergen, 1994). According to constructionism, "knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but

rather, something people do together" (Gergen, 1985, p. 270). The so-called objective reality is in fact the product of social construction processes under the influence of cultural, historical, political, and economic conditions. Because such knowledge is socially constructed, it can vary historically over time and differ across cultural groups that hold diverse beliefs about human development and nature. Given that values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and practices vary from one cultural group to another, so does the social construction of knowledge.

Social constructionism derives from social psychology. While agreeing with constructivist that we cannot know an objective reality, social constructionists emphasise the social aspect of our ways of knowing. As Kenneth Gergen states, "the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically- situated interchanges among people" (1985, p.266). According to the social constructionists, meanings arise in particular settings or traditions. The communities and cultures of which we are members determine our ways of seeing the world. Our taken- for- granted categories and assumptions are both sustained by and supportive of our "social, moral, political and economic institutions" (Gergen, 1985, p.268). Social constructionists question these commonly accepted categories as absolute.

Social constructionism is an approach to human inquiry that encompasses a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups and a belief that the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people. Gergen (1985) characterises social constructionism as a movement toward redefining psychological constructs such as 'mind' 'self' and 'emotion' as socially constructed processes, to be 'removed from the head and placed within the realm of social discourse' (p. 271).

Like Payne(1997) pointed out, social constructionist maintain that reality is knowledge guiding our behaviour, but we have different view of it. We arrive at shared view of reality by sharing our knowledge through various social processes which organise it and make it objective. Social activity becomes habitual, so we share assumptions about how things are. Also, we behave according to social conventions based on that shared knowledge. So we institutionalise these conventions as many people agree about understandings of that aspect of society. Then, these understandings become legitimised by a process which attaches "**meanings**" which integrate these ideas about reality into an organised and plausible system Social understanding is, in this way, the product of human understandings. So there is a circular process, in which individuals contribute through institutionalisation and legitimisation

to the creation of social meaning within the social structure of societies. In turn, societies through individuals' participation in its structures create the conventions by which people behave. We can see a spiral of constantly shifting influence, creating and re-creating the conventions by which people live within them. For example, most of us don't search the source of our bias. In socialisation process, a lot of dominant thinking system and such as social, economic, moral and cultural and people affected by these system construct and develops our bias. A lot system can transmit an idea to the outside which is in favour of them. If the interest of person's subjected to this idea are maximised, these ideas can be accepted more easily.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann proposed that all knowledge is socially constructed, including our knowledge of what is "real". Because people are born into a society and culture with existing norms and predefined patterns of conduct, definitions of what is "real" are socially transmitted from one generation to the next and are further reinforced by social sanctions. These existing group definitions are learned and internalised through the process of socialisation, and this knowledge becomes part of one's worldview and ideology. People, rarely, stop the question their worldview and unless unchallenged, they take it more or less for granted that the way in which they see the world is the same for everyone (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998). These knowledge are constructions that we take as a base and assumption.

Social constructionism is a sociological theory originating in sociology (Berger & Luckmann 1966), which posits that the world we create and the meaning we create in the world are the result of social interaction, that is, talking with other people and living in a cultural context that transmits meanings to us. Meanings are not inherent in objects or particular situations, rather we make meanings out of what we experience through interactions with others. Thus, social constructionists see numerous competing viewpoints of the world rather than one true view. Instead of the master narratives and universalising claims that have characterised knowledge since the Enlightenment, knowledge is conceived of as multiple, fragmentary, context-dependent, and local (Hare-Mustin, 1994, p. 20).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) believed that the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for knowledge. As sociologists, they also believed that all human knowledge is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations and through social institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 3). They hoped to develop a type of 'sociological psychology' that could explain knowledge development. Because of their emphasis, they believed that the sociology of knowledge must give attention to the sociology of language and

religion. They were particularly interested in socialisation processes such as the legitimisation of knowledge, and how humans reify social structures that subsequently construct their realities. Readers familiar with sociology will recognise that social constructionism is not without reifications of its own. It is filled, for example, with multiple explanatory (invented), sociological concepts. Concepts such as objectivation, institution, norms, roles, social order, and power, etc. Social constructionism, therefore, was created in the context of explanation, and within a framework of macro sociological perspectives. Berger and Luckmann, for example, sought to integrate the theoretical positions of Weber and Durkheim into a comprehensive theory of social action.

Using the social constructionist approach, social problems were recast as being social constructions, products of claims making, labelling and other constitutive definitional processes. Social constructionism was also adapted into social psychology where it is used to deconstruct common understandings of human development, anger and gender and other social psychological phenomena. It grew in several fields including sociology, social psychology and social work. Social constructionism, for example, has become the dominant approach to social problems theory within sociology in the United States, spawning dozens of articles and books and an on-going debates within the *Social Problems* journal for the past 20 years (Franklin, 1995).

Recently, the theory of social constructionism has influenced a number of theorists and practitioners in psychology, family therapy, and related disciplines. Franklin (1995) and Franklin (1995) also discussed theoretical distinctions between social constructionism and constructivism and their influences on therapeutic techniques. Constructionist techniques are being influenced by distinct but parallel trends in diverse practice areas (e.g. narrative psychology, cognitive therapy and family therapy).

The paradigm of social constructionism has its roots in the philosophy of human experience, in the writings of Mannheim and Schutz. In the social sciences, it draws on the work of Mead and Parsons. The most systematic presentation of the paradigm is found in Berger and Luckmann's book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). First, we present the constructionist paradigm. This presentation draws heavily on Berger and Luckmann's treatise. The discussion is organized around five statements; we have extracted them from a far more lengthy and integrated discourse (Delamater and Hyde, 1998).

First, our experience of the world is ordered. We do not perceive a chaotic jumble of sights, sounds, smells, and touches. We perceive the world as comprised of discrete events and specific persons engaging in distinct actions in a particular order. We experience the

world as an objective reality, as consisting of events and persons that exist independently of our perception of them.

Second, language provides the basis on which we make sense of the world. Language provides us with the categories, or typifications, that we use to classify events and persons and to order them. Language provides the means by which we interpret new experience. Language or discourse is "prior to and constitutive of the world".

Third, the reality of everyday life is shared. Other persons perceive reality in much the same way, as consisting of similar events, persons, actions, and order. This shared, or intersubjective, character distinguishes the reality of everyday life from idiosyncratic realities, such as our dreams. Language enables us to share experience, to make our experience available to others. Thus, reality is a product of social interaction (Gergen, 1985).

Fourth, shared typifications of reality become institutionalised. Shared typifications of people and events lead to habitualization: "While in theory there may be a hundred ways to go about the project of building a canoe out of matchsticks, habitualization narrows these down to one" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 53). Habitualization makes the behaviour of others predictable, facilitating joint activity (Mead, 1934). Once a typification or practice becomes habitual, others come to expect it, and mechanisms of social control are developed to perpetuate it. Of particular significance are institutionalised roles, reciprocal typifications of conduct by types of actors in specific contexts.

Fifth, knowledge may be institutionalised at the level of society, or within subgroups. A subuniverse of meaning is a socially segregated store of knowledge "carried" by a specific group. There may be conflict between such groups.

The unique feature of constructionism lies in the way it relates to individual differences of every human being. There is no proper technique or intervention to change human function. Rather, the theory addresses the important need to design a specific intervention to adopt to the specific needs of the client systems (Ronen & Dowd, 1998)

Social constructionism is an orientation to the knowledge based on the belief that knowledge arises from the interaction of an observer with his or her environment. This approach stands in opposition to the belief that objective observations of the world can be made from neutral positions. For social constructionist, a neutral position is impossible to attain. The values and interests of the observer are always operative, and the very act of observation changes that which is being observed (Dean & Rhode, 1998, p. 256). Our knowledge and knowing are shaped by also social, cultural, historical, economic and political conditions (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Geertz, 1973; Gergen, 1985, 1991; Dean & Rhode

1998). Those in positions of political and social power are able to influence the “terms” or categories that are used, and then supportive of the political and social institutions that spawn them. The role of language is seen as central in shaping rather than revealing meaning. Social constructionist focuses on socio-cultural processes labelling the problem as problem, meaning of the problem in the reference of client’s relations , and life story of the client (Cowger, 1998).

In social constructionist view, reality is always filtered through human language- we cannot gain direct access to it. It does not mean that violence, poverty, suffering, and mental and emotional anguish are not problems, but rather they are experienced and storied differently. For example, a woman who had an illegal and secret abortion in the 1940s or 1950s, a time when abortion was storied in society as shameful, will have had an experience very different from that of a woman of the 1990s who chooses to have a legal abortion, is offered counselling, and may share her experience with others. People understand and assign different meanings to their pain, poverty, successes, and failures and thus experience the same reality differently (Laird, 1999, 154-155).

For the social constructionist, the relationship between language and things in the world are indeterminate, that is, no necessary connection between objects, actions, and states and what they are called. Rather than reflecting the world, language generates it (Witkin 1999, 5). The basic function of the language is to coordinate and regulate social life (Gergen, 1994). As Marcuse asserted, “In speaking their own language, people also speak the language of their masters, benefactors, advertisers (Ingram, 1990).

Instead of trying to decide whose representation of reality is closer to “truth”, we must decide how to choose between competing interpretations, we must decide how to hear and assess different discourses from within their own context. Rather than operating from a position of certainty, we are faced with reconceptualizing approaches to education, research and practice (Witkin, 1999, 5).

Some clinical practitioners have examined the way that prevailing constructions of mental health and pathology produce social interactions in which their clients are constructed as pathologized individuals. Harper (1995) how one of his own clinical interviews constructs his clients as “paranoid”, and recommends that practitioners aim to provide their clients with alternative constructions of their experience which do not necessarily position them in helpful ways.

In this context Merttens, drawing on her work with children, emphasises the power of stories to allow people to enter into a “dialogue” with alternative values and ways of life

through imaginatively casting ourselves into the storied scenario. By experimenting with different, by telling different stories of who we are, we search for a narrative which empowers us to deal more effectively with our circumstances.

Social constructionist approach gives greater attention to the qualitative research. None of the social constructionist has rejected science as a way of knowing. In essence, their point is that only one way among several and that others should be considered seriously.

From a constructionist perspective, knowledge and theory cannot be differentiated- both are seen as culturally situated, creative narratives. Knowledge and theory are always negotiable. Social constructionist stressed intersubjectivity of knowing.

Theories are not neutral elements. Because they affect both nature and the result of intervention. They are also produced by powerful groups. There should be egalitarian relation between social worker and client in constructionist view. Social constructionist gives great importance to the collaboration, reflexivity and multiplicity.

After exploring the base of social constructionism, it is necessary to study the impact of social constructionism on social work with example of Turkish social work literature.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM ON SOCIAL WORK

Social constructionism is closely related with the value system and mission and social work profession and discipline. Social worker like social constructionist try to question the dominant knowledge structures and both of them try to understand effects of history and culture. The way how social workers understand the needs of human beings are determined by economic, politic, ideological, and ethical factors. Such model that construct the problem we address and their effects on the services are very important. For example, both of them try to understand at what point they protect the child welfare and who benefit from this situation, who are damaged from such practice (Witkin, 1999, p.7). For example, in Turkey, what is the mission of street children's center organized by society? What is their aim? Whether to take the children away or how far they are wanted in their life areas? How far different social groups want to have these children participate in life actively? How far these groups has the value system which are in congruence with social work mission and ethics? Are they any social groups who benefit from such children? At what point these groups try to prevent the practice of social work? In fact, such an approach based on social constructionism will make the social work practice successful. Social constructionism and social work recommend to

support, facilitate, legalise, different knowledge, tradition and way of expression. There is no need of limiting expression and of knowledge demand according to set criteria (Gergen, 1994). Social workers believe that those who cannot express themselves and their rights and as well as marginal groups have valuable opinions which are great value for society. Perhaps social work is the unique profession which can change dominant structures about discrimination of sex, race, disability and prejudice (Witkin, 1999, s.7).

As Witkin (1999) indicates social work should be a field where such view are expressed freely. However, if social worker give them meaningful services, then the knowledge they express in their own language will be of utmost importance. How this can be achieved? To encourage then write their experiences in their own words, to help them writing their stories and to share the gains of both roles of workers and clients are some examples of success. For example, how a client should have understood, had he/she read the record written by social workers about feelings, thinking and dynamics about the client. If it is the client's reality, the client should be the most appropriate person to value the process.

The view of social constructionism should not be used only in working with clients, but also this view should be integrated as a basic value. In these context, social work has to be careful to use language in congruence with its professional identity. For example, social work use the word disability. In Turkish version, of the word disability “**özür**” disagrees with basic values of social work. Because “**özür**” connotes the action of not being able to do the something that a person wants to accomplish. In other word, it is used as asking being excused. Therefore, it disagrees with basic social work value that believes in human potential and capacity to develop. What social work philosophy may loose when the kind of conceptualisation is made? What are gains and looses of disabled persons and society from use of this word? Why social work prefers to use this word when identifying clients. To answer this questions can effect the social work basic values and its practice.

Another example from the linguistic point of view is self-determination. The Turkish version of self-determination is “**kendi kaderini tayin hakkı**”. Turkish version of self-determination is to decide for against the Good's will. But we use these terminology in social work in understanding that the person is able to decide what they want to be which may disagree with the belief of certain groups in society who strongly believes in fate. It is against the social work basic values which believes that human beings are able to make rational decisions.

Another interesting word is client. The Turkish version of client is “**müracaatçı**” which means a person applying for any kind service. But the word client in social work is not

always an individual who applies for social service. But it could be a group even a community which would need of social work intervention. In that cases, neither a group nor a community applies for social work intervention. According to this understanding, if we do not accept groups and communities as clients, then we could exclude groups and community work from social work practice (in general the macro social work practice based on the belief that social functioning can be enhanced by developing social conditions) and social work is taken as residual work and it is similar to medical model of social work practice for individuals. Other connotation of the Turkish version of the client is the individual who expects the solution of his/her problem from the service he/she apply. But in social work we do not solve people's problem instead we try to encourage them to choose the best options for the solution of his/her problem.

Still, another word is empowerment as it is used in social work practice. In Turkish version of empowerment is “**güçlendirme**” which connotes to equip the person with the power originated from the social worker. But in practice of social work, the worker and client are taken as equal partners in the give and take situation. Therefore, when talk of empowerment in social work we mean that the social worker is only stimulating the potential power of the client.

As it is known, some words has positive meaning while others are negative. Intervention in the use of social work practice is a positive action. But the Turkish version of word is “**müdahale**” which is a negative action that is to intervene without the consent of the person. So, what the word connotes in social work practice and Turkish usage is contradictory with each other.

In these framework, social work is not objective or neutral from its mission point of view. Social work addresses to the welfare of the individuals, groups, families and communities who are deprived, poor who does not have its share from the distribution of resources, oppressed who are not able to accomplish their social functioning. In other words, social work are in favour of these groups in society. Any profession whose mission is impartial cannot be objective or neutral because of its nature. It does not mean to be against other part of the society or creating anarchy. The aim of social work is to enrich the society through orienting and empowering individuals and communities to societal changes and new styles of life. Because social work is a profession and discipline which sees individuals and society supplementing and complementing each other and believing interaction of individual and communities in the creation and solution of human problems. The constructionist defends that knowledge should be in accord with the demands of client, not from other sources of

power. Because all power groups produce knowledge in their favour. At this point, the function of social work should be to support the knowledge in favour of the client system which is likely invisible. In order to do this, it is necessary to provide opportunities for clients to narrate their stories in their own language. This is the best way of understanding the life and problems of clients and role of social welfare institutions in their life. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, the social worker is excluded from the position of knowledgeable, key person for the solution of problems of the client transforms the worker as an equal partner in their relationship. This gives the client the opportunity of assessing the situation. This also helps to conduct qualitative research techniques in social work.

From the constructionist point of view, while trying to understand the situation of the client, different theoretical approaches should be used. Because different theoretical approaches make us see the different *realities*. Bu using different theoretical approaches, professionals should be aware of prejudices and assumptions. These prejudices and assumptions cannot protect the clients or discard their benefits. Theories implies value preferences and political approaches (Dolgoff, 1981).

In other words, theories which helps to identify the problems and needs can determine the direction of our intervention. For example, while working with juvenile offender, should used psychological theories or sociological theories? the way we identify the situation will determine the type of intervention mode and expected outcome of the intervention. Already, social work profession at the turn of its millennium continues the discussion that whether social work's basic treatment modality is clinical practice and its primary goal is individual treatment or social work's historic roots and major goal is social reform (Haynes, 1998; Arawomitz, 1998). Although it is clear that the mission of social work covers both of them, within the framework of social constructionist, this situation may be interpreted as the result of knowledge generated by groups who are not congruent with social justice. Neglecting the social reform aspect and concentrating more on the individual treatment, social workers suffered from the lack identity among other helping professions.

The function of social work is to increase awareness of the imposed on the clients and having no effect for the welfare of the client and giving no consideration for their rights or prevent them to make use their rights.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, within the framework of social constructionist view, social workers should give attention to the following points:

1. This kind of approach create an equitable relation between social worker and client. So, there is no power relation between worker and client. Because social constructionist approach is of great importance to clarify the assumptions and values of practitioner.
2. This approach allows to use different theories and stories of clients which are told by their own words. This helps to understand the problems of clients without any need for the conceptualisation of ant theory which is not always necessary. In fact the life stories of the client which cannot be explained by existing theories should be used to create new theories which is unique to social work practice.
3. Social constructionist view, provides important information about how to create the changes in accord with the client system to professional by giving priority to values of the client. This approach could be taken as the contemporary version of social work's basic value of self-determination. This perspective makes the client system to participate in the formulation of practice theories.

If social work wants to be influential, should give priority to define his identity and components with the client systems. The narration and the language of the clients should be used while defining situation and problems of the client. Definition of the problem should be done in favour of the client by using multiple theories and seeing the client as the only person to make this definition. It should be kept in mind that it is to time to change the theories and approaches in favour of the client system. This kind of change is not considered as radical for social work. Because social work is a profession which tries to change status quo in favour of the client and it is a challenging profession. Social work values such as individualisation, adherence to self –determination, participation, social justice, starting where the client is, respect to dignity of client, believing in the development of capacity of individual, provided that the conditions are improved supports this approach in their contemporary meanings.

With this understanding, to assign appropriate meaning to the concepts is the only way to make the social work *real*. If this is not accomplished, society, practitioner and scientific circles might cause the *deviation* of social work. In my opinion, it is one of the most dangerous situation in the practice of social work

According to the constructionist view, social work should construct itself within its own philosophy. Social work has the responsibility of working in favour of the clients and making them the subject of life, in generating the knowledge and to integrating them into society. Although in social work practice, to see the problem in question and its solution

within the perspectives of the client and give less or no attention to other parties interest and benefits are quite clear theoretically, it might cause difficulty for the professional practice. But social work is a risk taken profession. Therefore, social workers should know that they cannot keep themselves away from this conflict if they want to make their profession *real* and to achieve their professional mission.

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