

Commentary

Making Sense of 'Construct' Terminology in Qualitative Doctoral Studies

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Contextualization

This article emerges out of challenges faced in developing the theoretical framework of a doctoral thesis. Findings in the particular thesis were drawn largely from face-to-face interviews that were conducted with educators working abroad. This data collection method called for an analysis that was firmly situated within the qualitative domain. Attempts to piece together a logical framework in support of such analysis, however, became increasingly difficult when faced with the ambiguity of terms rooted in 'construct' etymology. Significant time was spent trying to undo what might be described as a type of 'Gordian Knot' of words. These words often sounded similar but were not used consistently across academic literature. This article aims to build awareness of these inconsistencies, thereby enabling doctoral students who are engaged in qualitative work of this nature to build a more solidly grounded theoretical framework.

Abstract: *Terms like constructivism, social constructivism, social constructs and constructionism are frequently used to describe the theoretical frameworks of qualitative work. While they may appear similar in nature, a close examination of the literature indicates that there are some distinct differences. In my own doctoral work, I invested a significant amount of time in the analysis of literature trying to grasp the subtleties between these sometimes confusing terms. Admittedly, I found no neatly packaged answers, nor did I come across a transformational moment whereby the different literature suddenly aligned in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, I believe that what I gathered in the process may be of value to doctoral students currently immersed in their own qualitative analysis.*

Introduction

Broadly speaking, 'construct' terminology is situated within the psycho-social domain. This domain may be viewed as a non-linear space where cognitive, social and emotional factors come together and influence human perception and behaviour. Within this domain, an individual receives and exerts influence with an improbability that any two people will process the same experience in exactly the same way (Hall, 1976). Beyond differences in individual perception, the idea of 'constructs' also pre-supposes the existence of a collective social framework within which individuals operate. This social framework moulds the individual psyche through recurrent exposure to particular experiences and, by doing so, shapes the ways in which individuals come to understand and view the world around them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kalantri, 2012).

Across the psycho-social landscape it is easy to find a wide array of 'construct' descriptions, each with a slightly different interpretation. Importantly, there are significant inconsistencies regarding these various approaches in the literature. While some well-respected scholars are very explicit about differences between the constructivist and constructionist approaches (Ackermann, 2001; Andrews, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2012) some equally well-respected scholars use the terms interchangeably, effectively treating them as synonyms (Robson, 2002; Schwandt, 1998). To complicate matters further, among the scholars who purport differences, the reported differences are far from uniform (Andrews, 2012; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2012). Suffice it to say that definitions do not align across the literature. Given these inconsistencies, it is important for doctoral students to grapple with how their own

research will deal with these terms, including which version(s) they will incorporate into their final work.

While 'construct' conceptualisations have received their fair share of criticism (Kotzee, 2010; Oxford, 1997), the intent of this article is not to delve into questions of validity. Nor is it the intent of this article to explore any deeper large-scale research movements within interpretive research. Instead, the subsections that follow aim to communicate the fundamental differences identified between the most dominant of 'construct' terminology with a practical purpose in mind. To this end, this article is probably most useful to those who have already decided to use a theoretical framework rooted in a 'construct' conceptualisation but need better clarification on the individual terms (including their inter-relationship) - especially given the conflicting state of existing literature.

Constructivism

Most literature acknowledges constructivism as stemming from the work of Jean Piaget (Ackermann, 2001; Bodner, 1986; Papert, 1999). It is an approach founded in developmental psychology, and more specifically in child development. Through his work with young children, Piaget developed a cognitive theory which articulated how young children's thinking develops (Piaget, 1929). Unlike the popular theory of the time, which treated children as empty vessels to be filled, Piaget's theory offered a radically different explanation to how children learn.

In his work with children, Piaget developed the concept of 'schemas'. Rooted in Greek etymology, a 'schema' refers to a shape or outline (Nathanail, 1985). Piaget found that based on prior knowledge and experiences, children developed 'schemas' of thought against which they compared all new knowledge (Piaget, 1929). Children expanded and adjusted these 'schemas' to fit and make sense out of new knowledge and experiences. The process of negotiation and adjustment between prior knowledge and new knowledge was referred to as accommodation and assimilation (Bodner, 1986, Piaget, 1929).

While Piaget's work focused largely on the cognitive development of children, his idea of 'schemas' provided an important contribution beyond the field of psychology. Overlapping and running parallel to Piaget's developmental findings, social scientists were developing similar conceptualisations on how individuals categorised information from their social environment. It is these conceptualisations which effectively set the stage for the development of social constructivism and social constructs.

Social Constructivism & Social Constructs

With the conclusion of World War II came an unprecedented push for research aimed at understanding how individuals and groups come to develop prejudice and hate. This branch of study, known as Intergroup Studies, found that while individuals did form cognitive categories by which they sorted information, these categories were inevitably influenced by a variety of social factors that were an integral part of an individual's environment (Allport, 1954). These findings effectively extended the idea of cognitive schemas to social categories.

The additional consideration of social factors and their role in how individuals come to make sense of their world falls under the realm of social constructivism. Social constructivism adds new dimensions to Piaget's work for several reasons. First, social constructivism moves beyond childhood and into the more general notion of human development and understanding. Second, the individual is not examined in isolation but is seen as the centre of a network of other people who exert influence. These influences help to shape how individuals come to understand the world (Sharp & Wade, 2008). The interaction and role of complex social elements on the individual psyche is described succinctly in an excerpt drawn from the classic text 'The Social Construction of Reality':

The developing human being not only interrelates with a particular natural environment, but with a specific cultural and social order, which is mediated to him by the significant others who have charge of him.

(Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 66).

Whereas social constructivism is very much a process, social constructs are effectively the end-products or 'artefacts' of that process. In short, they are the collective symbols/beliefs that hold shared meanings among groups (Sharp & Wade, 2008). The Canadian flag, for example, might be referred to as a 'social construct' because it is a symbol that carries meaning to both Canadians and other cultural/national groups globally. With regards to more abstract concepts, the inclination of Westerners to associate pink with girls and blue with boys represents an implicit cultural norm that is accepted by the masses (Sharp & Wade, 2008). This construct is, in essence, socially imposed and widely accepted. It remains unlikely, for example, that a North-American or European will select a pink outfit as a gift for a baby boy.

Constructionism

Within the realm of human development, constructionism can also be viewed as an outgrowth (or variation) of constructivism. Constructionism uses the cognitive findings gained from constructivism to inform and target the learning process. In its most simplified form, constructionism is referred to as 'learning by making' (Papert & Harel, 1991). In education, the thrust behind this approach is in its advocacy for hands-on experiential learning, with constructionism standing in stark contrast to 'instructionism.'

The thrust of this concept is the belief that it is through active interaction with the external environment that people are able to construct knowledge most meaningfully (Ackermann, 2001). To this end, constructionism is particularly relevant to instructional research that moves beyond traditional notions of 'paper and pencil' learning. Even among adults, Papert holds a commitment that knowledge is fundamentally shaped by its uses (Ackerman, 2001). Although constructionism is most often associated with classroom instruction, it can also be linked to aspects of social constructivism. One could argue, for instance, that a key reason why human categorisations are so difficult to change is because they are formed through daily and direct (e.g. 'hands-on') experiences provided via the social environment.

Examining the Interrelationship

Adding the term 'social' to the terms constructivism and constructs immediately implies a more collective, sociological approach to knowledge. One might say that while constructivism and constructionism focus on various aspects of the individual psyche from a cognitive perspective, social constructivism and social constructs make a more explicit shift from the psychological to the sociological. The four terms, however, are very much related and often overlap with each other. It is difficult, for example, to examine individual perceptions without considering their broader social circumstances. Likewise, in order to understand the broader social context great insight can come from examining the thoughts of the individuals within that context. This is arguably true for any subject matter under study.

Indeed, all research begins within a particular context. An examination of how international students in higher education settings cope with personal and professional challenges may, for instance, draw on any number of these conceptualisations. From a social constructivism perspective, the new culture that international students must adapt to may challenge, even change, many of their incoming social constructs. A student coming from Saudi Arabia (where up until recently women were unable to drive) may still experience some disequilibrium upon being offered a ride from a female classmate. Likewise, a Japanese student may be surprised to find out that looking a professor in the eye in Western-culture is a sign of respect whereas failing to do so is considered rude (the reverse is true in Japanese culture!) Of course, these

examples have just as much to do with values and power structures as they do with knowledge. Nevertheless, they remain socially constructed realities that are often taken for granted by those who have been raised and have always operated within them.

Similar to Piaget's constructivism, however, changes in cultural context often prompt some disequilibrium. Since individuals are socialized to understand the world a certain way, when new knowledge and experiences do not fit norms, adjustments need to be made. From a constructivism perspective, therefore, the adjustments that international students face may very well result in new 'schemas' (or frames of reference) which, in turn, change the way the world is understood. Finally, the very act of living and working in a different culture is an experiential process that ties very closely with a constructionist approach to learning and growth. After all, it is through experiential 'doing' that international students are able to (albeit temporarily) internalise the new culture's new ways of being.

Due to the significant overlap described in the above example, doctoral students should be wary of treating these four terms as if they exist in mutually exclusive silos. Acceptance of one approach does not necessitate the rejection of the others. In many cases, there is substantial cross-over and it becomes increasingly difficult to claim allegiance to one approach alone. Perhaps part of the difficulty and confusion surrounding the separation of these terms stems from the significant interconnectedness which actually exists between them. My own inclination, therefore, is to view 'construct' terminology as existing on a gradated continuum whereby differences exist in emphasis but are nevertheless still contained along the same continuum.

Concluding Thoughts

What is apparent in the analysis of the literature is that there is no unanimous agreement as to what each term actually means. As mentioned earlier in this article, some scholars use the terms synonymously while others insist on subtle but distinct differences. While this article has tried to provide some semblance of the more dominant positions, it remains introductory and superficial in nature. It is my hope that readers who wish to delve deeper into these terms in order to reach their own conclusions will use this article as a single point of departure in their exploration.

Regardless of whether or not the definitions provided in this article are utilised 'as is', doctoral students working with theoretical frameworks rooted in 'construct' terminology would do well to address some of these recurring issues in their actual thesis. This is probably most efficiently done by: (1) acknowledging the inconsistencies that exist in the literature and (2) creating a section that explicitly addresses which 'construct' view has been selected in the particular research and why. By doing so, the readers' prior knowledge is not taken for granted thereby ensuring that the logic behind the research is received intact.

Indeed, one of the ironies of working towards a doctorate is the gradual realisation of how little we - and our respective academic communities - actually know. Strangely enough, for many of us this awareness emerges at around the same time we formally receive our doctorate, when we are suddenly bestowed with the official title of 'expert.' My own view is that acknowledging the complexities behind creating knowledge within one's research is not only highly relevant, but indicative of both intellectual maturity and humility. Beyond the gaps in knowledge our individual research tries to fill, therefore, identifying the gaps we find along the way can help to create new spaces for dialogue. It is these spaces, in turn, that can help to ensure that the broader academic community remains authentic and vibrant.

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