

## **DOES THEORY REALLY MATTER? THE VALUE OF UNDERSTANDING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY'S UNDERLYING THEORY OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM**

Session Description: Strengthen your Appreciative Inquiry practice by being grounded in social constructionism theory. Cooperrider attributes Ken Gergen's work on social constructionism as the inspiration for Appreciative Inquiry. In layman's terms, social constructionism argues that people create their reality through daily interactions with others. The culture of any group of people in history was created through ongoing conversations with others. For OD the implication is that organizations can change the organizational culture by changing the conversations.

Come prepared to discuss how you or organizations you work with have changed by having ongoing conversations with one another.

Katharine Wismer is the People Development & Training Program Manager at VMC Consulting in Redmond, Washington. In June 2007, she completed her master's in organizational development at Seattle University's OSR (Organization Systems Renewal) Graduate Program, [www.osr-nw.org](http://www.osr-nw.org). Katharine brings years of leadership development training and development experience to her love of organizational development. Please send your comments and questions to [Katharine@wismer.com](mailto:Katharine@wismer.com).

In layman's terms, social constructionism argues that people create their reality through daily interactions with others. The culture of any group of people in history was created through the ongoing conversations of the people in that time. For organizational development the implication is that organizations can change the organizational culture by changing the conversations.

This paper is an exploration of social constructionism with the intent of applying this theory through an Appreciative Inquiry intervention in a Consultation Project. The organization of this text starts with Cooperrider, the creator of Appreciative Inquiry (1987). An investigation of additional seminal theorists of social constructionism follows, including Gergen, Berger & Luckmann, and Burr. Then the paper discusses key areas of social constructionism, the historical context of its development, as well as divergent streams within the theory. The paper concludes with the author's response to what she has learned about the theory and how the theory will be applied in her Consultation Project.

Cooperrider created the concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) during graduate studies at Case Western Reserve University in the mid-1980s. Cooperrider attributes Gergen's *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (1982) as synthesizing the work of Lewin's action research. "Gergen offers a desperately needed clue to how we can revitalize an action-research discipline that has never reached its potential" (Cooperrider, 1987, n.p.). Gergen (1982) suggests the ambiguity in Lewin's work might well have been a protective measure, an attempt to shield his vision of an action science. "Lewin walked a tightrope between two fundamentally opposed views of science and never did make it clear how theory could be used as both an interpretive and a creative element. This achievement would have to wait for a change in the intellectual ethos of social science" (Cooperrider, 1987, n.p.).

"Increasingly the literature signals disenchantment with theories of science that grant priority to the external world in the generation of human knowledge. Instead there is growing movement toward granting preeminence to the cognitive processes of mind and the symbolic processes of social construction" (Cooperrider, 1987, n.p.).

## **Descriptions of Social Constructionism**

Cooperrider summarizes some of his ideas on social constructionism.

At the heart . . . . . is the assumption of impermanence - the fundamental instability of social order. No matter what the durability to date, virtually any pattern of social action is open to infinite revision. Accepting for a moment the argument of the social constructionist's that social reality, at any given point, is a product of broad social agreement (shared meanings), and further granting a linkage between the conceptual schemes of a culture and its other patterns of action, we must seriously consider the idea that alterations in conceptual practice, in ways of symbolizing the world, hold tremendous potential for guiding changes in the social order. (Cooperrider, 1987, n.p.)

Gergen stated that "social constructionism inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live." (1985, p.266).

Seminal theorists Berger and Luckmann's (1966) in their book *The Social Construction of Reality* wrote of social constructionism that

[r]eality is socially constructed and the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs. The key terms . . . are 'reality' and 'knowledge,' terms that

are not only current in everyday speech, but that have behind them a long history of philosophical inquiry. ... For our purposes we define 'reality' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish it away') and define 'knowledge' as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics. (p. 1)

Burr (2003) says that there is no single description which would be adequate for all the different writers who are considered social constructionists. What links these authors is what Burr calls 'a kind of family resemblance'. There are enough similarities that one knows they are of the same family.

Burr identified four key assumptions necessary to be considered a social constructionist (2003, p. 3-5):

- *A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge*  
"Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. This means that the categories with which we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions." Observation is not a valid way of understanding the world because of the perspective each observer holds is dependent on many factors.
- *Historical and cultural specificity*  
The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. The particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are artifacts of it, and we should not assume that our ways of understanding, are necessarily any better, in terms of being any nearer the truth, than other ways.
- *Knowledge is sustained by social process*  
"It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language, is of great interest to social constructionists." The accepted ways of understanding the world are created by the social processes in which people engage with each other every day.
- *Knowledge and social action go together*  
These negotiated understandings could take a wide variety of different forms, and we can therefore talk of numerous possible social constructions of the world. But each different construction also brings with it, a different kind of action from human beings. Our constructions of the world are bound up with power relations because they have implication for what is permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat others. How does a society react to individuals with mental disorders such as bipolar disorder? If the patient is a mother with children do we take the children away and not allow the mother to see her children. Instead put the children with a foster family, who happen to be alcoholics. This is the story of what happened to my first husband's mother in the early 1960's. Today our knowledge and understanding are different. Today mother's are given medication and given support to allow them to raise the children.

Burr's key assumptions appear throughout the writing of the authors on social constructionism. Though many scholars differ in other areas these four notions seem to be the concepts that hold the 'family' of ideas about social constructionism together.

The theory of social constructionism brings much of what western culture is built upon into question. If the scientific method is no longer valid then how do we gain our knowledge? “If our access to reality is inevitably conditioned by local beliefs about what is to count as knowledge, the traditional claim of sciences to be finding out more and more about the ‘as it really is’, begins to look questionable or at least unduly simplified” (Skinner, 1985, p. 11).

No wonder the traditional psychology and social psychology feel threatened. “The specter of a thoroughly radical relativism, a paralysis of thought and thus of thoughtful deed is well upon us” (Hazelrigg, 1989, p. 2). The concepts of knowledge, the belief in progress, the search for predictability and the ability to control events are not coming to fruition. Older mechanistic views are not as fully embraced as they once were, though they are well integrated into most of western industrial life.

“The world we came to know and inhabit is a product of linguistic convention, in an empowering insight that can alter the way that social scientists construe their task” (Steier, 1991).

Gergen has written, “The constructionist orientation invites experimentation with new forms of scientific discourse. For we as scientists are also engaged in forms of social construction – fashioning frames of discourse for living lives” (1988, p. 18). If this is our task rather than fashioning verbal mirrors, “then isn’t it true that we are theorizing scholars contribute to the forms of cultural intelligibility, to the symbolic resources available to people to carry on their lives together” (1988, p. 10).

“There is little about collective action or organization development that is preprogrammed, unilaterally determined, or stimulus bound in any direct physical, economic, material or deep-structured sociological way” (Cooperrider, Barrett & Srivastva., 1995, p. 157).

## **Theories related to Social Constructionism**

Busche views Appreciative Inquiry with five underlying themes. These include socially constructing reality, heliotropic hypothesis, inner dialogue, resolving paradoxical dilemmas and appreciative process (2001).

Jane Magruder Watkins, visiting OSR-13 faculty in May 2006, and author of *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (2001), identifies the theory and research base that underlies Appreciative Inquiry as social constructionism and the power of image.<sup>1</sup>

## **History of Development of Social Constructionism**

To assist the reader in understanding the historical content of this paper, a list of the culture movement names and estimated dates are listed below:

- Neoclassical (1600s – early 1800s)
- Romanticism (1770 – 1830)
- Realism (1830 – 1905)
- Modernism (1880 – 1965)
- Postmodernism (since 1965)

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<sup>1</sup> Watkins has worked closely with Cooperrider and suggested to this paper’s author to read Burr for a comprehensive overview of social constructionism.

Social constructionism is influenced by a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions, and can not be traced back to a single source. It is rooted in philosophical developments over the past three hundred years ago, yet social constructionism really began recently in the postmodernist era. Postmodernism was focused primarily in art, architecture, literature and cultural studies, not social sciences., yet it “represents a questioning of and rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism, the intellectual movement which preceded it and exists along side it, generating much argument and debate” (Burr, 2003, p. 10). Postmodernism embodies the assumptions underlying intellectual life that has been around since the time of Enlightenment, in the 1700s.

Enlightenment was a search for truth through the application of reason and rationality. This is in contrast to the mediaeval period where the church was the sole holder of truth. In the 1700s Kant (date) argued that all matters should be subject to publicity and debate. The individual person, rather than the church, should be the focus for issues of truth and morality. It was up to individuals to make objective scientific based judgments about what nature of reality. (Burr, 2003)

During the early 1600s Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician and scientist, became one of the key thinkers of the Scientific Revolution (Wikipedia, 2006). Cartesian thought established that the individual mind and the external world are separate and distinct entities. “The real world exists out there, independent of any attempts to perceive it or converse about it. Meaning making is an activity that occurs within the internal recesses of the individual mind” (Cooperrider, et al, p. 160). Language is a set of symbols that can subjectively convey the meaning of minds. Individuals can gather knowledge from the external world as long as the observer detaches themselves fully.

The modernist movement, a more recent search for truth, was based upon the idea that there were rules or structures underlying the surface features of the world. Modernism asserted that there is a right way of doing things. For instance, in the social sciences the search for rules and structure was displayed by Marx (date), who explained social occurrences in terms of an underlying economic structure. Psychologists Freud (date) and Piaget (date) suggested the existence of underlying psychic structures to account for psychological issues. In these examples the hidden structure is seen as transferable and identified as the truth. Theories in social sciences which postulate such structures are called structuralist. The later rejection of structures as truth is known as postmodernism. Postmodernism emphasizes co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation dependent ways of life.

Kant and Marx both believed that knowledge is in part a product of human thought rather than grounded in an external reality. In the early twentieth century the sociology of knowledge discussion began. This discourse involved how socio-cultural forces construct knowledge and with the kind of knowledge they construct.

Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) book “The Social Construction of Reality” has its roots in the sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann’s “account of social life argues that human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices. They show how the world can be socially constructed by social practices of people but at the same time experienced by them as if the nature of their world is pre-given and fixed” (Burr, 2003, p. 13).

Burr suggests that in psychology, the emergence of social constructionism is credited to Gergen’s (1973) paper ‘Social psychology as history’. Gergen states that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Instead of studying the individual it is important to study the social, political and economic areas to get a better understanding of psychology and social life. The only certain aspects of society are that it continually changes.

The concept of knowledge as a state of individual minds should be brought into sharp question. What is needed at this point is a view of knowledge that does not place it in the hands of individuals, but within communities. Because of the multi-perspective nature of knowing, the relational embeddedness of language, the impossibility of immaculate independent observation, the perlocutionary force of theory, the contextual quality of all thought, the idea that words are not autonomous pictures or maps; that historical conventions govern what is taken to be true or valid, it is for all these reasons and others that one can safely conclude that there is no more thing that unites many voices in the new era: the truth of human relatedness, our primary model of connectedness must count, count affirmatively, for the way we understand ourselves and our history. (Cooperrider, et al., p. 171)

Within in the field of psychology there are various forms that have commonalities and are sometimes considered in the family of social constructionism. (Burr, 2003, pp. 15-18)

- *Critical psychology* looks at how the individual is located within society in relation to difference, inequality and power.
- *Discursive psychology* is to study how people use language in their everyday interactions, their 'discourse' with each other.
- *Deconstructionism* emphasizes the constructive power of language as a system of signs rather than the constructive work of the individual person. This area focuses on how humans become structured through the structures of language and through ideology.
- *Constructivism* is used to refer to Piagetian theory that sees the person as actively engaged in the creation of their own phenomenal world.

## Research supporting Social Constructionism

Cooperrider did an exhaustive review of research that supports his concepts. From Cooperrider's article *Positive Image; Positive Action* (1987) he summarizes this research as follows:

**Placebo:** People get better both physically and emotionally when they believe in the treatment. Studies show one-third to two-thirds of patients respond positively to placebos. This is even stronger in experiments where the physician believes as strongly as the patient.

**Positive Affect:** Positive emotions increase the capacity for learning, creative problem solving, social helpfulness, and effective decision making.

**Internal Dialogue:** Successful people have internal dialogues that explain success as permanent, universal, and internal while failure is temporary, specific, and external. Unsuccessful people have the opposite dialogue.

**Interpersonal Dialogue:** Successful interpersonal relationships are based on a ratio of at least two positive statements to one negative statement. The words and images we choose intentionally actually create the interpersonal situation; positive words and images lead to positive interactions.

**Pygmalion:** The teacher's image of the student affects the student's results. When teachers are told that certain children (randomly selected) are gifted, those children perform better—because the teachers behave differently with students they expect more from. This is a better predictor than IQ, home environment, or past performance. Studies have also found that successful managers often had a strong mentor as their first boss.

**Culture Image:** The rise of positive images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise of cultures. Almost all social advances are first described in utopian writings.

**Affirmative Competence:** Using positive imagery and then monitoring success rather than failure increases competence in golf, Olympic athletics, and life.

## **Critics of Social Constructionism**

Many theorists and writers within psychology and social psychology do not agree with the concept of social constructionism (e.g, Smith, 1983, and Trujillo, 1967). The philosophy underpinning of social constructionism runs counter to what mainstream psychology is based upon; namely research and empirical data gathering. Gergen himself states that “study of social process could become generic for understanding the nature of knowledge itself. Social psychology would not stand as a derivative of general psychology.” (1985, p. 266) Psychology would be a social process and the need for the study of psychology would not be needed. Burr noted that the one thing can unite the various forms of social constructionism is forming a radical critique of mainstream psychology.

## **Social Constructionism Research**

Social constructionism research focus exists in two broad areas. The first is micro structures of language use in interaction. The second is the role of macro linguistic and social structures in framing our social and psychological life. Micro social constructionism includes the research by Gergen (date) and Shotter (date). Gergen focuses upon the constructive force of interaction, stressing the relational embeddedness of individual thought and action. Shotter’s work emphasizes the dynamic, interpersonal processes of construction.

Macro constructionism acknowledges the constructive power of language but see this as derived from material or social structures, social relations and institutionalized practices. The concept of power is at the heart of this form of social constructionism. The work of Foucault (date) is one of the main theorists. Others include in this field include Parker (date) and Willig (date)).

Research methods used for all forms of social constructionism takes the constructive force of language as a principal assumption. Research methods include the analysis of language and the use of qualitative methods as research tools.

## **Debates within Social Constructionism**

One debate with social constructivism is between realism and relativism. Realism asserts that an external world exists independently of our representations of it. Representations include perceptions, thoughts, and language and material images such as pictures. Relativism asserts that even if reality exists, it is inaccessible to us. The only things we have access to are our various representations of the world, and these therefore cannot be judged against reality for their truthfulness or accuracy.

Another debate is between agency and determinism. Mapping to the distinctions between micro and macro versions of social constructionism is the issue of human agency. The distinction is whether human being has the capacity to make choices and impose those choices on the world. Determinism is the perception that every event, every human cognition and action is a causally determined by an unbroken chain of prior occurrences. No random events ever occur.

## **Author’s Response to Social Constructionism**

My interest in Appreciative Inquiry comes from personal experience. My life has changed dramatically by changing my internal conversations and associating with people with

positive outlooks on life. Observing my late husband's attitude in living with lung cancer for eleven months is a testimony of the power of focusing on positive conversations to create positive personal culture.

What I've learned about social construction theory is that it has built upon the work of thinkers over the last several hundred years. I have heard the terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' and did not understand what these words meant. Now I have an appreciation for how the work of each person builds on the previous scholars. Cooperrider was inspired by Gergen and Gergen was inspired by others before him. As I learn from these authors I will teach others what I have learned through my work. The evolution of the understanding of knowledge continues through each of us.

There are amazing thinkers in the world who are not necessarily good at communicating their thoughts through writing. Seminal theorist such as Gergen and Berger & Luckmann were especially challenging for me to read. Burr wrote in a straight forward easy to understand way and gave great overviews of the theory. Having waded through many dense books I hope to communicate these thoughts to others in easy to understand ways.

Before studying social constructionism I envisioned a simple definition with some explanations. The exploration of the many interpretations of social constructionism along with its divergent lines of thought often seemed overwhelming. There are upper level graduate programs devoted to understanding this topic. My summer exploration is only scratching the surface. Social constructionism touches on many aspects of philosophy with immense divergent thinkers.

Social constructionism theory is a paradigm shift. Because of the whole hearted integration of the mechanistic model into every aspect of society it will take many years to shift the paradigm. The change in perspectives is huge. Imagine the shift in thinking hundreds of years ago from the church as the holder of all knowledge to the belief that individuals can think for themselves. This is the size of shift I see happening in today's world. The implications for embracing social constructionism will influence every aspect of our lives.

Most of what is called 'new age thought' is really different versions of social constructionism. New thought often involves some version of 'let go of the old' and create a new reality. One artifact is the magazine, *What is Enlightenment?* (WIE) published by Andrew Cohen. In the September – December 2006 issue of the magazine Cohen writes in his editorial section titled, *A Revolution in Consciousness and Culture*. (pp. 14-15)

The thrust and development of WIE has for the most part been based on my own ongoing inquiry into the meaning and significance of the spiritual experience. . . . Indeed, it was through endeavoring to make deep sense out of my own life and the lives of my students in light of living the simplicity of the mystical truth that the ongoing inquiry behind WIE was born. . . . Enlightenment is simple. It is the mind-shattering revelation that all is One and One is all, that everything is ultimately none other than that mystical and mysterious ground of Being – the Nothingness that is Everything.

So for the last fifteen years, I have spent many, many, many hours with a small group of students / coconspirators – sitting around a table in a crowded office, sweating bullets in a sauna, jammed in a van on the way to the airport, grooving in a rented villa in the south of France, huddled in a café in Paris – in the incredibly precious, deeply focused, one-pointed practice of spiritual inquiry. As this inquiry always, sooner or later, brings those elusive gems of wisdom and understanding that, in this crazy time in which we find ourselves, reveal how to live a human life in a way that makes the deepest sense.

Cohen writes of creating his reality through continuous conversations. He writes of leaving the teachings of the past behind and creating his own reality through dialogue with others. He describes creating meaning for himself through social engagement. This is social constructionism in action, creating a new reality through on-going dialogues.

Many of the authors we have read in OSR have similar threads of understanding to social constructionism. Wheatley discusses the beginning of the twentieth century as and the end of the domination of Newtonian thinking and the need for a new science to explain the world. Quantum mechanics can help us understand our world and our organizations in new ways. (Wheatley, 1999) “All life uses information to organize itself into form. A living being is not a stable structure but a continuous process of organizing information” (Wheatley, p. 95).

Understanding social constructionism as the foundational theory underlying Appreciative Inquiry (AI) will assist me in using AI for my Consultation Project. Some of the readings I did within social constructionism and AI have noted the danger of applying techniques without sufficient background knowledge. Some of the critics of social constructionism seem to make fun of the ways almost anyone uses the term ‘social constructionism’ to help support their particular issue or agenda. Busche writes about the harm that can happen when individuals call what they do AI without sufficient background depth in the theory to support their work.

My heart is full of gratitude at the honor of being able to have time and space to be here and study social constructionism. I have learned about the historical context of the theory, read seminal theorist, identified key areas of the theory, noted key areas of the theory, and discussed dissenting and alternative views.

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