

Social Constructivism: An Overview

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Social Constructivism in its simplest form is just what its name implies, social as in a social group or community, constructivism as in building or constructing knowledge. But social constructivism is more than its name implies. Social Constructivism is based on ontology, the nature of being, and epistemology, the nature of knowledge.

The ontological nature of Social Constructivism is that reality is unknowable and has external validity. If there is a tree in the yard, social constructivists cannot *know* that it is a tree; they rely on others in their social group to *verify* that it is a tree, which is called “little t” truth. Even when the social group reaches a consensus about the nature of the tree, they still cannot know for a fact that it is a tree, that knowledge is truly unknowable.

Now the epistemological nature of social constructivism is a bit easier to understand. The nature of a social constructivist’s knowledge is social and experimental, meaning that they work in a social group and use a trial and error format to discover knowledge. The social group can be very large as in a race or gender group or very small as in a family group, also a person belongs to more than one group and can interact with more than one group at one time. Also knowledge to a social constructivist is relative and subjective. It is relative because it depends upon the group to justify the knowledge and one group’s knowledge can be different from another group’s knowledge. It is subjective because it depends upon what experiences that an individual has had. Those experiences are brought to the group and shared within the group. Then the group reaches a decision, either conscious or unconscious, about the viability or usefulness of that knowledge.

A social constructivist’s knowledge is also adaptive, organized, and constrained. Their knowledge is adaptive only in a social way, meaning that the social group takes the knowledge and changes or adapts it in a way that pertains to the social group not necessarily to any other social group. Their knowledge is also organized by the social group, again as it pertains to that group and not necessarily to any other social group. And finally their knowledge is constrained. It is constrained by society and the social group. This is how a social group polices their knowledge; it’s where laws and rules originate.

There are three different types of social constructivism, symbolic interaction, social constructionism, and sociocultural constructivism. They are on a continuum that ranges from the most social in nature to the least social in nature. The least social in nature and the closest to radical

constructivism is symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction (SI) flows freely from social learning to individual learning and back. SI constructivists can learn from their group or they can learn individually and independently. Their actions are based on meanings that they create when interacting with other, artifacts, or objects. This form of constructivism is typically found in institutions such as schools, where they reach a group consensus to make sense of each other ideas. But they still focus on the individual's interpretation of the consensus.

The next type of social constructivism is social constructionism. This is the middle ground, not the least nor the most social of all three. Social constructionism (SC) deals with discourse communities. A discourse community is a group with their own common knowledge and language, for example physicians, plumbers, mathematicians, a language club, etc. The discourse community is the center of SC, an individual interacts with artifacts, or things, and objects, or events, within a discourse community. Thus a person attending a conference on technology interacts with events, such as seminars and lectures, and with artifacts, such as handouts and computers. All of this occurs within the technology discourse community. Thus this person speaks the same language as the other attendees. That language is technical jargon. This supports the SC belief that knowledge is created through social interactions and that the discourse community has to speak the same language.

The last type of social constructivism is sociocultural constructivism. Sociocultural constructivists (SO) has two parts, a United States belief and another belief explained by Vygotsky. The US belief is that knowledge is a social construction and a property of organized collectives, meaning that people within a group construct group knowledge, then that knowledge becomes part of that group. They also believe that cultural artifacts connect the individual to society and society to the individual. Sharing meaning connects the two. Artifacts are ideas and concepts and objects are items, things, or tools. Thus ideas or concepts connect the individual to society and connect society to the individual.

The other belief derived from Vygotsky's concept of SO is characterized by three of his themes: (a) the reliance on genetic analysis (meaning that every behavior has a past history), (b) that the higher mental functions in individuals have their origins in social life (meaning that higher cognitive abilities come from social interaction), and (c) that the key to understanding human social and psychological processes are the tools and signs used to mediate them (meaning that signs are our language and tools, such as a computer, are used to impact society).

Social constructivism is a complex concept, with the ontology and epistemology of it reflecting ideas and thoughts from a variety of individuals and social groups. The concept, as explained above, is much more than just social groups and the building or constructing of knowledge.