



Saúde & Transformação Social / Health &  
Social Change

E-ISSN: 2178-7085

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Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina  
Brasil

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Saúde & Transformação Social / Health & Social Change, vol. 1, núm. 1, 2010, pp. 9-19

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Santa Catarina, Brasil

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## Saúde & Transformação Social

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Pesquisa Qualitativa: teoria e metodologia

# Research as Social Construction: Transformative Inquiry

*Pesquisa como construção social: investigação transformativa*

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**ABSTRACT** - This article introduces a view of research that is compatible with a social constructionist philosophical stance. Research is described as a relational process where the coordination of multiple (and often competing) discourses are at play. The challenge for the researcher is to adopt a reflexive stance toward any inquiry process so that the local, contingent, and situated practices of those participating in the research, as well as those conducting the inquiry can be in dialogue with one another. From a constructionist stance, traditional research (i.e., the scientific method) is viewed as one discursive option for conducting research – but not the only one.

**Keywords:** Methodology; Theories; Social Constructionism.

**RESUMO** - Este artigo introduz a visão de pesquisa que é compatível com a postura construcionista social. A pesquisa é descrita como um processo relacional onde a coordenação de múltiplos (e geralmente competitivos) discursos está em jogo. O desafio do pesquisador é adotar uma postura reflexiva frente a todo processo investigativo, de modo que as práticas locais, contingentes e situadas dos participantes da pesquisa, assim como as dos que conduzem a investigação, possam dialogar umas com as outras. De uma postura construcionista, a pesquisa tradicional (ex. método científico) é vista como uma opção discursiva para conduzir pesquisa, entretanto, não é considerada a única.

**Palavras-chave:** Metodologia; Teorias; Construcionismo Social.

What form does research take when approached from the philosophical stance of social construction? This is a question that perplexes many scholars (especially those just developing their identity as researchers) since the tradition of research itself already seems daunting and beyond one's competence. The rigor of controlled laboratory conditions, experimental designs, sophisticated statistical analyses, and conclusions that confirm hypothesized predictions are presumed to require focused specialization in the language of the scientific method. Others assume that, given the alternative philosophical assumptions of social construction, research must be limited to qualitative methods. Neither of these assumptions is the case and we need not limit ourselves, as constructionists, in our form of inquiry. In addition, the daunting quality of research could be related to the identity a "legitimate" researcher presumes s/he must adorn: all knowing and in control of the research process. Since science holds such a privileged position in our culture, most people assume that the scientific method is the only means for discovering Truth. In this article I will provide a very brief overview of social construction against the backdrop of the research tradition (scientific method) and discuss the practice of research as social construction.

### Multiple Discourses of Human Inquiry

What can be said about different discourses of human or social science? These have been spoken of as "paradigms"<sup>1</sup>, "thought styles"<sup>2</sup>, "discourses" and "social science perspectives"<sup>3,4</sup>, and "intelligibility nuclei"<sup>5</sup>. The point is that different, locally constructed realities generate very different theories, inquiry methods, values and interests. Discourses of human science differ in their assumptions about what exists (ontology), in their assumptions about what can be known about what exists (epistemology), and in their assumptions about how such knowledge can be produced (methodology). Differing discourses also vary in what they emphasize in terms of central questions and issues to be explored, how they should be explored, and what is ethical. Different discourses

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Artigo recebido em 10/04/2010

Aprovado em 02/05/2010

also vary in their views of the relationship between 'scientific' and other sorts of inquiry. For example, in one view, scientific inquiry is a very particular sort of activity (controlled, repeatable and predictive) - one that produces generalizable knowledge claims that are open to a particular sort of justification. In this view, Hollis<sup>6</sup> states that knowledge is described and defined as 'justified true belief'<sup>6:9</sup> - where the justification takes the form of empirical data that support the claims made.

But there are other forms of practice, other interests and other justifications. In general, empirical justifications grounded in scientific procedures and expressed in numbers are thought to be more persuasive than, for example, examining family photograph albums, reading tea leaves, astrological signs or trusting our past experience or the words of an elder. Yet, for the constructionist, it is important not to diminish community-based practices that differ from our own. To that end, it is worth outlining some commonly held assumptions about science. Contrasting the received view of science<sup>7</sup> and constructionist inquiry processes helps us to appreciate the many important, interrelated distinctions and the very particular ways they are manifest in different perspectives.

### The Received View of Science

The "received view of science" (RVS) is described by Woolgar<sup>7</sup> as one that is often presented (a) by scientists (b) in particular contexts (c) for particular audiences. For example, the RVS may be presented in introductory textbooks and in popularized accounts of science. Further, scientists' public declarations of science's "supposed virtues"<sup>7:12</sup> are also likely to reflect this "received view." Woolgar identifies four interrelated themes. The first theme concerns assumptions about the world. The RVS discourse involves reference to an assumed natural world made up of independent entities. As an illustration, "expertise" would be seen as a measurable, objective quality of a person. This discourse suggests that there is a 'real reality' that is self-existing and available for science to know; philosophers of inquiry refer to this as the *assumption of ontology*. Any assumption about what exists goes together with some assumption about what we may know (in this case, scientifically) of such an existence. This brings us to the second theme of the RVS that philosophers of inquiry refer to as the *assumption of epistemology*. The RVS speaks of scientific knowledge as knowledge that is determined by the characteristics of real world objects. In other words, scientific knowledge is objective (about objects in the world) rather than

subjective (e.g., reflecting the idiosyncrasies of the knower making the knowledge claim). Thus, according to the RVS, we can point to and recognize expertise without having to rely on an individual's subjective report. Additionally, the RVS, by embracing this objective notion of knowledge, posits the researcher/researched relationship as one of subject (researcher) acting upon or *knowing* the object of research (researched).

The third theme deals with the issue of how knowledge can be produced; this is the *assumption of methodology*. The RVS presents this as the question of how science can produce objective knowledge. The RVS gives considerable emphasis to the existence and the importance of a generally agreed set of methods, rules and procedures. In other words, it is suggested that scientists know how to do science, that they share a high degree of consensus about this, and that they believe that designing and following a scientific methodology can produce objective knowledge. The scientific method proposes that researchers must remain *detached* from the object of their study. This requires the use of standardized and controlled methodologies and attempts to separate fact from value.

Last, the received view of science suggests that scientists 'do science' through individual acts of thinking, reasoning and deciding. In other words, it is implied that science is grounded in "individualistic and mentalistic"<sup>7:13</sup> activity<sup>7</sup>. These (assumed) cognitive acts then are reflected in individual behaviors such as the design and conduct of the inquiry procedure as well as in the analysis and presentation of what are referred to as data. Objective knowledge is regarded as a neutral fact about an object that can be generalized to other similar objects in similar conditions. This is the way in which (some) people sometimes *talk about* science. Woolgar's notion of the RVS refers to a discourse that is used only in certain contexts, such as when one wants to claim authority so as to defend or legitimize an argument in cultures where the discourse of science is persuasive.

This set of assumptions generates an orientation toward research that places the researcher in the position of *knowing that something is x*. Knowing *that* generally entails propositional (if...then), unitary (right/wrong), relatively fixed (true regardless of history, culture or context) conclusions. Knowledge within the RVS becomes an entity - an object. And, language is viewed as the vehicle through which this reality/knowledge is *represented*. In other words, language represents knowledge of the world (and it is either true or false). As we can see, this view of research generates right/wrong thinking, leads to a

debate (persuasive) form of practice, and is determined by supposed facts and allegedly rational arguments. But, *whose* rationality is dominant?

Simply asking this question should make clear that the relationship between researcher and researched is one where power is implicit. Those with knowledge (researchers) are rational and they have *power over* their subjects (those researched). Ironically, the RVS is not the view of science embraced by most professionals who populate scientific communities; for them, science is a “messy” activity (see for example, <sup>8</sup>). Many argue that science, as described above, does not seem to bear much resemblance to accounts emerging from ethnographic studies of what scientists do when they are in the process of “doing science”<sup>7</sup>. In addition, science has varied considerably through the course of history. For example, there was a time when science was thought capable of producing facts that could *positively prove* (thus the term, positivism) the truth of some knowledge claim. This view gave way to post-positivism where *falsification* and probable truths are central rather than verification and the language of proof and certainty. The idea in post-positivism is that science cannot “prove” anything to be true by simply pointing to it. There must be a contrary hypothesis and method that will allow the scientist to compare the explanatory value of each. This is referred to as the methodology of a hypothetico-deductive approach<sup>5,9</sup> – hypothetically, we can deduce, by testing competing hypotheses, that one is probably true and others not.

Shifting constructions of science were perhaps most famously discussed in Thomas Kuhn’s work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*<sup>1</sup>. Kuhn wrote of different “paradigms” as different “coherent traditions of scientific research”<sup>1:10</sup> such as, Copernican astronomy or Newtonian physics. He suggested: “Men (sic) whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice”<sup>1:11</sup>.

But a paradigm is much more than shared rules and standards. A paradigm is reflected, for example, in decisions to use certain sorts of apparatus, measuring devices, or tools in particular ways, in decisions to follow particular procedures, laws and theories, and in *shared commitments to particular philosophical “fundamentals.”* The fundamentals include those matters with which we are already familiar such as assumptions about what exists (ontology) and what we can know of this (epistemology), together with specifiable rules and standards for practice (methodology). Identification with a particular “tradition” or set of shared

“fundamentals” is effectively a matter of becoming a member of a particular professional community<sup>1</sup>. This is why the constructionist refers to community-based norms, values and interests. For example, a tradition that claims that our health is dependent upon our faith would entail very particular forms of practice. These practices would be quite different from a tradition that claims health as a byproduct of environment, bodily function, chemistry, and so forth. When health is viewed as a matter of faith, the tools for examining and improving one’s health might include prayer, some sort of sacrificial offering to a greater being, penance for wrongdoing, and so forth. The diagnostic tools of modern western medicine would have no place in the faith-based paradigm of health. Kuhn focused on historical shifts in the particular “research tradition” or “paradigm” that was then generally regarded as “normal science.” Kuhn’s account tended to emphasize one generally agreed upon set of community based practices giving way to another that becomes the new normal science, so to speak. However, it seems that since he wrote his text, things have again moved on. The human sciences are no longer characterized by one generally agreed paradigm but by a variety that exist simultaneously. For example, Guba and Lincoln<sup>10</sup> identify four paradigms and view them as “competing.” Alvesson and Deetz<sup>4</sup> also identify four “social science perspectives” but present them as “alternatives.” This latter view would invite a positioning of social construction as one possible community based paradigm. So we must ask what might it mean to inhabit the constructionist community of research?

### Social Construction

The themes of social construction have long histories and are found in many literatures including feminist and other radical critiques of science, communication studies, social psychology, sociology, family therapy, critical social anthropology (see e.g., <sup>5, 11, 12</sup>) and some areas of “postmodernism” and “post structuralism” (e.g., <sup>13, 14</sup>). The common thread among these themes is a concern with processes of communication as opposed to concern with discovering phenomenon in the “real world.” The assumption is that in our daily interactions with others, we construct the relational realities within which we live. Thus, the focus for the constructionist is on *joint action*<sup>15</sup>, or *what people do together and what their doing makes*. This is a radical departure from the modernist tradition where focus is placed on the individual and his or her private, internal capacities (for a more extensive treatment of this distinction, see <sup>5, 16, 17</sup>).

Joint action is another way to describe what happens when people communicate; our joint actions construct on-going scenarios and routines. These routines (or patterns) give rise to standards and expectations that eventually construct what interacting communities to be real and good. These beliefs and values (realities) give way to future joint activities, sometimes changing the realities that had been previously established and sometimes confirming and further reifying (literally, “making real”) those beliefs and values. Connecting to the earlier illustration of health, we can say that in a faith-based community, the joint activity of prayer, penance, and sacrifice (all “worked out” locally and therefore varying from one faith community to another) generates very particular standards (e.g., “this is how we do penance”) and expectations (e.g., “I’m not feeling well; I should pray”). These standardized patterns generate, in turn, a worldview (i.e., set of beliefs and values) that confirms, “this is how we deal with illness and it is the ‘right’ thing to do.” Such beliefs and values cycle back into future joint activities thereby confirming that “this is the way to deal with health issues.” Yet, since there are multiple discursive communities, the possibility for change in practices, beliefs and values is always omnipresent.

Thus to the constructionist, communication is not a process of *conveying* meaning from one mind/person to another. Nor is communication the simple exchange of information. These commonly accepted views of communication feature a “knowing subject” transmitting information to another knowing subject, who is the object of his or her persuasive attempts. Note that this “transmission model” of communication features *persuasion* as the main activity of interaction. Persuasion, as a cultural resource, has a powerful history and a powerful effect on our everyday interactions. The discussion of persuasion is traced to Aristotle<sup>18</sup>. In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric and Poetics*, he argues that rhetoric is the ability to find the available means of persuasion in a situation<sup>18:24</sup>. He claims that the most effective means of influencing others (e.g., persuading) hinge on notions of rationality or logic. Aristotle is guided by his belief that truth is gained by opposition and therefore, we must oppose another with formal logic.

Obviously Aristotle’s work has been influential. It remains a mainstay of cultural discussion and everyday practice. Debate, a common form of public discourse in our culture, is rooted in Aristotelian logic. Debate is focused on influencing others - winning an argument through influence or persuasion that is immanently logical and rational. But the question is *which* logic or rationality? And who gets to

decide which logic or rationality? Presumably, it is in the world of research and scientific investigation that what is true and good and effective can be determined – but not in a world where language is viewed as constructing reality rather than representing reality (as it is for the constructionist). Once we step inside the discursive space of social construction, we must expand our focus to communities of *co-participants* collaborating in the construction of a worldview (not *the* worldview). As we shall see, this has bold implications for our understanding of research. *If research cannot prove what is universally true, of what use is it? The constructionist claims that the utility of research is in the array of action potentials it creates in conjunction with the reflexive critique into which it invites participants.*

The main premise of social construction is that meaning is not an individual phenomenon. It is not located in the private mind of a person, nor does one person unilaterally determine it. Meaning (and thus reality), to the constructionist, is an achievement of people coordinating their activities together. This assumption removes the modernist concern with the individual and his/her private, cognitive abilities and focuses our attention on language practices (i.e., what people do together or joint action). There is a very particular use of the term language for the constructionist. Unlike the modernist view of language as representative of the “real world out there,” language entails all embodied activities for the constructionist. There is no necessary relationship between a word and an object; the meanings we attribute to certain words, actions and objects are a matter of communal construction (think back to the faith community’s understanding of health and illness). Thus, language, to the constructionist, is ultimately relational; it is coordinated action with others and in that coordinated activity, we create a reality. In this sense, it is radically different from the modernist understanding of “language” where communication is viewed as a process of transmission or exchange of information as opposed to a *creation* of meaning.

We might think, for example, of a research process aimed at exploring how a community health center can better serve its population. A traditional research project might use questionnaires or interviews designed to gather demographic information about the local population so that the health center can organize their services accordingly. This research design builds on the assumption that a survey can access a reality that is “out there.” Alternatively, a constructionist research process might consider asking local residents within the community to provide their ideas for effective healthcare service.

Perhaps health professionals and community users might be invited into a dialogic space where they can ask each other questions in an attempt to expand their understanding of each other. This research design, rather than assuming that there is some external reality to access, views language (interaction) as a moment of collectively creating the meaning and reality of the very particular community and health care center. I am not arguing that one mode of action is better than another. I am simply trying to illustrate that when, as researchers, we allow ourselves to step outside our own expectations of “research,” our inquiry might actually offer pragmatic and practical “results” for all involved. Dialogically, relationally sensitive inquiries create the potential for self-reflexive critique, multiplicity of voice, and potential coordination of diverse understandings.

It is precisely the notion that when we engage with others we are actually creating meaning together that distinguishes a constructionist stance from a traditional, modernist orientation to human activity. When it comes to research, this distinction serves to expand our resources for action. From the very simple process of coordinating our activities with each other, we develop entire belief systems, moralities and values. Is “good” research a simple means of following the scientific method? If we are blind to the relational, situated, and often times very local processes within which we craft our understandings of the world, we can easily mistake meaning, intentions, values, moralities, and all that is meaningful in our lives to the private world of the mind. And, in so doing, our attempts to move toward more collaborative, ecological ways of living (in this case, participating in the generation of meaningful forms of inquiry) is thwarted because the decisions about how we should work, the decisions about what policies should be in place and about what counts as equity, will remain in the hands of those in positions of power who are granted the ability to make these complex decisions because they know how to preserve the “right” values and the “right” actions. But, questions must be asked: By whose standards are we determining the “right” values and actions? What are the standards by which those in power claim their position? What about the very unique ways in which local communities coordinate their activities concerning inquiry processes might be useful and generative? It should be noted that I use the term “inquiry” in place of “research” to emphasize the multiple ways in which research can transpire. Specifically, the idea is to broaden our understanding of what counts as research beyond explorations using the scientific method (but, not excluding them either).

The following are some of the key themes of social construction:

- Talk of the individual self, of mental operations, and of individual knowledge gives way to an emphasis on relational processes – *what people do together*.
- Relational processes are viewed as interactions that maintain, deconstruct, or reconstruct local ontologies or “forms of life.”
- The unitary conception of Self gives way to a dialogical, multiple self that is in ongoing construction (i.e., self *emerges* in relational processes of interaction).
- Self-other (subject-object) relations are no longer taken for granted as “the way things are” but are recognized as by-products of particular ways of talking. We can talk of actions as belonging to self or other *or* we can talk of actions as jointly achieved.
- Relational processes construct both stability and change; they may close down or open up possible selves and worlds.

We have choices about how to use the theories that inform our work. We can approach theories and perspectives, be they modernist or postmodernist, as telling us the “truth” about the way the social world operates. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves when it might be useful to draw on resources offered by one theory or approach as opposed to another. To ask this question, requires sensitivity to the interactive moment, to the historical and cultural conditions that construct our worlds, and to the multiple voices that participate in shaping who we are and what we are doing. Social construction encourages us to consider how any particular idea or discourse converts to practice in the performance of a *specific* moment, in relationship with another – rather than turning to a canonical truth that prescribes Theory A or Model B or Method C.

Social construction, like any other discourse (i.e., theory), is a form of coordinated activity among persons in relation. To that end, every discourse/theory is about practice. We need to spend more time asking what sorts of practices are invited by different theories (discursive constructions). With this issue at hand, I now turn to a specific discussion of constructionist inquiry.

### **Constructionist Inquiry**

Social construction, as a discursive choice, offers a set of fluid resources for action that do not eliminate or demonize other traditions. Those of us who adopt a constructionist stance are not attempting to claim a preferred mode of life or to discover the best way for a person, a relationship, an organization, or a community to develop. Social construction, instead, urges us to attend to the traditions, the communities, the situated practices of the participants at hand – that is, to the local understandings – in identifying what becomes real, true, and good. To attend to traditions, communities, and situated practices requires a constant flexibility on the part of those involved. Where the purpose of modernist theory and practice is to solve problems, cure illness, achieve social, environmental, and scientific advancement, the purpose of social construction, as a discursive option, is to explore what sorts of social life become possible when one way of talking and acting is employed instead of another. The constructionist alternative is a relational discourse - one that views meaningful action as always emerging within relationship – and this very much includes the relationship between researcher and participants. It is helpful to compare the constructionist orientation to the RVS in terms of the major assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

### **Constructionist Ontology.**

There is no presumption that the world exists apart from our relation to it. This does not, however, mean that constructionists reject the notion of a material world. The constructionist claim is simply that there is nothing in particular about any aspect of the physical world that requires it be referred or related to in a particular manner. Again, as mentioned earlier, there is no necessary relationship between an object and a word. A forest, for example, could be a serene place for reflection to one and a dangerous health hazard to another. Both realities are “true” to the communities that come in contact with forests. In the present case we might say that a meditative, reflective community might privilege the first interpretation while a community that has suffered health problems from wildlife contact in the forest might privilege the second. The constructionist ontology proposes that our worlds are created in what we do together (and this includes our relations to the environment and objects). For the constructionist researcher, the topic of investigation is actually created in the questions asked, the context selected, and in all research choices made; a world or reality comes into being in the very process of inquiry.

### **Constructionist Epistemology.**

To the constructionist, what we can know (the domain of epistemology) is neither objective nor subjective. If meaning emerges in relational interchange, then knowledge itself must be relational. In other words, knowledge and what we can know is neither yours nor mine; it is neither the possession of the researcher/scientist or the researched/subject. The kinds of conclusions we are able to draw from our research processes are a by-product of not only our engagements with those who participate in our research (i.e., “subjects”) but of the scientific or research community within which we operate, our local organizational context, and so on. Knowledge is constructed in our interactions with others (i.e., our language practices) – including our interactions in the research context. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”<sup>19</sup>.

### **Constructionist Methodology.**

While it is important to be clear about what methods we use to carry out our inquiries, there is no adherence within a constructionist stance to an objectified set of procedures and rules. There is no ultimately correct method for any investigation; rather, there are methods that produce “this” information as opposed to “that.” When we employ different forms of inquiry, we generate (construct) different knowledge. Thus, to the constructionist, research is a process of transformation for both researcher and research participant. The very process of inquiry invites all involved to take a reflexive stance toward their own unspoken assumptions about (1) what is the “right” way to proceed, (2) what are the “right” questions to ask, (3) what is the “right” analysis to employ, and (4) what is the “right” conclusion to draw.

The standard for choice of method (as for choice of topic, research question, analysis, and form of presentation/dissemination) is not a dichotomous right/wrong (as if it is obvious what the correct approach should be). The constructionist researcher makes choices based upon a wide range of concerns including what is pragmatic, what is responsive to research participants, what forms of inquiry might be most compatible with participants, and so forth. The researcher makes clear the bases upon which each decision is made, not for purposes of claiming each choice as the “right” choice but, rather, as a means for exposing the discursive community from which s/he is operating. In so doing, the researcher invites others into “curious reflection” on what other methods might be possible and what sorts of “results” such methods might generate. Since, from a constructionist stance,

there is no universal, objective reality (but instead multiple, communally constructed realities), the challenge is to invite others into *understanding* methodological choices, not *evaluating* them as right or wrong.

In sum, a constructionist stance invites us to view the RVS as *one way* of knowing; it is a way of knowing that is socially and historically located and that makes order out of complexity. This implies that there could be and are *other ways* of knowing. Thus, we shift from a modernist position of *knowing that* to a constructionist position of *knowing how*. This is the reflexive move. We become aware that our knowledge claims are worthy, logical, ethical, and rational within one discursive community and we are invited to become curious about what other discursive communities generate as viable and reliable forms of knowledge.

This orientation places us in a collaborative relationship with others as opposed to the dualistic subject-object/researcher-researched relationship of the RVS. Language then is viewed as constitutive, performative, responsive, invitational, and improvisational. Meaning/knowledge emerges in the joint activities of participants. Thus, power is no longer understood as employing the “voice of the facts” or what many refer to as “power over.” Power is now conceptualized and realized as “power with” by virtue of an openness to consideration of whose voices are heard, included, excluded, and so forth. This suggests that, as researchers, we might see ourselves and those who participate in our research as cultural participants who occupy different discursive communities. We are also encouraged to see research as part of everyday life and as a form of social transformation (for all involved).

### **Research as Performance.**

It is in this vein that the metaphor of meaning as performance is useful because it cuts meaning from a focus on methods for conveying knowledge to a process that is attentive to the ways in which participants create meaning together. Performance is always responsive to context and relations; in fact, a performance requires a “relational other.” As we engage with each other in inquiry, we not only create a sense of who we are but also a sense of what is valued. We create – we perform *together* – a world, a lived reality.

The metaphor of performance provides the opportunity for us to engage in self-reflexive inquiry about our own resources for action that are not being utilized but that might aid in creating ways of going on together<sup>20</sup>. If meaning is a byproduct of relational

engagement (conversation, performance), then we are free to pause and ask ourselves what other ways we might talk about this topic, this issue, and this problem. Performance as a metaphor enhances self-reflexivity by legitimizing it. In so doing, we open ourselves to listening, reading, talking, and writing in more “generous” modes - remaining open to the relational coherence of diverse ways of acting. We thereby avoid speaking with a sense of certainty that the world is or should be one way. And in so doing we open possibilities for the coordination of multiple ways of being human and of, as Wittgenstein<sup>21</sup> says, ‘going on together.’

### **Implications for Research**

To summarize my discussion thus far, inquiry informed by a constructionist stance acknowledges that, as researchers, we make choices about our inquiry. The choices we make are not guided by some pre-determined, universal code that dictates the proper questions, hypotheses, methods, and analyses. We are confronted with a plethora of choices, each with its own implications. And, those implications (otherwise known as “results”) are not generalizable but are, in fact, useful to a particular community in a particular cultural, historical, and situated context.

This approach to research encourages us to ask *with* which communities we are acting as well as *from* which communities we are acting (i.e., what community of scholars inform our work?). Asking such questions opens a reflexive space where we can consider which community’s values are being/should being applied. Here, methods are viewed as different discourses – different ways of being in relation with others (research participants); is our relationship established via a questionnaire, an interview, an observation, a participatory engagement, etc? We are free to ask what will “count as data” and gather answers to that question from all involved. This is not a search for the right answer but provides the opportunity for an interesting discussion about the variations on what counts as data for the various stakeholders thereby opening a space for renewed coordination through engagement in dialogue that allows curiosity as opposed to judgement.

### **Resources for Constructionist Inquiry**

It should be noted that there is no constructionist method *per se*. If each theory, model, and method is understood as a communally constructed discourse, then our concern shifts from one of “using the *right* theory or method” to exploring what any particular theory or method might constrain or potentiate. So, while there are no hard and fast rules for conducting

research from a constructionist stance, there are some fluid and flexible resources that we can use to guide our inquiries.

First, there is an emphasis on the co-constructed nature of relational realities. Just as methods are community based, they are also co-constructed performances with members of particular communities. To that end, the unfolding nature of our performances together becomes central. When we position ourselves as inquirers, we have ideas about what and who and where and how we want to focus our inquiry. Yet, as a constructionist inquirer, that original positioning is always open to amendment. Using the language of Alvesson and Deetz<sup>4</sup>, this constructionist positioning would be a “local-emergent” rather than an “elite, a priori” approach. Rather than work with design and method, the preference is to work with minimal structures and improvisation. At the same time, there are dozens of important decisions any researcher must make before s/he embarks on any form of inquiry. Yet these initial decisions emerge within particular relational communities and are more or less open to supplementation (response) by those with whom we conduct our inquiry.

An illustration of this can be seen in the Ph.D. research of Murilo Moscheta<sup>22</sup> (also in this issue). Murilo was interested in understanding how healthcare professionals understand and work with GLBT patients. He carefully designed his research to include (1) an open invitation to professionals in one health center to participate in his project, (2) one-on-one interviews with those who volunteered for participation to gain a sense of their challenges in working with GLBT patients, and (3) a series of open dialogues with all participants. All was going quite smoothly in his research; he had a good number of volunteers and completed his one-on-one interviews. He carefully prepared for his first dialogue session with the health professionals by summarizing the questions and concerns voiced in the interviews. He wanted to create an open and welcoming atmosphere and so, on the day of the group dialogue, when a nurse who had not previously volunteered for the project (nor had she been interviewed) asked if she could join, the answer was, “of course!” Murilo felt he was honoring the “local-emergent” practices of the healthcare professionals. However, to his horror, the newly joining nurse abruptly left the dialogue session when she realized that everyone else present had participate in a personal interview. She felt marginalized.

Murilo felt that his research was a disaster at this point until he made the decision to seek out the nurse and ask her if she would like to join the group.

The following excerpt from his dissertation describes how he transformed what he originally imagined was a research design that respected the local-emergent community with which he was working to an on-going emergent research process:

I met Carla one month after our first and embarrassing meeting and two days before the second group discussion. The conversation was easier than I thought it would be. She probably needed to talk about it as much as I needed - we were both trying to process the same undigested experience. I guess she felt I was really concerned about the way she felt and she probably could realize how important that conversation was to me. I could tell her what I had been thinking since our last meeting and, probably, it allowed her to see things from a different perspective. For half an hour we worked together and built a new understanding that I felt compelled to share with the group. She promptly accepted my invitation to be part of the group in our next meeting.

My conversation with Carla helped us to undo a misinterpretation. My caution and discretion about inviting people to be part of my research did not always work on my behalf. Carla told me she would have felt more invited if I had talked to her personally. For myself and some other members of the team, my subtlety was a sign of respect. For her, it produced doubt and left her insecure about how appreciative we all were of her presence. Carla also helped me to understand that simply allowing her to be in the meeting at the last minute did not count as real inclusion. She left the room when she realized we were talking about something in which she had not participated. Welcoming her into the group was not enough since we did not create the conditions for her full participation in the ongoing conversation. When I think about that conversation and recall my story with Carla, I also think about the discussions we had with the group about the health care of GLBT clients. I can understand that inclusion requires more than inviting; it demands an active engagement with the invited one, especially when he/she is part of a vulnerable population. Moreover, it makes me think about the “kind exclusion” we can produce when all that we do to include is limited to simply inviting, and later, we blame the other for not being able to usufruct what we had kindly offered.

Not only did Murilo achieve an on-going emergence to his research but also, as we can see, he was able to see the implications of his own research process for the topic of his research (work with GLBT clients).

Second, constructionist inquiry starts with the assumption that multiple communities or stakeholders populate any research endeavour. There is no attempt to reach a consensus among diverse beliefs or values of the various participants; nor is there any attempt to determine which community’s values and beliefs are “best” or “right.” The constructionist orientation is towards multiplicity, fragmentation, or what Alvesson and Deetz<sup>4</sup> called “dissensus.” The challenge is to give

space to these multiple, local rationalities, encouraging a form of coordination among them. Yet, this coordination is not for purposes of agreement. Coordination is the attempt to create an inquiry space where diverse views can be in dialogue with each other. Agreement is not privileged; curiosity is. The challenge is to open up rather than close down possibilities.

An excellent illustration of this can be seen in the research of Celiane Camargo Borges<sup>23</sup>. Her research also focused on community health. She was interested in understanding what made one particular community health center such an outstanding illustration of collaboration between users and providers. To explore this issue, she participated in the weekly meetings of the “hypertension group” which was well known for its success. The group was seen as successful because, unlike other health groups, it had a long history and a consistent membership. In addition, the health professionals actually enjoyed attending the weekly meetings of this group. What she found was a keen curiosity and openness to a multiplicity of perspectives, beliefs and values on healthcare. Group members – those diagnosed with hypertension – felt free to bring all sorts of problems and issues to the group for discussion. Their sessions spanned talk of homeopathic remedies for arthritis to treatments for bad breath. What was remarkable about this group was not only the freedom to diverge from the topic of hypertension but the health professionals’ active participation in such a wide range of topics. Additionally, Camargo Borges found that the health professionals fully participated in these discussions, departing from their ordinary role of expert on the topic of hypertension. In fact, she found that the health professionals actually offered to include alternative voices and simultaneously granted credibility to the local knowledge shared such as favored homeopathic treatments. The hypertension group illustrated the way in which a diverse set of voices – generated by the inclusive participation of many stakeholders – can open up possibilities (in this case, the possibility for continued user-professional collaborations).

Third, is the attention to the many local and practical concerns of those who participate in the inquiry process. Consider the following: how might an organization or community struck by AIDS develop an inquiry process to create new ways of working and living together? How might a study of leadership facilitate ways of leading that make space for collaborative relations between multiple local rationalities? How could a community development

worker give space to multiple local rationalities rather than imposing science-based norms and values?

In these suggestions we see the blurring of the line between research and consultation or change processes. To the constructionist, research is not a process of documenting or “discovering” what exists. Research is a process of construction. To that end, research is transformative and ultimately practical – it has generative possibilities for all participants (researchers and researched).

### **Constructionist Responses to Traditional Research Critiques**

At this point, it might be useful to consider the voice of critique. What challenges might an adherent of the RVS pose? The critic asks, “But what of objectivity and value-free observations and conclusions? This is the mainstay of science. Why should the public trust scientific research if it is not producing objective evidence of how the world really is?” The constructionist responds, “All action is contingent and situated. Objectivity is not an entity, a thing. Objectivity is a rhetorical achievement<sup>5,16</sup>. When we remove personal statements and speak from the third person (e.g., “It was discovered....”), we achieve the “idea” of objectivity. There is no value-free space from which to stand. All perspectives, all realities are saturated with values. Thus, the question is not which are the right values but *whose* values are being promoted as “value-free?”

The critic continues, “What about the expert knowledge of the researcher? There should surely be a separation of researcher and researched!” The constructionist response points to the ways in which the relational quality of meaning making is no different in the research context. Knowledge is constructed in what people do together. Such an orientation gives rise to research practices such as collaborative inquiry<sup>24</sup>, action research<sup>25</sup>, and dialogue processes<sup>26</sup>, to name a few of the many options.

Finally the critic asks, “But what of reliability and validity? Surely it is important for scientific inquiry to be able to prove it is reliable and valid.” The constructionist responds by acknowledging that all knowledge is provisional and contestable from some other knowledge community. All accounts and claims to knowledge are locally, historically, and culturally specific. For the constructionist, reliability and validity are replaced with the criteria of utility (for whom is this information/knowledge useful?) and generativity (how will this information/knowledge help this community “go on together?”).

**Contingent Conclusions**

Constructionist forms of inquiry shift our attention from validity to utility and from uncovering “facts” to constructing useful ways of going on together. Often, the boundary between social change (whether consultation, education, community work) and research is blurred. We must remember: data never stand alone; they are interpreted by someone who is part of multiple communities where various ways of making sense (creating knowledge) are privileged.

The following chart summarizes some of the significant shifts we make in understanding the process of inquiry as constructionists.

Received view of science	Relational constructionism
Data	Process
Results	Process
Control	Minimal structures & unfolding
Method	Forms of practice/performance in context
Reliability	Generativity
Validity	Utility for the (multiple) local communities
Protocol	Emergence & reflexivity
Science & scientist centered	Ongoing processes centered

**Coda**

A final word about stepping into the domain of constructionist inquiry: In my experience working with and advising those new to the philosophical orientation of social construction in general *and* constructionist research in particular, I have learned that it is vitally important to start by granting legitimacy to the very local and familiar practices each person brings to his or her work. I begin by validating the expertise of those present whether that expertise is as consultant, psychotherapist, educator, community activist, student, modernist, postmodernist, etc. The challenge is to take stock of each form of expertise and begin to understand it as an emergent by-product of a particular discursive

community. From this vantage point, it is much easier to understand the RVS as also an emergent by-product of a very particular discursive community. Once understood in this light, the scientific method can be appreciated for what it makes possible (i.e., the *semblance* of making objective, valid, universal statements) while it can also be seen as only *one option* for inquiring about the social world. In effect, the ability to reflect upon one’s own familiar resources for action as a legitimate form of inquiry also positions those new to constructionist discourse generously. That is, all orientations (the scientific method included) are viewed as viable forms of relating while none are viewed as ultimately truer than another. Again, the question of utility replaces the question of validity. We are invited to reflect on how generative any form of inquiry will be for those involved and thereby encouraged to understand any “conclusion” as a partial and temporary conclusion that is tied to situated activities.

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