The Practice of Social Constructionism: Exploring Everyday Realities through Sociological Theory

Dr. Bhupendra Sachan

Dept. of Sociology, Assistant Professor, Vidyant Hindu P. G. College, University of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India; Email: shettysachan@gmail.com

Abstract - This study examines social constructionism as a fundamental sociological paradigm for analysing and comprehending everyday occurrences. This theory, grounded in the seminal writings of Berger and Luckmann, underscores the construction of social realities through human interaction, language, and collective meanings. The research examines fundamental aspects of social constructionism, encompassing its influence on identity formation, the reinforcement of power relations, and the negotiation of collective meanings in social interactions. The paper additionally explores the applicability of constructionist concepts to current challenges including media, culture, identity politics, and education. This framework dismantles established norms and inequities while providing instruments for fostering inclusivity and reflexivity. Furthermore, the research confronts criticisms of social constructionism, such as allegations of relativism and its pragmatic constraints in tackling material and structural issues. The research highlights the importance of social constructionism in comprehending digital reality, globalization, and policy-making in evaluating its current relevance. The conclusion reflects on the lasting significance of social constructionism in addressing the difficulties of contemporary society and outlines prospective study avenues, especially at the intersections of technology, global change, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This study confirms the transformative potential of social constructionism in enhancing understanding and facilitating significant societal change using an integrated approach.

Keywords - Identity, power dynamics, everyday realities, reflexivity, interdisciplinary study

I. Introduction

A. Overview

One important sociological framework that examines how human interaction shapes,

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

11

preserves, and alters social reality is social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann first presented this idea in their ground breaking book The Social Construction of Reality (Berger and Luckmann 3). Fundamentally, social constructionism challenges the concept of objective truths, proposing that ingrained shared meanings, symbols, and behaviours in social situations shape our perception of the world.

Examining how language, symbols, and social norms shape identities and power relations, this essay seeks to comprehend ordinary realities through the lens of social constructionism. Social constructionism provides a lens through which we can examine and evaluate long-standing social phenomena by highlighting the dynamic and fluid character of these constructions. This investigation sheds light on the interplay between theory and practice, revealing how constructed realities shape behaviours and social interactions.

B. Relevance of the Subject

In today's intricately linked and complex society, it is essential to comprehend created realities. According to social constructionism, historical, cultural, and institutional influences determine identities like race, gender, and class rather than them being innate. For instance, Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble that roles, expectations, and power dynamics shape gender as a social construct, not merely a biological categorization (Butler 10). Acknowledging this allows for a more thorough analysis of inequality and the systems that support it.

In a world characterized by fast technological innovation and globalization, social constructionism's focus on fluidity and adaptation is especially pertinent. It offers resources to deal with urgent problems, including identity politics, systematic injustice, and the influence of media narratives. Furthermore, its knowledge has real-world implications, influencing social interventions, educational programs, and legislation that try to eliminate inequality and promote inclusivity. By examining manufactured realities, we can challenge oppressive institutions and envision fair alternatives.

C. Research Questions and Objectives

1. How does social constructionism explain the shaping of everyday social realities?
2. What does it mean for comprehending power, identity, and social change?

II. The Foundations of Social Constructionism

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

12

A. Philosophical Origins

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in their seminal work The Social Construction of Reality (1966), argue that human interaction socially constructs reality, rather than it being an intrinsic feature of the outside world. Berger and Luckmann contend that routine behaviors that eventually become institutionalized and serve as the cornerstone of society are what build and maintain everyday reality (Berger and Luckmann 33). Through their work, sociology began to perceive reality as dynamic and molded by shared understandings rather than as unchanging and objective.

Alfred Schutz's phenomenology has a significant impact on the intellectual underpinnings of social constructionism. Schutz placed a strong emphasis on how personal experience shapes social reality, especially how individuals negotiate the social environment using their own subjective interpretations (Schutz 45). George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, emphasizing the significance of relationships and symbols in meaning-making, also greatly influenced this approach. Identity itself is a result of interaction rather than an innate quality, as demonstrated by Mead's conception of the "self" as emerging through social processes (Mead 173). These intellectuals working together established the foundation for comprehending society as a constantly changing interaction of meanings and interpretations.

B. Fundamental Ideas in Social Constructionism

Fundamentally, social constructionism holds that reality is a result of social activities rather than a fixed or objective substance. Berger and Luckmann argue that social contact, through the negotiation and reinforcement of shared meanings and understandings, creates reality (Berger and Luckmann 51). This viewpoint contradicts essentialist beliefs by arguing that what we define as "real" depends on cultural context and human consensus.

As a vehicle and by product of social production, language is essential to this process. People create a shared world by giving meaning to their experiences and sharing these meanings with others through language. For instance, linguistic and social contexts, rather than biological determinism, define and reinforce the meanings of terms like "race" and "gender" (Butler 22).

The dynamic and flexible character of reality is another point of emphasis for social constructionism. It recognizes that societal conceptions change throughout time, reflecting changes in power, culture, and social conventions, in contrast to static frameworks. Because of its versatility, it is especially applicable to the analysis of modern social concerns, where

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

13

shifting views on justice, equality, and identity frequently contradict long-standing conventions.

III. Seeing the World via the Social Constructionist Lens

A. Identity Construction

A crucial foundation for comprehending how identities—like gender, ethnicity, and class—are socially produced rather than innately predetermined is provided by social constructionism. For instance, cultural norms and expectations influence gender, making it a social construct rather than merely a biological characteristic. Judith Butler highlights the contingent and constructed nature of gender in Gender Trouble, contending that societal scripts and repetitive behaviours "perform" it (Butler 33). Similarly, Judith Butler views race as a system of classification that rationalizes historical power disparities, not as an innate biological difference. The racial formation theory of Omi and Winant emphasizes how socio political situations shape, institutionalize, and construct racial categories (Omi and Winant 55).

Marxist critiques of capitalism, which sustain inequality through economic systems and cultural norms, underscore the social production of class. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital" demonstrates how social class influences privilege and power access, with cultural norms serving to further entrench class divisions (Bourdieu 72). These concepts illustrate the dynamic and constant creation of identities within social systems, as opposed to their fixed nature.

B. Social Structures and Power Dynamics

Constructed realities frequently maintain power hierarchies by marginalizing some norms and legitimizing others. Institutions such as the media, education, and the family play a significant role in maintaining these power dynamics. Through his analysis of power, Michel Foucault shows how social institutions normalize power hierarchies by using discourse and knowledge to govern and control behaviour (Foucault 94). For instance, by establishing what constitutes appropriate knowledge and values, the educational system upholds social norms by preferring dominant groups and ignoring the opinions of marginalized people (Apple 18).

The media also powerfully legitimizes social constructions. By defining cultural standards about gender, ethnicity, and class through depiction, the media frequently reinforces pre existing power structures and prejudices. Certain communities' representation as "others"

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

14

perpetuates prevailing narratives and unequal power dynamics (Hall 231).

C. Social Interaction: Constructed Realities

Social constructionism looks at how people establish common meanings via routine interactions at the micro level. Erving Goffman's work, influenced by symbolic interactionism, illustrates how individuals manage their impressions by using performances and symbols to negotiate their roles in social contexts (Goffman 24). For example, the basic act of greeting promotes shared meanings and reflects underlying cultural norms.

As people engage with one another over time, these negotiated meanings change and become more dynamic. These constructs' fluidity emphasizes how social realities are flexible and rely on ongoing social interaction for reinforcement (Berger and Luckmann 61). This dynamic emphasizes how people can influence and redefine social standards in their daily lives.

IV. Constructionism's Use in Contemporary Society

A. Culture and the Media

In particular, through news, entertainment, and public opinion, the media plays a crucial role in creating and spreading social realities. According to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, media narratives actively create reality by presenting people and events in ways that support prevailing cultural ideas rather than just reflecting them (Hall 232). For example, depending on the media's goals, selective coverage of protests can portray activists as either heroes battling for justice or disruptive forces endangering social order.

Entertainment media also greatly influences social standards and expectations. Ads, movies, and television all reinforce cultural narratives about gender roles, family dynamics, and beauty standards. The idea of "hyperreality," as defined by Jean Baudrillard, emphasizes how media portrayals can conflate fact and fiction, creating a manufactured sense of reality (Baudrillard 82). The media also influences public opinion, marginalizing opposing viewpoints and upholding social norms through frequent exposure to certain narratives.

B. Activism and Identity Politics

Social constructionism provides important insights into identity politics by examining the social production of race, gender, and sexuality. Movements like Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ activism contest these ideas, highlighting their role in perpetuating injustice and

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

15

inequality. The idea of intersectionality, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes how overlapping social identities—like gender, race, and class—create distinct oppressive experiences that call for a communal response (Crenshaw 140).

In order to dismantle oppressive structures and promote more inclusive identities, activists employ constructionist theory. Feminist movements, for instance, have challenged the socially created origins of traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. Similar to this, transgender rights movements push for a more flexible definition of identity by challenging binary gender classifications (Butler 45). Identity-based activism aims to build a more just society by dismantling these ideas.

C. Knowledge Systems and Education

Social constructionism plays a significant role in education, influencing the production, dissemination, and legitimization of information. Berger and Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann 69) assert that social interactions within institutions shape the definition of "legitimate" or "valid" knowledge. Curricula frequently reflect a society's prevailing beliefs, excluding opposing viewpoints and upholding established hierarchies of power.

Co-constructing educational realities involves active participation from both teachers and students. Paulo Freire advocates for a dialogical approach to education in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, where students co-create knowledge through critical interaction instead of imposing it hierarchically (Freire 67). This method emphasizes teamwork and critical thinking in constructing educational experiences, which is consistent with constructionist ideas. By acknowledging the production of knowledge, teachers can create learning environments that are more inclusive and fair.

V. Social Constructionism's Drawbacks and Criticisms
A. Critiques of Philosophy

There have been serious philosophical objections to social constructionism, including claims of relativism. The theory's claim that all truths are socially created, according to its detractors, calls into question the viability of objective knowledge. This critique begs the question, "Can any claim be more valid than another if all truths are constructed?" For instance, Hacking questions the entire construction of the laws of physics and other scientific or mathematical facts, challenging the boundaries of constructionism (Hacking 72). These criticisms cast doubt on constructionism's applicability, especially in fields where scientific

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

16

data seems to defy socially constructed interpretations.

Furthermore, social constructionism finds it difficult to balance its emphasis on social realities with those of the material and biological worlds. Critics contend that the framework occasionally downplays the significance of biological elements, even as it successfully dismantles social categories like gender and race. For instance, social formation of gender roles cannot completely disregard biological distinctions between the sexes (Haraway 199). According to this criticism, social constructionism needs a more sophisticated strategy that takes into account how social and material reality interact.

B. Practical Limitations

Applying constructionist ideas to systemic change is difficult from a practical standpoint. Social constructionism often fails to provide definitive solutions for addressing structural injustices due to its focus on dismantling prevailing narratives and ideologies. For instance, dismantling racial or gender hierarchies reveals their production, but effectively implementing such policies requires interaction with structural and material realities (Young 34).

Critics often point out how challenging it is to strike a balance between institutional limitations and individual agency. Although social constructionism highlights how human interaction and agency shape reality, it frequently downplays how deeply ingrained systems like capitalism and sexism restrict personal agency. For instance, despite the social construction of media portrayals of beauty standards, powerful companies that profit from these standards also endorse them (Bordo 56). This critique brings the conflict between systemic improvements and changes at the individual level to light.

In the end, these criticisms highlight the necessity of incorporating social constructionism's insights with other theoretical frameworks rather than making it obsolete. Social constructionism can continue to be a useful method for examining and altering social realities by resolving these theoretical and practical issues.

VI. Contemporary Relevance of Social Constructionism

A. Comprehending Contemporary Social Events

In the digital age, social constructionism is still essential for understanding contemporary social phenomena. The emergence of digital worlds has changed how people create and see themselves. Social media and other online platforms have made it possible to create digital identities and virtual communities, which can make it difficult to distinguish between

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

17

representation and reality. Through social media profiles, for instance, people carefully craft narratives that may not entirely correspond with their offline lives in order to curate their online personas (Turkle 89). As digital spaces transform conventional ideas of identity and interaction, this phenomenon serves as an example of the dynamic nature of socially constructed realities.

Furthermore, social constructionism offers insightful perspectives on international relations and globalization. The modern world's interconnection gives rise to new social and cultural structures that cut beyond national borders. For example, the idea of a "global citizen" challenges conventional ideas of nationalism and localism by reflecting a socially constructed identity based on shared human rights and global duties (Appadurai 50). These revelations highlight how useful constructionist viewpoints are for negotiating the intricacies of international societies.

B. Developing Practice and Policy

Social constructionism also impacts organizational procedures and policymaking, highlighting the value of inclusive and reflexive methods. Healthcare programs, for instance, use constructionist insights to address cultural stigmas and income inequalities, two social determinants of health. Acknowledging health as a socially constructed phenomenon encourages more equal healthcare practices by moving the emphasis from simply biological considerations to the larger societal environment (Conrad and Barker 70).

By highlighting how schools shape society norms and values, constructionism in education promotes reflection among educators and politicians. For instance, inclusive curricula that tackle a range of identities and histories subvert prevailing narratives and advance social justice (Apple 112). Similarly, the legal system encourages restorative justice techniques that prioritize rehabilitation over retaliation, acknowledging that crime and punishment are social constructs (Braithwaite 35).

Organizations and governance can promote more responsive and fair systems by using constructionist concepts. A fundamental component of social constructionism, reflexivity fosters self-awareness and adaptation, guaranteeing that practices and policies stay sensitive to the changing demands of society.

VII. Conclusion

A. Summary of the Main Findings

Social constructionism is a transformative framework for comprehending and

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
 A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

18

influencing everyday reality, as demonstrated. It draws attention to the ways in which language, interpersonal relationships, and shared meanings shape our worldviews. According to this perspective, ideas like identity, power, and social standards are dynamic and influenced by social, historical, and cultural factors rather than being static. Researchers and practitioners can dismantle long-standing disparities, oppose repressive conventions, and promote more inclusive social structures by utilizing constructionist insights. Social constructionism offers crucial tools for comprehending the intricacies of contemporary society, whether in the analysis of digital identities, global interconnection, or policy formation.

B. Final Reflections

In a time of swift technological development, globalization, and cultural transformation, social constructionism is still a viable and flexible theoretical framework. It opposes essentialist viewpoints and promotes a sophisticated comprehension of the creation and reconstruction of reality. Its focus on human agency and reflexivity highlights the possibility of revolutionary change. Social constructionism continues to shed light on new phenomena like online communities, global citizenship, and intersectional activism as the lines between the real and virtual worlds become increasingly hazy.

C. Prospects for the Future

Future social constructionism research can explore a number of interesting crossovers. First, it will be crucial to investigate how digital tools mediate social construction processes as technology develops further. For instance, virtual reality and artificial intelligence raise questions about the construction of knowledge, identity, and ethics in these innovative environments. Second, in order to address how cultural narratives and societal norms influence our relationship with the natural world, the global climate catastrophe necessitates the application of constructionist concepts to environmental concerns. Third, interdisciplinary studies that integrate environmental science, psychology, economics, and constructionism may produce novel solutions to urgent global problems.

If we use social constructionism more widely across academic fields and societal spheres, it will remain relevant and useful in tackling the complex problems of the modern world. Social constructionism can direct efforts to build just and sustainable futures by critically examining emerging realities.

Society Language and Culture – A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal
October-December 2024 I Fourth Year I First Issue I ISSN - 2583-0341
A Unit of Society, Language and Culture Trust

19

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Apple, Michael W. Ideology and Curriculum. Routledge, 2004.

Apple, Michael W. Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age. Routledge, 1993.

Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Anchor Books, 1966.

Bordo, Susan. Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. University of California Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Braithwaite, John. Crime, Shame, and Reintegration. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge, 1990

Conrad, Peter, and Kristin K. Barker. "The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications." Journal of Health and Social Behavior, vol. 51, no. 1, 2010, pp. 67–79.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." Stanford Law Review, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Vintage Books, 1977.

Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 2000.

Goffman, Erving. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Doubleday, 1959.

Hacking, Ian. The Social Construction of What? Harvard University Press, 1999.

Hall, Stuart. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. Sage,

1997.

Haraway, Donna. Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. Routledge, 1991.

Mead, George Herbert. Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. University of Chicago Press, 1934.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. Racial Formation in the United States. Routledge, 1994.

Schutz, Alfred. The Phenomenology of the Social World. Northwestern University Press, 1967.

Turkle, Sherry. Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. Basic Books, 2011.

Young, Iris Marion. Justice and the Politics of Difference. Princeton University Press, 1990.