

## 3.4 Constructivism

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The construction of social reality is booming as a topic. For almost all areas of social scientific research there are monographs or collections in which a constructivist approach is selected: on socialization (Grundmann 1999), health and illness (Gawatz and Nowak 1993; Lachmund and Stollberg 1992); on technological change (Flick 1996); or transsexuality (Hirschauer 1993) to name but a few. Scientific findings are also generally treated as social construction (e.g. Latour and Woolgar 1979), which has led to bitter controversies (cf. the debates resulting from Sokal 1996). Hacking (1999) desperately asks 'the social construction of What?'. With regard to qualitative research, constructivist ideas (such as Schütz 1962 or Berger and Luckmann 1966) have been the basis for a variety of methods. Over the course of time, however, little attention has been paid to these ideas in qualitative research. At present interest in constructivist ideas is again on the increase (e.g. Flick 2002: ch. 4; T. Sutter 1997).

### 2 WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVISM?

A number of programmes with different departure points are subsumed under the label

'Constructivism'. What is common to all constructivist approaches is that they examine the relationship to reality by dealing with constructive processes in approaching it. Examples of constructions are to be found at different levels.

- 1 In the tradition of Jean Piaget (1937), cognition, perception of the world and knowledge about it are seen as constructs. Radical constructivism (Glaserfeld 1995) takes this thought to the point where every form of cognition, because of the neurobiological process involved, has direct access only to images of the world and of reality, but not of both. Luhmann (1990a) relates these ideas to systemic perspectives in order to use them as the basis for a social theory (1997).
- 2 Social constructivism in the tradition of Schütz (1962), Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Gergen (1985, 1999) enquires after the social conventionalizations, perception and knowledge in everyday life.
- 3 Constructivist sociology of science in the tradition of Fleck (1935/1979), the present-day 'laboratory-constructivist' research (Knorr-Cetina 1981; Latour and Woolgar 1979), seeks to establish how social, historical, local, pragmatic and other factors influence scientific discovery in such a way that scientific facts may be regarded as social constructs

('local products'). (On the distinctions between these different variants of constructivism cf. Knorr-Cetina 1989.)

Constructivism is not a unified programme, but is developing in parallel fashion in a number of disciplines: psychology, sociology, philosophy, neurobiology, psychiatry and information science. In what follows we shall deal briefly with the first two of the three levels we have presented here from the point of view of what is relevant to qualitative research. The empirical programme of (laboratory)-constructivism has not so far been applied to qualitative research. The following sections are guided by the idea that constructivism is concerned with how knowledge arises, what concept of knowledge is appropriate and what criteria can be invoked in the evaluation of knowledge. For qualitative research this is doubly relevant since, like all research, it engenders knowledge and therefore (at least very often) looks empirically at specific forms of knowledge – for example, biographical, expert or everyday knowledge.

### 3 EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS ON THE NATURE OF SOCIAL REALITY

Alfred Schütz has already claimed that facts only become relevant through their meanings and interpretations:

Strictly speaking there are no such things as facts pure and simple. All facts are from the outset selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. There are, therefore, always interpreted facts, either facts looked at as detached from their context by an artificial abstraction or facts considered in their particular setting. In either case, they carry along their interpretational inner and outer horizon. (Schütz 1962: 5)

A considerable part of the criticism of constructivism is devoted to the questions of the approach to reality, and it is for this reason that Mitterer (1999: 486) insists 'no kind of constructivism is of the opinion that "everything is constructed"'. Glaserfeld (1992: 30) underlines the point: 'radical constructivism in no way denies an external reality'. On the other hand, the various types of constructivism, from Schütz to Glaserfeld, do question whether external reality is *directly* accessible – that is to say, independent of perceptions and concepts

that we use and construct. Perception is seen not as a passive-receptive process of representation but as an active-constructive process of production. This has consequences for the question whether a representation (of reality, a process or an object) can be verified for its correctness against the 'original'. This form of verifiability, however, is questioned by constructivism, since an original is only accessible through different representations or constructions. And so the different representations or constructions can only be compared with one another. For constructivist epistemology, and empirical research based on it, knowledge and the constructions it contains become the relevant means of access to the objects with which they are concerned.

### 4 CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Taking three main authors we may clarify how the genesis of knowledge and its functions may be described from a constructivist viewpoint.

1 Schütz (1962: 5) begins with this premise: 'All our knowledge of the world, in common-sense as well as in scientific thinking, involves constructs, i.e. a set of abstractions, generalizations, formalizations and idealizations, specific to the relevant level of thought organization.' For Schütz, every form of knowledge is constructed by selection and structuring. The individual forms differ according to the degree of structuring and idealization, and this depends on their functions – more concrete as the basis of everyday action or more abstract as a model in the construction of scientific theories. Schütz enumerates different processes which have in common that the formation of knowledge of the world is not to be understood as the simple portrayal of given facts, but that the contents are constructed in a process of active production.

2 This interpretation is developed further in radical constructivism, whose 'core theses' are formulated by Glaserfeld (1992: 30) as follows.

- 1 What we call 'knowledge' in no sense represents a world that presumably exists beyond our contact with it. ... Constructivism, like pragmatism, leads to a modified concept of cognition/knowledge. Accordingly knowledge is related to the way in which we organize our experiential world.

- 2 Radical constructivism *in no sense* denies an external reality. ...<sup>1</sup>
- 3 Radical constructivism agrees with Berkeley that it would be unreasonable to confirm the existence of something that can/could not at some point be perceived. ...
- 4 Radical constructivism adopts Vico's fundamental idea that human knowledge is a human construct. ...
- 5 Constructivism abandons the claim that cognition is 'true' in the sense that it reflects objective reality. Instead it only requires that knowledge must be *viabile*, in the sense that it should *fit* into the experiential world of the one who knows ...<sup>2</sup>

Seen in this way, knowledge organizes experiences that first permit cognition of the world beyond the experiencing subject or organism. Experiences are structured and understood through concepts and contexts that are constructed by this subject. Whether the picture that is formed in this way is true or correct cannot be determined. But its quality may be assessed through its *viability*, that is, the extent to which the picture or model permits the subject to find its way and to act in the world. Here an important point of orientation is the question of how the 'construction of concepts' functions (Glaserfeld 1995: 76–88).

3 For social constructionism the processes of social interchange in the genesis of knowledge take on a special significance, and in particular the concepts that are used. In this sense Gergen formulates the following 'assumptions for a social constructionism'.

The terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts ... The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people ... The degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social processes ... Language derives its significance in human affairs from the way in which it functions within patterns of relationship ... To appraise existing forms of discourse is to evaluate patterns of cultural life; such evaluations give voice to other cultural enclaves. (Gergen 1994: 49ff.)

Knowledge is constructed in processes of social interchange; it is based on the role of language

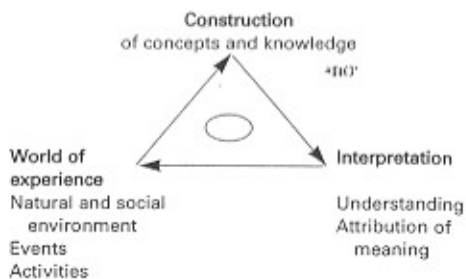


Figure 3.4.1 Construction and interpretation as means of access to the world of experience

in such relationships, and it has above all social functions. The eventualities of the social processes involved have an influence on what will survive as a valid or useful explanation.

In accordance with these three constructivist positions, our access to the world of experience – the natural and social environment and the experiences and activities it contains – operates through the concepts constructed by the perceiving subject and the knowledge deriving from these. These are then used to interpret experiences, or to understand and attribute meanings (see Figure 3.4.1).

The ideas of radical and social constructivism relate to cognition and knowledge in general but not (or only in specific ways) to scientific cognition. In particular, for radical constructivism there is as yet no translation of the basic ideas into a conceptualization of empirical research (the first guidelines were presented by Schmidt 1998). Here the focus should be on the importance of constructivism for research, and especially qualitative research. What remains to be clarified is the relationship between knowledge and research (see section 5) and the links between the world of experience and constructs, between constructs and interpretations, and between interpretations and the world of experience (see section 6).

## 5 SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

For the social sciences Schütz assumes that their knowledge starts from everyday understanding: 'The thought objects constructed by social scientists refer to, and are founded upon, thought objects constructed by the common-sense

thought of man living in his everyday life among his fellow men' (1962: 6). Social scientific knowledge is developed on the basis of pre-existing everyday knowledge and socially constructed through this developmental process. The main idea is the distinction that Schütz makes between constructs of the first and second degree: 'the constructs of social science are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, that is, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene'. Accordingly Schütz holds that 'the exploration of the general principles according to which man in daily life organises his experiences, and especially those of the social world, is the first task of the methodology of the social sciences' (1962: 59). For Schütz, everyday knowledge and cognition become the basis on which the social scientist develops a more strongly formalized and generalized 'version of the world' (Goodman 1978). Schütz (1962: 208ff.), therefore, assumes 'multiple realities', of which the world of science represents only one, which is, in part, organized according to different principles compared to the everyday world. Social scientific research becomes a kind of research that, on the basis of pre-existing everyday constructs, constructs another version of the world. Its results – the knowledge and objective meanings that it produces – are social constructs in the everyday world that is under investigation and, by extension, constructs in scientific analyses. Schütz's ideas were further developed for sociology by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and have subsequently exerted a strong influence, particularly on biographical research (see 3.6, 3.7, 5.11) and on the development of ethnomethodology (see 2.3, 3.2, 5.17).

### Scientific knowledge as text

Social scientific analyses are increasingly using the medium of text for their constructs: data are collected as text (for example, in the form of interviews, see 5.2), and processed and interpreted as such (see 5.10, 5.21). Ultimately, all discoveries are presented in textual form (see 5.22). In concrete terms text is already partially used as a metaphor or a concept: from the 'world as a text' in general terms (Garz and Kraimer 1994a) to the city as a text (Darnton 1989); life as a story (Bruner 1990) to people and identities as texts (Gergen 1988; Shotter and

Gergen 1989). A similar direction is taken by ideas that there is no fundamental difference, at the level of modes of experience, between interpretations of texts, persons and artefacts (Dennett 1991), or that cognitive processes should first be analysed through the analysis of discourses, rather than memory and experiment (Edwards and Potter 1992; see 5.19). In all these approaches the contexts being investigated and the modes of action and experience are presumed to be in texts or are investigated in them. Social scientific constructs therefore often become textual constructs, linked in part to the idea that everyday constructs are textual constructs. This approach has found particular favour in the context of the postmodernist debate and is related to the most recent developments of symbolic interactionism (see 3.3) and the work of Denzin (see 2.7, 5.7). If this thought is pursued further, it may be asked what processes of construction (Schütz's first or second degree) or of world-making (Goodman) are going on in the transformation of modes of action and experience into texts or at least text-like constructions. To answer this question we shall refer to the concept of mimesis (cf. Gebauer and Wulf 1995), which will also give pointers for a social science working with texts.

## 6 MIMESIS AND WORLD-MAKING IN TEXTS

Mimesis is concerned with the representation of worlds – and in Aristotle this originally meant natural worlds – in symbolic worlds. In Blumenberg (1981) this is discussed as 'the imitation of nature'. In the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) and Adorno (1973), the term was used as a counter-idea to the rationality of conceptual thinking in the context of an increasingly scientized world-view (cf. also Wellmer 1985). At present growing interest may be detected in a broader understanding of mimesis: 'Mimesis can therefore be used in a comprehensive way to mean representation' (Reck 1991: 65). As an example, the representation of natural or social contexts in literary or dramatic texts or stage performances is often discussed: 'in this interpretation mimesis characterizes the act of producing a symbolic world, which encompasses both practical and theoretical elements' (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 3). Current interest also focuses on this

concept outside literature and the theatre. The debate thematizes mimesis as a general principle that can be used to demonstrate understanding of the world and texts: 'the individual assimilates himself or herself to the world via mimetic processes. Mimesis makes it possible for individuals to step out of themselves, to draw the outer world into their inner world, and to lend expression to their interiority. It produces an otherwise unattainable proximity to objects and is thus a necessary condition of understanding' (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 2-3).

In applying these considerations to the production and functioning of social science and its texts mimetic components can be identified in the following places: in the translation of experiences into narratives, reports and so on by those under investigation,<sup>1</sup> in the construction of texts on this basis on the part of researchers, in their interpretation of such constructs and, finally, in the reflux of such interpretations into everyday contexts. This reflux of science into everyday life is discussed more fully in the theory of social representations (Moscovici 1984) or Matthes (1985). This means that social science has already contributed to determining and constructing the world it is investigating by means of its results – so long as these, as individual results, can attract to themselves the attention of a broader public (cf. also Gergen 1973 for further discussion of this). In this way its interpretations and modes of understanding again feed back into the modes of everyday experience. The fact that in this process such interpretations are not accepted one-for-one but are transformed in accordance with the rationalities of the everyday world has been shown by Moscovici (1961), on the reception of psychoanalysis, and utilization research (cf. Beck and Bonß 1989, see 6.3) in a number of different case studies.

### Mimesis as a process

A fruitful starting point to illustrate mimetic transformation processes in the production and reception of social scientific texts may be found in the ideas of Ricoeur (1981a, 1984). He breaks down the mimetic process, 'playfully yet seriously', into the steps of *mimesis<sub>1</sub>*, *mimesis<sub>2</sub>* and *mimesis<sub>3</sub>*:

authors, and readers. ... It will appear as a corollary at the end of this analysis, that the reader is that operator par excellence who takes up through doing something – the act of reading – the unity of the travel from *mimesis<sub>1</sub>* to *mimesis<sub>2</sub>*, by way of *mimesis<sub>3</sub>*. (Ricoeur 1984: 53)

The understanding of texts – and by extension of social reality – becomes an active process of producing reality in which not only the author of texts, or versions of the world, is involved but also the person for whom these are produced and who 'reads' or understands them. For Ricoeur the three forms of mimesis are distinguished as follows.

The mimetic transformation in the 'processing' of experiences from the social or natural environment into textual constructs – into concepts, knowledge or everyday stories to others, into particular types of document during the production of texts for research purposes – is always to be understood as a process of construction. According to Ricoeur, *mimesis<sub>2</sub>* is taking place here:

Such is the realm of *mimesis<sub>2</sub>* between the antecedence and the descendance of the text. At this level mimesis may be defined as the configuration of action. This configuration is governed by a schematization which is historically structured in a tradition or traditions, and it is expressed in individual works that stand in varying relationships to the constraints generated by this schematism. (Ricoeur 1984: 53)

The mimetic transformation of such texts in modes of understanding by transformation takes place in processes of the everyday understanding of narratives, documents, books, newspapers and so on, and in the scientific interpretation of such narratives, research documents or texts. Ricoeur refers to this as *mimesis<sub>3</sub>*. It 'marks the intersection of the world of text and the world of the hearer or reader' (1981a: 26).

Finally, in the reflux of such everyday and/or scientific interpretations into modes of action via prior understanding of human action and social or natural phenomena, *mimesis<sub>1</sub>* plays a role:

Whatever may be the status of these stories which somehow are prior to the narration we may give them, our mere use of the word story (taken in this pre-narrative sense) testifies to our pre-understanding that action is human to the extent that it characterises a life story that deserves to be

Hermeneutics, however, is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works,

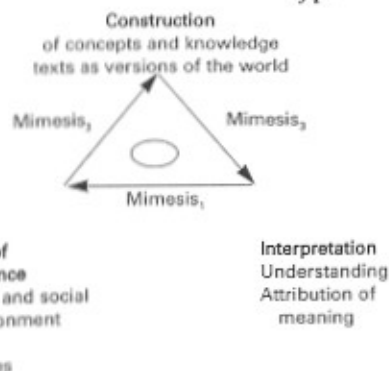


Figure 3.4.2 Process of mimesis

told. *Mimesis<sub>1</sub>* is that pre-understanding of what human action is, of its semantics, its symbolism, its temporality. From this pre-understanding, which is common to poets and their readers, arises fiction, and with fiction comes the second form of mimesis which is textual and literary. (Ricoeur 1981a: 20)

According to this view, which Ricoeur formulated to handle literary texts, mimetic processes can be found at the following points in social scientific understanding as an interplay of construction and the interpretation of experiences (see Figure 3.4.2).

Gebauer and Wulf (1995) explain that understanding as a constructive process, by involving the person who understands, extends to understanding as a whole in social scientific research. They base this on Goodman's (1978) theory of different modes of world-making and the versions of the world that derive from this as a result of cognition: 'knowing in terms of this model is a matter of invention: modes of organization "are not found in the world but built into the world"' (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 28). Gebauer and Wulf discuss mimesis in processes of cognition in general terms. Ricoeur develops this concept for processes of understanding in relation to literature in a manner that emerges without the narrow and strict idea of the portrayal of a given reality, and without the corresponding narrow concept of reality and truth: 'Mimesis in this sense is ahead of our concepts of reference, the real and truth. It engenders a need as yet unfilled to think more' (1981a: 31). This interpretation of mimesis can extend the process of the social construction of reality – in

knowledge, in texts and generally – and can complement the conceptions of radical constructivism and social constructionism.

## 7 CONSTRUCTIVISM AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

From this point of view, mimesis may be used to provide a conception of understanding in the social sciences that takes account of the fact that material to be understood should be dealt with at various levels as something that is constructed and presented: mimetic processes can be found in the processing of experiences in everyday practice. They also take place in interviews and thereby in every construction of textualized and textualizable versions of the world which are thus rendered accessible to social science. Finally, they also play a role in the production of texts for research purposes – for example, transcripts, reports or interpretations.

This idea of the mimetic process can also be applied to a type of design (see 4.1) that is widespread in qualitative research – the reconstruction of life-histories or biographies (see 3.6, 3.7) in interviews (see 5.2). In this, narratives (see 5.11) are considered to be the appropriate form for the representation of biographical experiences. Ricoeur (1981a: 20) supports the 'thesis of the narrative or pre-narrative quality of experience'. With regard to the mimetic relationship between life-histories and narratives Bruner explains:

that the mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair: ... Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. 'Life' in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as 'a narrative' is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives. When someone tells you his life ... it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through the clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing psychologically as 'life itself'. At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat. (Bruner 1987: 12-13)

Seen in this way the biographical narration of one's own life is not a portrayal of factual sequences. It becomes a mimetic representation of experiences that are constructed more generally in one's knowledge and more specifically for this purpose – in the interview – in the form of

a narrative. On the other hand, the narrative provides a general framework within which experiences are ordered, represented, evaluated and so on – in short, within which they are experienced. The object that qualitative research is investigating (here) already has, in everyday life, the form in which it seeks to investigate, construct and interpret it. In the interview situation these everyday modes of interpretation and construction are used to allocate these experiences to a symbolic world – that of science and its texts. The experiences are then interpreted from within this world.

Through reconstructing life by means of particular questions a version of the particular experiences is constructed and interpreted. The extent to which the life and experiences actually occurred in the form reported cannot be checked, but it can be established what construction of both the narrating subject is presenting, and also which version arises in the research situation. These experiences and the world in which they happened should ultimately be presented and seen in the representation of the results of this reconstruction in a specific way – perhaps in the form of a (new) theory (see 2.1, 5.13, 6.6) with claims of validity. Mimetic processes create versions of the world which can then be understood and interpreted through qualitative research. Ricoeur's different forms of mimesis and Schütz's distinction between everyday and scientific constructs provide further content for the framework that was set up by Goodman with his assumption of different versions of the world created by everyday, artistic and scientific modes of construction.

For qualitative research constructivist assumptions become relevant for the understanding of collected data – for example, biographies as constructs (cf. Bude 1984 for discussion). Here we must ask whether qualitative research succeeds in gaining access to the constructs of the interview partner or the members of a research area.

As may be shown in the case of objective hermeneutics (see 5.16), constructivist assumptions also become relevant for the critical analysis of procedure and methodological requirements (cf. Flick 2000a for an application to this process of the idea of mimesis outlined here), or in the sense of some further development (cf. T. Sutter 1997 on the linking of this approach or conversation analysis (see 5.17) to constructivism in the sense given in Luhmann 1990a).

In more general terms we may ask, in the sense of social scientific constructivism, what processes of decision-making belong to the qualitative research process (see 4.1) and how they influence the process of cognition and the desired results (cf. Flick 1995, 2002 for further discussion).

Finally, constructivist assumptions may be used as a starting point for the debate on the question of justifying the validity of qualitative research (cf. Steinke 1999, and 4.7) – in particular, because the validity of knowledge and its determination are a major problem for radical constructivism which has to be dealt with under the key-word of the viability<sup>2</sup> of knowledge, models, theories or discoveries (cf. Glasersfeld 1995).

#### NOTES

- 1 Here the understanding of mimesis which Bruner develops, with reference to Aristotle and Ricoeur, becomes relevant: 'mimesis was the capturing of "life in action", an elaboration and amelioration of what happened' (Bruner, 1990: 46). 'Mimesis is a kind of metaphor of reality. ... It refers to reality not in order to copy it but in order to give it a new reading' (Ricoeur 1981b: 292–293). Mimetic processes can then be understood as a principle of the representation in everyday language of modes of action, events and situations, 'brought' by the latter into a communicable and intelligible version – for the subject and for others.
- 2 Viability means that knowledge or other constructions must show themselves to be useful and sustainable (capable of life) in the particular context of use – they must fit and allow the individual to act and survive in the particular environment. This does not mean that constructions must be true or contain correct depictions: neither of these can be checked since they cannot be directly compared with the original.

#### FURTHER READING

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