

**Editorial: *Theories that matter.*
On Some Pragmatic Aspects of Social Constructionism**

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In this issue of *FQS* we launch a new debate: on social constructionism. In our view, social constructionism is, among other things, a good metatheory for grounding qualitative psychological research. In this sense, a debate on the constructionist perspective—often applied to psychological inquiry—is invaluable for qualitative social research in general. [1]

Social constructionism invites celebrating a new kind of psychology that understands the challenges of the *linguistic* and the *cultural turn* turns and tries to inject them into the discipline. In their critical reflection of the discipline's academic mainstream, constructionist psychologists demonstrate that "objective knowledge" is historically and culturally contingent. They articulate what it means to give up culture-centric "universalisms" in an era of globalization and to how to understand psychological phenomena and functions as cultural constructions, not only in the field of academic research and theorizing, but also in various areas of applied psychology. Whereas social constructionism is well known and subject to scholarly debate in the English-speaking context, in German (and Swiss, Austrian) psychology the crucial contents and characteristics of a social constructionist psychology are hardly known. [2]

Today various orientations in academic and applied psychology describe themselves as "social constructionist." Whereas many varieties of constructionism draw on postmodernist and post-structuralist theories, several constructionist writers focus mainly on a rather pragmatic view of language and construction (e.g. Kenneth GERGEN) or on a general theory of *dialogical understanding* (e.g. John SHOTTER). *Discursive psychology* often is defined via the specific method of psychological *discourse analysis* and there are constructionist oriented branches of *cultural psychology*, as, for example, the programmatic theory of the *dialogical self* (Hubert HERMANS & Harry KEMPEN). Writings in the field of *critical (social) psychology* have substantially coined constructionist theory and given it fresh impetus and new aspects (see, e.g., texts by Ian PARKER, Valerie WALKERDINE, Carla WILLIG, or John CROMBY). [3]

Whereas we appreciate this productive heterogeneity of social constructionist approaches, we believe that it should still be possible to list a number of "family similarities" (BURR, 2003) that may help gloss the main characteristics of a social constructionist psychology:

- A constructionist psychology is shaped by the idea that those phenomena that we tend to understand as "internal" or "private" (e.g., emotions), are socially constructed and gain their meaning in the course of everyday social practice and talk.

- One important starting point of the constructionist movement in social psychology was the critique of the discipline's concentration on individuals—their cognitive and affective functioning.
- In method, too, the social dimension is prior to that of the "individual" perspective of the subject; social interaction, especially the analysis of every day conversation and of mundane practices are foci of social constructionist research.
- Epistemologically, the general skepticism towards any kind of objective knowledge is characteristic. This is especially relevant for the case of scientific/scholarly knowledge and the specific validity claims tied to it.
- Finally, one of the most obvious, if not undisputed, features of constructionist psychologies is the general critical approach. Most constructionist writers have said in some place that the function of social constructionism is critique and that it is one of the aims to unravel imbalances in power and social inequality. [4]

From these broad characteristics some controversial points of discussion arise:

1. The self-definition as critical scientific/scholarly enterprise and the obligation to keep in mind the "political" interpretation of one's own findings and discourses clearly follows from the relativist foundation of constructionist metatheory: Whatever we may "discover" is socially and culturally contingent and thus "made" instead of "given." However, this constructionist premise forbids any standards for critique. How can a constructionist psychology be a critical psychology? How can it explain that its own discourses and research findings may change power relations and social inequality?
2. In the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, pragmatist theories of language and postmodernist-semiotic theories of meaning, constructionism places much emphasis on "local truths" and stresses the positive and productive power of the dialogical multiplicity of possible (scholarly) discourse or constructions. It is widely accepted that the discursive power of empirical "findings" is not derived and cannot be evaluated by means of the usual validation criteria in the social sciences, as it is not seen to be an objective representation of reality. However, whereas a broad consensus concerning the need for different criteria may be taken for granted, detailed positions towards the significance of empirical research differ greatly within social constructionism:
 - Kenneth GERGEN repeatedly has criticized the idea of a specific "constructionist methodology." As psychology's theoretical concepts are fully determined by the social context of their genesis and to no extent determined by their extra-discursive "referent," any "empirical method" is as good as the other in terms of objective "representation" (see for example CISNEROS-PUEBLA, 2007; ZIELKE, 2007, pp.169-182).
 - Discursive psychologists mainly practice one empirical method—a specific version of psychological discourse analysis—the functionality of which is

illustrated by means numerous empirical examples presented in their writings.

- Other writers in social constructionism recommend for a repertoire of (certain) qualitative, interpretative methods of social research, which are even subject to validation criteria (see for example BURR, 2003).
3. The tendency to exclude aspects of the individual psyche from the range of interesting questions leaves substantial questions unanswered. How can a psychology without subject be more than mere analysis of discourse or systems, how is it to be distinguished for example from cultural studies? How does the rejection of agency or subjectivity as a whole leave conceptual space for a critical subject? [5]

Most of the aspects mentioned above point to the potential of social constructionism to inform social action. Starting from this focus, however, all the following topics may be discussed: epistemological questions and critique of knowledge, the critical potential, the reconstruction of the individual "in discursive terms," the constructionist concept of action, that of practice or the relation of constructionism to postmodernist-semiotic theories of meaning. [6]

In many English speaking countries, there is already a tradition of public debates on these and other issues surrounding a social constructionist psychology (for example PARKER 1999, CROMBY & NIGHTINGALE, 1999; BURR, 2003). In German psychology, in contrast, such discussions have hardly been heard or begun—and this must change! The need for and interest in such debate became obvious through the discussion triggered by the interview on social constructionism with Ken GERGEN (MATTES & SCHRAUBE, 2004; see RATNER, 2004, 2005; ZIELKE, 2005, 2006, 2007; VAN OORSCHOT & ALLOLIO-NÄCKE, 2006). [7]

To date, only a few articles on social constructionism have been published in *FQS*. It therefore appears to be the right time to bundle this debate and to accelerate it at the same time. Therefore we drafted an outline for such a debate and sent it to authors who we believed might be interested in participating. In the present issue of *FQS* we do not only keep record of our outline, but also of its response: So far [Klaus D. DEISLER](#), [Pascal DEY](#), [Peter MATTES](#) und [Johannes VON TILING](#) have joined in. We would like to thank these authors for their motivation to open the debate with their articles. [8]

Certainly, this debate is not complete with the publishing of this first round as we wish for further comments and articles to supplement our discussion. If you are interested to participate in this debate, please contact [Jo REICHERTZ](#) or [Barbara ZIELKE](#). [9]

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