

Learning Social Constructionism: Students' Understandings of Transformations in Their Lives

Pedro Pablo Sampaio Martins, Ph.D. and Marina Arantes
Uberlândia, MG, Brazil

Abstract

Social constructionism offers an orientation to knowledge production that carries implications for the ways we understand people and the social world. It has been described by many scholars and practitioners as “transformative” in different contexts. This article aims to describe how people, who are learning social constructionism, understand this orientation, and the implications of these understandings to their professional and personal lives. These students were part of an introductory course, “Social Constructionism in Practice.” Each submitted a two-page report on the concepts they considered most important during their learning process throughout the course and these were thematically analyzed. Three understandings of social constructionism were described: as meta-theory, as professional stance, and as conversational resources. Different understandings create different implications for participants’ personal lives and professional practices. These implications are discussed in the context of an appreciation of the ways we can teach social constructionism, and the formative effects we are seeking while doing so.

Key Words: *social constructionism, professional practice, personal change, transformation, knowledge construction.*

Social constructionism is an orientation which positions the epistemological debate about knowledge creation at its core. Specifically, social construction moves away from understanding knowledge as representing reality, towards describing the social processes which are involved in constructing and sustaining forms of understanding reality. Whether in sophisticated academic debates or in daily conversations, people jointly craft understandings about both who they are and what things are. This is made in processes of meaning making. Relational and social processes construct and re-construct what we take to be “real” and “good,” and these meanings generate implications for the ways we live our lives (Gergen, 2015).

Gergen (1985, 2015) proposes social constructionism as a “movement” in science, instead of an already-made, finalized version of “what is the case” about the world. The notion of “movement” emphasizes the social processes involved in the construction of social constructionism, as an explanation to particular social phenomena (Rasera, Martins & Vieira-Júnior, 2017). It positions us to understand this orientation as a diverse, heterogeneous, continually evolving set of ideas, which are negotiated in communities of interest that range from Psychology to Social Sciences and Family Therapy – to mention only a few. There no single version of social constructionism. However, all versions focus on: cultural and historical aspects involved in knowledge construction; relational and social processes of meaning making.

In the last decades, social construction theory has also expanded to an understanding of professional practices. Much creative efforts in fields such as therapy, community practices, organizations and education resulted from looking to practices from a social constructionist standpoint (e.g., Rasera, Taverniers & Vilches-Alvarez, 2017; Grandesso, 2017; Guanaes-Lorenzi et al, 2014; Anderson & Gehart, 2007; McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Traditionally, these practices

are less focused on offering techniques or sets of actions for professionals, and more interested in the construction of a kind of professional stance, which is oriented by: a) flexibility, b) consciousness of construction; c) collaboration; and, d) value-oriented practice (Gergen & Ness, 2016).

These practices have been described as “transformative” in different professional contexts. Whether for their potentials of critique to the status quo (e.g., Barreto & Grandesso, 2010; Peretti, Martins & Guanaes-Lorenzi, 2013), for their innovative ways of organizing practices (e.g., Håkansson, 2015; Denborough, 2008), or for their dialogic potentials (e.g., Grandesso, 2017), there has been great enthusiasm surrounding social constructionist contributions to professional practice.

Additionally, we note that the discourse of “transformation” is also often used in many conversations around us to account for how social constructionism has affected people’s personal lives. When we, the authors, look back at our own personal and professional stories in contact to social constructionist ideas; when we listen to our students, who are learning this orientation, describing how social constructionism affects their lives; as well as when I (P.M.) read practitioners’ accounts of their trajectories in several manuscripts, as part of my duties in the editorial board of a journal that is committed to these ideas; we are struck by how passionately people describe the ways in which learning social constructionism has transformed both their professional and personal lives.

Shocked, confused, lost, inspired, touched, changed and transformed are a few of the words we have heard in our journeys with social construction throughout our decade of studies and practice. These words and their contexts made us curious. This article is a response to such curiosity. Our aim is to describe how students who were learning social constructionism in a course that we offered in 2017, understood a social construction orientation, as well as how they describe the implications of these understandings for their professional and personal lives.

We begin by describing the course which was the context of this study. This is followed by describing our methods of inquiry, followed by the results that describe three different understandings of social constructionism, as well as their implications for students’ lives.

Social Constructionism in Practice: The Course

“Social Constructionism in Practice” was an introductory training course comprising 16 class hours (plus reading materials). The course was offered to students and professionals in the fields of Psychology, Mental Health, and Social Work and had two aims: one was academic, and the other was social. In terms of academic purposes, the course aimed to present and discuss the core premises of social constructionism (i.e., knowledge is created through social practices), as well as to explain how the understanding of these premises fosters useful, creative and transformative practices, without the need to use specific techniques. Our hope was that by the end of the course participants could: understand the epistemological debate associated with social constructionism and its basic assumptions; become familiar with the most common practical approaches and resources inspired by this orientation; and, promote collaborative and reflexive processes in their own works contexts.

In terms of social purposes, the course aimed to invite a community of interest on social constructionism in the city where it occurred. Our community, Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, is located in Southeast Brazil, with an estimated population of 700 thousand people. We intended for this course to be part of the creation of a community where people with shared interests in social constructionism would feel welcomed, and where they would feel their interests were valued. The course was financed by the Taos Institute and therefore it was offered to practitioners and students free of charge. The practitioners and students worked with different populations in Uberlândia and neighboring towns.¹

The course was announced on social media and via e-mail. Four, four-hour classes were offered to course participants. Participants were asked to read the provided materials before each class. Each class started with an exposition of the theme or main learning point for the class. Theoretical and practical articulations were discussed in relation to each main point. The decision about which point should guide each class was always related to a question that we asked ourselves when preparing classes: “In our own journeys with social constructionism, what were the most central and useful idea in relation to this particular theme?”

Each theoretical presentation was followed by practical exercises (such as role playing, live interviews, live supervision, reflecting processes, and questionnaires) students could experience how these ideas could be transformed into actions. Additionally, we also provided students with supplementary materials—additional readings and videos-- to further their understanding of the focus of each class, particularly other forms of practices that we did not discuss in class. Table 1 summarizes the main information about each class and provides a general view of what this course was about.

Table 1

Structure of the Course: “Social Constructionism in Practice”.

Class	Main Point	References
Epistemology and Conversational Resources	Knowledge production is a social practice. Each form of describing the world bears implications. Theories and other aspects of cultural life can be conversational resources.	Gergen (2015). McNamee (2004).
Collaborative and Dialogical Practices	Our ways of talking and interacting have effects. A not-knowing stance invites was to move away from a specialist position towards focusing on the co-construction of understanding.	McNamee & Gergen (1992). Anderson (2012).
Narrative Practice	We live our lives through the stories that we tell. Personal narratives are constructed in relation to social discourses. There is never a single story to be told: alternative stories are always available.	White (2007).
Reflecting Processes	Conversations are important, and so are conversations about conversations. Turn taking between positions of talking and listening create processes of reflection that aim to broaden the possibilities of understandings people have available to make sense of their lives.	Andersen (1991).

Methods

A social constructionist stance towards knowledge construction guided our methodological views in this study. We understand knowledge as social practice. Research is a process of immersion in different relationships from whence we reconstruct meanings about social life (McNamee & Hosking, 2011). Focus is on understanding how people explain themselves and the world surrounding them, as well as on the implications of these understandings for the ways they relate to the social world (Gergen, 1985). Inquiries do not aim to create generalizable or replicable knowledge; instead, the aim is to generate specific, located articulations of social phenomena that may create deeper, denser, and more varied understandings of the diverse ways the world can be described in.

As authors of this article, and teachers in the course on which this article is based, we recognize that this is a situated version of processes of transformation described by students who are learning social constructionism. This version is strongly influenced by our own ways of understanding social constructionism – from material selection, to classes, to ways of practicing. Our account aims to give visibility to some different ways in which social constructionism can be understood, and to how these differences generate diverse transformations, whether personal or professional, for the lives of the people.

Context, Participants and Materials

Twenty-seven students participated in this course. During our last class, we asked the participants who were present to write short reports (one to two pages) describing the concepts they considered most important in their learning process throughout the course. We also asked for them to write about how learning these concepts affected their lives, both on a personal and on a professional level. We explained to the students that our intention was to use their reports as the basis for writing this article and to revise future course materials. We asked them to: a) not identify themselves in the reports, b) create a written version of their experiences which they would be comfortable to share with other people, and c) consider whether or not they would like to participate in our study, by means of deciding to handle their report to us, or to keep it to themselves.

A relational notion of ethics (McNamee, 2017) guided us in the construction of these requests. We understand that, while we share broad ethical guidelines that come from our academic and professional communities, ethical values are also generated in our local encounters with others. Together, we create local moral worlds, where what counts as “ethical” is constructed as valid knowledge in the context of our interactions. We believe that we have created a friendly and productive learning environment in classes, where all participants felt safe to express their opinions and to decide if they wanted to be part of our study. The quality of our relationship with the participants was the basis upon which we constructed our request for their participation in this inquiry. Fifteen participants submitted their reports, and expressed their consent for these reports to be used in this article. Together, the reports are the textual materials we analyzed.

Analysis Steps

We carried out a thematic analysis, which was inspired by Spink (2010), and Martins and Guanaes-Lorenzi (2016). This type of analysis aims to give visibility to the themes that are negotiated in

contexts of meaning making (in the case of the original researches, interviews; in our own case, participants' reports). Thematic categories are constructed in response to the aims of an inquiry. Categories are understood as discursive practices, which are not present in the material per se, but created in the process of interaction between researchers and materials (Spink, 2010).

Each author read the raw materials separately once and made notes about the aspects of the report that seemed relevant to our inquiry aims. We then compared notes, in a process of conversation where we asked ourselves how our observations could help us create an analytical axis. We noticed that our initial observations mainly described the impacts or implications that learning social constructionism created for the students' lives. With this focus in mind, we went back to the materials, with a specific aim to identify each of these implications. Once we reviewed and identified each participant's noted impact, we compared the responses with one another. These categories were about specific understandings of what social constructionism is, and each of these understandings were related to different implications for participants' lives.

After reviewing the materials, taking and comparing notes, and then going back through them again, we organized our analysis in three categories. For each category, we described: a) what is the specific understanding about social constructionism; b) what are the implications of this understanding to participants' lives; and, c) examples of these implications, as described in their reports.

Results: On the Implications of Learning Social Constructionism

What are the different understandings about social constructionism students generated during their learning process in the classes? Which implications do these understandings bear for their lives? In which ways can the process of learning social constructionism be transformative for students? In this section, we provide responses to these questions, based on the analysis of the participants' reports. As previously stated, the analysis is organized in three categories, and their respective implications. Please see Table 2.

Table 2

Social Constructionism and Implications

Understanding of social constructionism	Implications for students' lives
Social constructionism as meta-theory	Change in the way of seeing relationships and the world. Impossibility of separating personal and professional aspects of life. Contextualization of the notions of problem, self and discourse.
Social constructionism as professional stance	Appreciation of reflective movements and attention to inner conversations. Attention to the positions in a conversation.

Critical stance in relation to one's own work.

Focus on the conversational process and attention to effects.

Social constructionism as conversational resources

Understanding every discourse as potentially useful in practice.

Attention to the multiple voices and selves present in a conversation.

Motivation for freedom and creation in practices.

Social Constructionism as Meta-Theory

Students' descriptions of social constructionism in their reports refer to this orientation as a meta-theory, i.e., a theory about theories. Here, social constructionism is seen as a stance in relation knowledge construction, a way of looking to how people jointly create descriptions of the world in different contexts. Three implications derive from this understanding.

The first implication is the way social constructionism has invited students to a new *way of understanding and being in the world*. They understand that their descriptions – about the world, and about themselves – are discursive possibilities, created in and through language practices. The following is an example of this implication:

I see constructionism as something that goes way beyond a theory about “therapy techniques.” Social constructionism is an approach about “knowledge construction,” and as such, it serves not simply as a “guide on how to-do,” but as a proposal on how to position yourself in relation to knowledge, to the world, and to life (Report 15).

The second implication is about an *impossibility of separating personal and professional experiences*. This perception has strengthened students' understandings of how we relationally construct the versions of world we live in, which includes all contexts of social life.

Example: When I think about the learnings in this course, I can refer to the moments of tension, conflict, or daily events in my life when I caught myself reflecting on the conversations we had in class: “What would the authors say/ask about this? If I talked about this situation in the group, how would that discussion go?” The range of my inner conversations was broadened (Report 1).

The third implication describes the possibility of *contextualizing the notions of problem, self and discourse*. In doing so, these notions are no longer taken-for-granted, and they are viewed as conditioned by the assumptions of social construction, where language and culture play a significant role.

Example: “The course helps me think about, and reflect very much on my social relations, and that everything we create with one another is part of a context, and that idea goes through myself at every moment as a professional” (Report 12).

Social Constructionism as Professional Stance

The second form of understanding social constructionism reported by the students describes it as a professional stance. Particularly, this stance is understood as an invitation to self-reflexivity, and to a notion of joint responsibility in the construction of conversations and possible worlds. Four implications come from this type of understanding.

Meanings are taken as byproducts of interactive negotiations, both in personal and professional settings, and this focus implicates in a consequence that students become more *attentive to their inner conversations, and appreciative of the reflective movements that happen between inner and outer dialogue* in the context of their interactions. Report 10 shows a description of how this kind of reflective movement happened to this student, and how it has impacted their professional life.

Example: *I think that [before the course] I used to be more fascinated by my own inner conversations than by the client's talk. And, with that, my listening and my possibilities of action got very limited. I also realized I was living an urge to "cure," which also got in my way of being with my clients (Report 10).*

When they attend to their reflective movements and their inner conversations, the *idea that we position each other in our interactions* seemed useful to participants. The understanding of language as action led them to question the forms of life and social expectations that are part of processes of meaning making.

Example: *As a teacher, a mother, a daughter, a citizen... The way these positions are taught, and they bring prescriptions, behavior expectations... And, this course makes me realize these are positions. And, that I get to choose how to be in this position, and how I can make different invitations, with different questions, to be in this position in a different way, or even to move out of this position. The questions we ask position us and other people in relationship (Report 3).*

Students understand themselves as co-responsible for the creation and maintenance of dialogical processes, as well as for the content and implications of the conversations that they are part of. This realization leads them to a *critical stance towards their own work*, which is an invitation to continually revise which understandings get constructed as byproducts of their ways of interaction, and how these constructions influence the course of the interactions themselves. Example: *"Thinking about these issues has been helping me to constantly rethink my place and my choices as a therapist, always trying to think about the effects of what I do, say, propose, etc."* (Report 7).

Moreover, *the focus on conversational process*, as a way of being in relationship, was prevalent in students' reports. This focus seems to have fostered attention and care towards their own contributions to an evolving conversation, particularly where the *effects* of these conversations are concerned. This is how one participant describes this implication:

There is always this question in my mind: 'what are the effects of the discourse being used?' when I talk about cases with the rest of my team. The question 'What are the effects of this in the conversation?' is also present in a great part of my time (Report 8).

Social Constructionism as Conversational Resources

The last form of understanding social constructionism describes it as conversational resources. Students understand that social constructionism contributes with their repertoire of possible conversations and resources for action. This form of understanding, they report, creates three implications for their lives.

First, understanding social constructionism as a way of being in conversation, and not as a technique to be applied, has contributed for students to realize that *various discourses are potentially useful for their conversations*. Here, the question of “right or wrong” is replaced by the more generative question of “how might this be useful?”. This is described in Report 3: *“Asking other questions or interacting in different ways create different invitations. Not better, not worse; other possibilities. Possibilities that make interaction flow, or possibilities that create more tensions.”*

Attention to the multiplicity of voices and selves which are present in any given conversation is the second implication of understanding social constructionism as conversational resources. When they learn that discourses are products of culture and relationships, and that the notion of a self is a product of social discourses, participants realize they can use polyvocality as a resource in conversations:

... it motivates me to think about the conversational resources that I use daily in my practice as a psychologist. For instance, “What other ways of talking might I use, so that this narrative of a negligent mother creates space for other versions of this mother, which she talks about in other moments?,” “what questions might I ask to move away from rigid, oppressive legal notions and assumptions so that we can create space for this father to appear as a good father, in a way that is not described in legislation, but that makes sense for him and the people around him?” (Report 9).

A motivation for freedom and new possibilities of action appears as the last implication that comes from understanding social constructionism as conversational resources. Students said that social constructionism invites them to understand that there are always many options for relational engagement, and never one that is uniquely correct. Therefore, they feel motivated to be free and to create new ways of being in relationship. Report 5 talks about this implication:

“I feel like these are practices whose main potential I see are in the ability to create/innovate. When I think about that, the word that comes to mind is freedom, and that takes me to lightness, which is connected to trust and collaboration.”

Concluding Thoughts

Social constructionism is a multifaceted discourse; it is an orientation in relation to knowledge that understands social processes – language and relationships – as the focus of analysis. However, many understandings have been articulated around these notions, and they become richer and more complex as the conversation about them continue. Instead of searching for unity, we take an appreciation for multiplicity as our ethical paradigm (McNamee, 2017). Different understandings create different implications.

In this article, we have explored how the learning of social constructionism – understood in different manners – creates implications for the lives of those who are learning it. In conclusion, we would like to offer four reflections that seem important to us, in relation to what we have described.

First, we go back to the relevancy of our own participation in the construction of our versions of social constructionism with the participants. As teachers in the course, we carried our own personal and professional stories into this educational experience. These stories involve our networks of people, our educational journeys, and our personal preferences. The introductory part of this manuscript makes it clear that we have constructed the course based on an understanding of social constructionism first as a meta-theory. It is clear in the reports of the students, shown in our analysis, that this choice has somehow resonated for them as a productive version of this knowledge.

However, we also recognize that the ideas of social constructionism as a professional stance and as offering conversational resources, are present in our course as byproducts of understanding it as meta-theory. Differently said: understanding knowledge as a product of social process positions us, as professionals, in a stance that values the co-construction of the realities we participate in. We are active beings in our relationships, and in the construction of specific versions of the world. Less important than techniques, different resources that come from cultural life (which include those associated to social constructionism) may be seen as resources for conversation.

On the one hand, we hope that this explanation, makes our own participation in the construction of our “results” here clear. On the other hand, this explanation also shows how the three ways of understanding social constructionism that have been presented are intimately interconnected. Their separation here is mostly the result of a didactic effort of understanding the materials, which allows us to visualize different implications for the construction of practices and ways of life that result from different understandings of social constructionism. This analytical division can favor a reflection on how our didactic choices create implications for students’ lives. What do we want to teach, how do we do it, and what implications do we participate in creating when we do so?

In this context, we would like to point to how the use of some “social constructionist phrases” – jargon that we have heard in our years in contact with the subject – have also impacted the participants’ learning process in a positive way. Phrases like “the problem is the problem; the person is the person,” “how can we go on together?” “trust the process,” and “let’s not be too quick to understand” seem to offer useful reminders for those who are studying social construction. These reminders quickly reconnect students to social constructionist ideas in the context of their lives and prepare them to be in their relationships in sensible ways.

Finally, we understand that it is possible to teach social constructionism within a critical and reflective orientation regarding knowledge making. Instead of simply “deconstructing” concepts, this orientation offers many powerful practical alternatives that create implications for our ways of being in the world. There is no need for any universal recipe book. When we focus on the process of constructing knowledge and the associated implications, an infinity of complex and useful possibilities for action to open up in front of us.

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Author Note

Pedro Pablo Sampaio Martins, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Uberlândia, MG, Brazil
pedropablomartins@gmail.com

Marina Arantes
Clinical Psychologist, Verso: Mediação de Conflitos, Uberlândia, MG, Brazil
marina.arantes.s@gmail.com

¹ The term “participants” will be used for all people attending the course.