

# **Social Constructionism: A Unifying Metaperspective for Social Work**

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

The shift of social work training programs from the practicing agency to the academic institution in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created defining shock waves within the profession that still resonate today. This move created both a physical and theoretical fissure between what is taught in the academy and what is practiced in the field.

The current major debate in the field is whether social work should adopt an evidence-based practice (EBP) metaperspective. This debate has ignited the ideological divide between social work researchers and practitioners (Karger, 1983, 1999; Raw, 1998; Reamer, 1999; Sheldon, 2001; Web, 2001; Witkin, 1991, 1992, 1996, 1998). Proponents of EBP cite the adoption of evidence-based practice by the field of psychology and the recent adoption by the National Institute of Health (NIH) of the Randomized Control Trial model (RCT), to bolster claims that social work should adopt EBP on a wide scale. Opponents of the EBP movement focus on the concern that it is a further adoption of a positivist paradigm into a field dedicated to diversity, relationships and communities. They maintain that positivist notions of linear causality do not capture the complexities of life and are, at worst, culturally oppressive. EBP advocates have responded with the question: If not positivism and EBP then what (Thyer & Myers, 1998)?

## **Research Background: Discussion and Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore a response to the EBP question through discussions with leading social constructionists from around the globe. The research focuses on those academics, practitioners, and academic/practitioners who seek to build a unifying bridge between the academy and practice with social constructionism as the foundation. It explores, through qualitative interviews and analyses, what thirteen social constructionist scholars and practitioners from four countries believe social work practice education should entail and how education from a social constructionist framework could influence the field and the client-social worker relationship. Study participants include Harlene Anderson (US), Ruth Dean (US), Jan Fook (AU), Jill Freedman (US), Ken Gergen (US), Ann Hartman (US), Allen Irving (CA), Joan Laird (US), Steven Madigan

(CA), Nigel Parton (UK), Susan Robbins (US), Dennis Saleebey (US), and Stanley Witkin (US). The ensuing theory of the application of social constructionism to social work practice education and its potential influence on clients, communities, and the profession may provide an alternative path for social work that would honor the diversity of ideas and constructed ways-of-being, while also being effective and socially just.

Social constructionism is a philosophical approach maintaining that reality is uniquely experienced, interpreted, and created by individuals in relationships (Gergen, 1999). Truth, from this perspective, is not something that is located outside of the observer that can be discovered through techniques of variable control aimed at enhancing the clarity of vision. Rather, truth is constructed and reified through social negotiation. Truth is not discovered outside of the context of which it is a part (Gergen, 1991; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1989). This premise affords an understanding of reality as a multi-verse rather than a uni-verse because events, ideas, stories, experiences, may have multiple negotiated interpretations (Gergen, 1991, 1996, 1999).

## Methodology

In keeping with the social constructionist underpinnings of the study, a qualitative approach that honors the negotiation of meaning in relationships and the social construction of knowledge in cultural context was sought. After a thorough examination of the literature it was decided to utilize the following approaches for the project. The primary approach for interviewing was the reflective dyadic approach (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Gubruim & Holstein, 1997). The primary approach for analysis was constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000).

After themes were constructed, four prominent critical perspectives were utilized to discuss application in social work. These included: (a) Evidence-based Positivism (Gambrill, 2005, Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002; Sheldon, 2001; Thyer & Myers, 1999), (b) Witkin & Gottschalk's (1988) proposed alternative criteria for theory evaluation, (c) Hare-Mustin's discussion of feminist based ethical practice (1994), and (d) the Social Work Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999).

## The Dialogical Creation of Meaning: Interview and Analysis

An unstructured interview using reflective dyadic interviewing took place with each participant for approximately one hour. The question discussed was: **What value, if any, do you see in social constructionist ideas informing the education of social work practitioners?** During the course of the interviews the following areas were explored: (a) What skills, values, and beliefs should be taught in a social constructionist classroom? (b) How would they be taught? (c) How would a shift to a social constructionist paradigm influence the practices of future social workers? (d) How would these social workers influence their communities? (e) Would the profession itself change, and if so, how?

Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed and coded using the constant comparison method. This circular process is consistent with constructionist grounded methodology (Charmaz, 2000). The process of coding and analysis in constructive grounded theory is unguarded and free-flowing. Data collection, coding, memoing, and

sorting by theme (modified axial coding), was a circular process involving constant comparison, self-reflection, and a learning stance (Figure 1). Initial hypotheses were neither formed, nor their validation sought, rather, a space of possibility was opened where ideas and thoughts could reside without the necessity of being fit together in a quick manner or organized by a preconceived category. In constructivist research, interpretations change and move, multiple interpretations may be possible. Theory was constructed from this space of open interpretation as data were systematically collected, coded, and compared (Charmaz, 2000). Briefly, the process proceeded in the following manner: (1) Open coding was used to analyze transcripts. (2) Open coding was performed again to determine if codes remained consistent or if other ideas appeared. (3) Transcripts were coded until the point of saturation (no new codes constructed). (4) Coded transcripts were compared and coded to each other to the point of saturation. (5) Codes were then organized into themes and were compared to the point of saturation (no new themes constructed). (6) Themes were tested and refined by returning to the transcripts and considering supportive and unsupportive cases (negative case analysis). Finally, (7), constructed themes and applications were organized into frameworks.

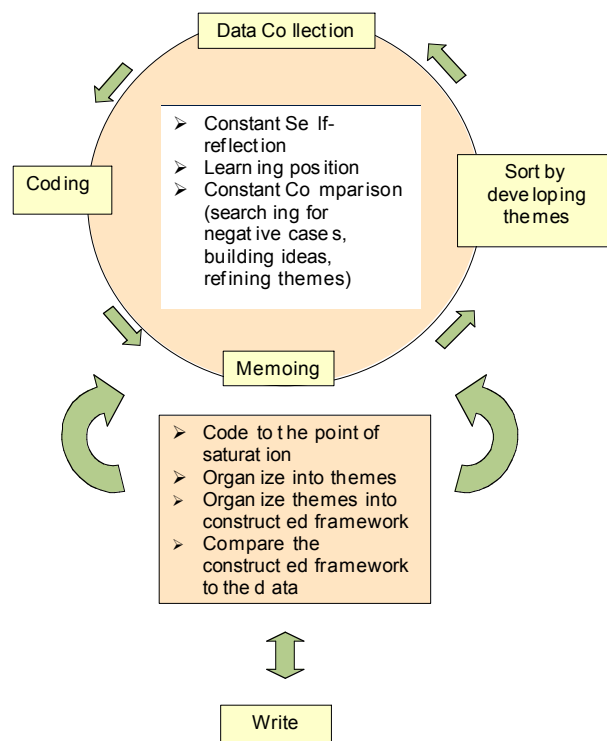


Figure 1: Constructivist grounded theory.

## **Thematic Results**

The results of constructivist qualitative data analysis revealed a main philosophical framework for constructionist social work practice and six applications of this framework in social work practice education (Figure 2). The six curriculum applications are reviewed here: (a) the eclectic-hybrid application, (b) the eclectic-collaborative application, (c) the process application, (d) the political practice application, (e) the political practice and institutional deconstruction application, and (f) the community polyvocal partnership application. In addition to these six applications of the constructionist philosophical framework, an application of the philosophical framework for teaching social work practice was constructed.

### **The Eclectic-Hybrid Social Constructionist Application**

The eclectic-hybrid position focuses on the instruction of practice theories as evolving from philosophical thought. The application espouses that students should understand basic concepts of the philosophy of science, as well as multiple theories and models of practice. Social constructionism is used in this approach as a guide to help students deconstruct underlying

clinical philosophies, theories, and practice models, as well as to situate them in historical context. It is considered a positivist, social constructionist hybrid because the use of these models is governed, in part, by quantitative evidence of effectiveness. The application differs from EBP in that if a problem categorization is used, such as diagnosis, a literature review is conducted to determine the evidence to support the existence of the diagnosis, as well as the reliability and validity of the process of diagnosing.

*Figure 2: Six applications of a philosophical constructionist framework to social work practice education.*

### **The Eclectic-Collaborative Social Constructionist Application**

The eclectic-collaborative application is based on the idea that differing modalities are taught as social constructions and the use of those modalities in practice is governed by a collaborative decision between the client and the social worker. The major distinction between the eclectic-collaborative model application and the hybrid application above is that this application puts more emphasis on the therapist's ability to work with the client in ways that are collaboratively decided rather than empirically driven.

### **The Process Social Constructionist Application**

The process application espouses the teaching of relational process over theory. The approach allows space for students to experience the act of being a part of a helping relationship and to gradually develop their own theories of practice from their interactions and reflections. Students come to learn the process of helping in personal ways as they are gradually invited into more intense forms of experience. These experiences begin with simply sitting with another, then moving to helpful discussion, shadowing other practitioners, practicing in conjunction with other therapists, and practicing with clients. After these experiences students are gradually moved to literature that may support and add to their burgeoning practice approaches.

### **The Political Practice Social Constructionist Application**

The political practice approach espouses that curriculum should focus on constructionist informed modalities which recognize the influence of dominant culture on individuals' experiences of themselves, both singularly and in relationships. Specifically, the approach seeks to instruct students in practice modalities that challenge naturalistic accounts of human nature and the traditional belief that the self is a collection of traits and variables. Instead, this approach places great emphasis on self as a culturally influenced construction. The approach is political in that problems are not viewed as residing within people but as existing in relational space. This relational space represents the ways in which people can interact and co-construct meaning with others. Cultural and family discourse can operate in restricting ways on the meanings that can develop in relational space. This restriction of meaning development may influence the possibilities of co-construction and identity formation. From this perspective, individuals who are experiencing problems may be struggling against discourses which are operating in limiting ways, influencing their ability to co-construct the meaning of the events in their lives. This limitation effectively shuts off life possibilities and may recruit individuals, families, and communities into problem-saturated narratives, discourses of negativity that influence past, present, and future life understandings. In this application clinical approaches should be taught which do not pathologize clients but assist them to recognize their strengths and to construct a new understanding of themselves free from a problematic discourse.

### **The Political Practice and Institution Deconstruction Social Constructionist Application**

The political practice and institution deconstruction application is similar to the political practice approach with clients, but seeks also to intervene at the institutional level by challenging traditional places of knowledge. This approach seeks a more polyvocal understanding of the world and encourages the recognition of indigenous, local, community knowledge. The goal is to assist clients to unearth oppressive discourses in the therapeutic contexts and to challenge the institutions that serve to reify these discourses. The academy in particular is put into question and is pushed to have a greater recognition of the community and to engage students and community members in partnership. Through this shifting of the source of knowledge from the academy exclusively, to the community in partnership, it is hoped that a more polyvocal society can be created. This application, like the political approach, questions the traditional mental health discourse and its insistence on placing the problem within the person. This approach goes further and begins to make claims that social workers, including academics, who do not address the cultural sources of problems are acting in oppressive and unethical ways.

### **The Community Polyvocal Partnership Social Constructionist Application**

The community polyvocal partnership application is the broadest application of social constructionist theory and seeks to move the place of learning and helping to the community itself. This application deconstructs the notion of the academy as the place of

learning, questions the traditional concept of practice recognizing it as a mechanistic vestige of the Enlightenment, and harkens back to Jane Addams by considering the place of helping to be in collaboration with the community itself. The approach invites community and student to come together in collaborative learning to create a stronger voiced community. Community helping, process, and learning all occur together through the act of doing. This collaborative community work has most recently taken place in the area of the visual arts and community activist theater.

### **Utility for Social Work Practice: Loosening Tied Ends**

The study may benefit the field of social work by offering alternative perspectives through which social work can evolve, and by opening further dialogue about the future direction of social work practice and practice education. This discussion is important and timely given the ongoing debates in the field regarding these issues. I encourage future discussion, thoughts, and ideas.

With that said, conclusions seek to tie ends together, to wrap-up, to make tidy. This tradition is based on Enlightenment discourse which invites us to structure projects along the line of story plots, with introduction, middle, and end. I hesitate to be seduced into this framework because conclusions may give the illusion of closing off possibilities and this research is about expanding perceptions and honoring the diversity of experience. The study represents ongoing discourse and movement in the field, thus a conclusion could be viewed as antithetical. To that end, reflective questions are offered which invite further thought and discussion. I would ask that you consider your position in the conversation that is social work. What assumptions about truth, diversity, practice, outcomes, might you be bringing into the conversation that may shape social work in relation to you? Do you find yourself privileging the voices of some over the voices of others? If so, on what grounds are you doing this? Are you engaged in ways that honor diversity? How is your understanding and experience of social work influenced by assumptions and expectations? How do these expectations and assumptions influence your relationships with clients, colleagues, and fellow students? Where do these assumptions and expectations come from and whose interest do they serve?

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