Constructivism and the Inescapability of Moral Choices: A Response to Raskin and

Debany

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Abstract

In their paper on ethics, Raskin and Debany (in press) raise a number of important issues that merit discussion and that have implications for a constructivist stance on ethics, an issue that has dogged constructivist and social constructionist theory, and that has in the past been the focus of a good deal of debate. In my response to their paper, I will focus on two issues before going on to consider what these imply for a constructivist ethics. The first is the status of 'reality'; drawing on the work of French philosophers, Discursive Psychology and Symbolic Interactionism, I will argue that the constructivist conception of reality has been widely misunderstood and will outline what I regard as a defensible construction of 'reality'. The second issue concerns the relationship between the individual and the social world; drawing again on earlier work in micro-sociology I will argue that the 'constructed' individual must be understood as emerging from the social realm rather than pre-existing it and argue for Personal Construct Psychology as a candidate for filling the subjectivity 'gap' in social constructionism. Finally, I will use these conceptualizations of reality and the person to argue for an ethical stance of 'radical doubt' for constructivism.

In their paper, Raskin and Debany (in press) raise several issues that I would like to address here, especially concerning two questions that have an important bearing on the central concern of their paper- the status of ethics in constructivism. The first question concerns the viability of constructivism and social constructionism (here considered under the single rubric of "constructivism") as epistemological approaches that can have a meaningful conceptualization of "reality," and the second question concerns the relationship between the individual and the social world. I will address each of these in turn, before going on to discuss what I think can be concluded about the status of ethics.

What is "Real"?

The authors critique the view that constructivists are "antirealist," i.e., "that they reject the existence of an external, independent reality or deny that statements about such a reality can be judged true or false" (add citation here). It seems to me that the case for this "antirealist" argument rests on a confounding of, and failure to distinguish between, a number of dichotomies or constructs which have "reality" as one pole (Burr, 1998):

- reality (truth) vs. falsehood

- reality (materiality) vs. illusion

- reality (essence) vs. construction

By placing "construction" at the opposite pole to "reality," constructions become aligned with falsehood and illusion; to say that something is constructed comes to imply that it is an illusion or an imperfect representation of the "real" world- a "mere" construction. Constructivists then become characterized as head-in-the-sand deniers of

reality, unprepared to face its implications, preferring their own fictitious version of the

world. Drawing on the work of Derrida (1976), I would like to deconstruct this

dichotomy. Derrida pointed out that such either/or dichotomies inevitably devalue one

pole and argued for replacing these with "both/and." I would like to replace the

either/or dichotomy of "real vs. construction" with "real AND constructed." In many

contexts, we have no difficulty in applying such an idea; a cathedral is undoubtedly a

construction, but is nevertheless regarded as "real." There is no argument with the

suggestion that the stones and mortar from which it was constructed could have been

used to create a very different (and equally real) structure. There is nothing about the

building materials that mean a cathedral was the inevitable and only possible outcome

of the construction process. However, once it comes into existence a cathedral may

have an enormous impact upon human physical, psychological, and social being.

The sociologist W.I Thomas recognized the power of the "definition of the

situation," which came to be a key concept in Symbolic Interactionism: 'if men [sic]

define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas, 1928,

p. 571-572). Although the examples that are frequently used to illustrate this are often

those of rumor and self-fulfilling prophesy, Thomas was at pains to point out that the

nature of any objective "reality" that might lie beyond people's definition of the

situation is irrelevant—it is our constructions of events that guide our conduct. Material

reality is the battleground upon which conflicts between reality and constructions are

often fought. How can constructivists deny the evidence of their own eyes or other

senses? Surely one cannot deny that the computer at which I now sit exists and is real?

Or the trees and other plants I'm fortunate enough to see from my window? Again, such

arguments rest on a misconception of what constructivism is claiming. For human

beings, the existence of materiality is an unavoidable "fact." Our physical properties and

requirements as animals pull us strongly towards producing material distinctions such as hard vs. soft, edible vs. inedible, warm vs. cold and so on. But these distinctions are inevitably products of our own human condition rather than inherent qualities of the material world. Would such distinctions be of any relevance to the microbe, which undoubtedly lives in the same world? I agree with Raskin and Debany's (in press) argument for "structure determinism." There cannot be a single world as it "really" is when this would entail choosing between the world as the human perceptual system perceives it and the world as it is encountered by the spider, the bacterium, or the amoeba. Some constructions of the material world are just not available to us, though they would be if we had a radically different perceptual system. And it is worth remembering that even the "hard" sciences do not find it problematic for competing versions of material reality to co-exist, such as when light is sometimes best thought of as a wave and at others as a particle, as noted by Butt (2008, p. 136).

Both Symbolic Interactionism (which I return to below) and Social Constructionism regard language as fundamental to our constructions of reality. The now classic paper, "Death and Furniture: The rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism" (Edwards, Ashmore and Potter, 1995), convincingly makes the point that, as soon as the material world enters discourse it becomes transformed and it is impossible for us to think about or encounter it some hypothetical "objective" state. And there is arguably little or nothing in human experience that could be said to lie outside of discourse. Through my window I see a garden wall, but as soon as I begin to interrogate just what this "is" I become caught up in an infinite regress of language, cultural meanings and features of the human condition. It is only a "wall" by virtue of its capacity to retain or keep out the desired or the unwanted—human concerns. It is a "wall" only by virtue of the builder's skill, rendering it more than "a pile

of rubble" by common cultural criteria. The "stones" from which it is built are alternatively construed not as stones but the residue of the activities of millions of ancient sea creatures. It is allowed to be a "wall" through the operation of countless social and cultural norms and expectations.

I agree that the representation of the constructivist as a person who believes he or she can change "reality" at will is a straw figure. It is a misconception to say that constructivists deny the existence of a material world or that they propose we can change "reality" just by thinking differently. Using the example in Raskin and Delaney's paper, we can't change our partner's behavior by saying that it didn't happen, but we can change our understanding of what it means to be "unfaithful," and reconstrue their behavior. Constructionist therapy aims to enable people to examine the social constructions (e.g., of family, gender, sexuality) that they are caught up in. This does not mean that they can resolve their problems simply by re-thinking these things. But it does mean they may develop a different conception of where the problem lies (e.g., in the expectations placed upon them, or the structure of 'normal' family life, rather than a personality deficit within themselves).

The Individual and the Social World

Raskin and Debany (in press) characterize PCP as providing a counterweight to social constructionism's view of discourses as free-standing entities that produce the shared meanings or "truths" that we collectively create. Such a social constructionist position appears to give all the constructive power to discourses, leaving the person as a product rather than an agent. PCP, they argue, with its focus upon the private and idiosyncratic creation of personal meanings, creates a necessary corrective to this view. However, I think this tension arises from a long-standing false dichotomy between the

individual and society that mainstream psychology simply wasn't interested in and that

social constructionism merely perpetuated, mapping onto a further false dichotomy of

freedom (individual free will and agency) vs. determinism (we are determined by social

processes and structures and simply live under the illusion of free will). Adopting either

ends of these dichotomies does not enable us to properly understand human experience

and behavior, and if we were to characterize them as unhelpful constructs the task

would be to find an alternative construction that is orthogonal to them.

Social constructionism has in the past made an almost knee-jerk reaction against

any attempts to re-introduce the psychology of the individual into this most social of

theories. Such attempts were seen as inevitably representing a back slide into the

essentialism that social constructionists were trying to escape, but I think this was

mistaken. I have always held that there is an important and necessary place for a

psychology of the individual in social constructionism, and social constructionist

thinkers have more recently felt the need to theorize human subjectivity within a social

constructionist framework. I see this as beginning with the work of Davies and Harré

(1990/2001) on "positioning," which Harré and others subsequently more thoroughly

developed (Harré & van Langenhove,1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), whereby

people are seen as simultaneously positioned within discourses and agentically

positioning themselves and others, thereby negotiating viable identities for themselves.

But more recently there have additionally been sustained attempts to re-theorize

individual subjectivity and, especially, affect, in ways that do not essentialize experience

and which render it compatible with a social constructionist approach, even attempting

to assimilate neuroscience within this more holistic way of thinking (Cromby, 2004,

2007; Cromby, Newton, & Willliams, 2011; Wetherell, 2012).

In my view, the perceived tensions between social constructionism and individual psychology, especially constructivist approaches, that have made it difficult to synthesize social constructionism with theories such as PCP have been more imagined (or even desired) than real, and I have recently argued for PCP being positioned well to fill the subjectivity space within social constructionism (Burr, 2015). The focus of convenience of PCP was the individual and psychotherapy, and in the 1950s it represented an important challenge to the assumptions of the prevailing psychologies and an assertion of the need to appreciate and understand the perspectives and subjective meanings of persons. But this does not mean that it is incompatible with social constructionist theory.

All this may of course be of more interest to social constructionists, who are recognizing the psychological gulf in their theory. But constructivists, more so than other mainstream psychologists, also see the need to set human meaning-making within its social context and as someone who sees great potential in both PCP and social constructionism, I am especially keen to see these approaches married. Underlying my conviction that they can and should form extensions of each other is a model of the relationship between the individual and society that owes much to the work of the Symbolic Interactionists, and especially Mead (1934).

I challenge the idea that personal constructions emerge prior to social interaction, and that knowledge is a personal and private construction. This stance leads to the conclusion that sociality is a matter of feeling our way into other's minds to try to find something in common. Raskin and Debany (in press, p. TBD) thus argue that "The experience of a shared discourse emerges from sociality and the establishment of an intersubjective reality." I agree with Mead that society does not emerge from the

activities and thought processes of individuals, but the reverse. Mead's view of the origins of self and mind is that our interactions with others, from our earliest days, leads to our adopting the perspective of the "generalized other." This is the internalized perceptions, attitudes, norms and values of the culture and sub-cultures into which we are born. In this view, we are all microcosms of our native societies, but colored by our own personal history through our unique human reflective capacities. Unlike other animals, we have the capacity to reflect upon our experience and conduct and make meaning with it. I agree with Raskin and Debany (in press) that "people are active meaning-makers"—and perhaps this is our only fundamental attribute, the only quality we can claim as "human nature." According to Mead (1934), our arguably unique ability to reflect is a capacity to effectively escape the "here and now," to imagine a state of affairs different from "here" and different from "now," to imagine what might be happening in other places distanced from our immediate physical location and to imagine what could happen in a possible future, if only minutes away.

So, I share with the Symbolic Interactionists the view that the self emerges from the social realm, rather than begin with the assumption of a pre-existing individual. This means that there is no need to explain how we come to share constructs with others in our culture (though we do not necessarily use them in the same way). I see sociality as achieved through the operation of another Meadian concept, "taking the role of the other." During our mundane interactions with others, our capacity to transcend our own location in time and place, to imaginatively inhabit alternative psychological spaces, enables us to step in and out of our own perspective and to adopt that of the other, to imagine the world and ourselves as seen through their eyes.

I agree with Raskin and Debany (in press) that criticisms of social constructionism, and of the notion of discourse in particular, are sometimes not well founded. There is a simplistic misconception of what discourses are. Discourses, as envisioned by Foucault (1972), are not "just language" or symbolic; they are manifested in social and power relations (for example, doctor/patient, teacher/student) and in the material world (in the design and furnishing of hospitals, prisons, and schools), creating possibilities and limitations on action and interaction, and for human subjectivity. Discourses are therefore simultaneously symbolic, active, and material. In discussing Glasersfeld (1995), Raskin and Debany (in press, p. TBD) note, "constructivist approaches stress the viability of knowledge, or how well it works," but the social constructionist additionally asks "works for whom?" For the social constructionist, knowledge is always tied to power because discourses or constructions of the world often benefit some and marginalize others, facilitate or limit us.

Ethics in a Socially Constructed World

As a constructivist and a personal construct theorist, I must regard all human beings as fellow constructivists, and so the arguments that follow apply to humans in general and not just those social scientists and philosophers who explicitly adopt a constructivist theoretical stance. I agree with Raskin and Debany (in press) that adopting a constructivist (or constructionist) approach does not mean "anything goes" (all moral choices are equally justified), nor does it result in the inability to make moral choices. I also agree that the reverse is true- we are compelled to make such choices. The availability of multiple alternative constructions requires rather than pre-empts moral reasoning.

The societies and subcultures we inhabit and which bring us into being as psycho-social entities provide a multitude of constructs that we cannot avoid applying to ourselves and others; they are already part of us. We cannot simply refuse to engage with "core" social constructs such as masculine vs. feminine or able-bodied vs. disabled—we must position ourselves in relation to them in some way. And some of those constructs are ethical ones concerning loyalty, trust, honesty and the balance between self-preservation and the good of others, as illustrated in Raskin and Debany's (in press) example of the criminal. Like all the other constructs we inherit from our parent culture, we must engage with ethical constructs and position ourselves in relation to them.

Raskin and Debany (in press) introduce the concept of "construing epistemologically," an idea that seems to broadly map onto that of reflexivity, in the Meadian sense outlined above. Such reflexivity is prompted when we are exposed to alternative constructions of events (arguably, the purpose of education). The capacity for abstract thought, for considering "what might be," both provides the foundation for and insists upon the articulation of alternative constructions. Alternative constructions enable and require us to make moral choices. For example, how should we treat a "bully"? Are bullies perpetrators and those they bully "victims"? So perhaps it would be right to punish bullies? Or perhaps bullies act as they do because they feel vulnerable or have mental health difficulties? What if a "bully" is in the military and someone who helps others to "toughen up" to enable them to do their jobs? Is it right to punish such a "bully"? The availability of alternative constructions faces us with the difficult but necessary task of properly assessing our possible ethical choices. Arguments for a single and incontestable reality (especially a social reality) that is "true" and renders other truth claims "false" is dangerous. Kelly was adamant that once we pre-empt alternative

constructions and forget that construing is acting "as if," we immediately shut down our future possibilities. But constructive alternativism means that constructions and the moral choices that arise from them need to be argued for. The alternative is "certainty" and the road to oppression, where there is only one possible truth and those who challenge it must be forced to agree or be eliminated. It is vital that we live in "radical doubt"; the absence of self-doubt is arrogance and oppression, and a form of Kellyan "hostility." Raskin and Debany (in press) write about some people's ethical construct systems being rigid, and this rigidity arguably arises from the "hostile" idea that there is a single truth.

All societies have a moral code—not of course the same one—but nevertheless a set of principles that lay down what is thought to be valuable for all people, worth sacrificing for, worth facing difficult choices for. So right vs. wrong appears to be a universal construct and one that, other than in small children, is not identical with what "would benefit me personally." This does not mean that people are never motivated by and choose self-advancement over benefits to others but no one can escape the requirement to make moral choices. The constructivist is not faced with an inability to decide what is right in principle, any more than anyone else. But considering alternative constructions means that what is "right" to do may be different under one construction rather than another. As constructivists, we can ask the question (but not necessarily come to a quick or easy answer), "under which construction of events do people have the greatest potential to lead fulfilling lives?"

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