

Subject	PSYCHOLOGY
Paper No and Title	Paper No 3: Qualitative Methods
Module No and Title	Module No 3: Social Constructionism
Module Tag	PSY_P3_M3

Principal Investigator	Co-Principal Investigator	Co- Principal Investigator
Prof N.K.Chadha Head and Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Delhi	Dr Jaswinder Singh (Principal) and Dr.H.V.Jhamb, (Associate professor) SGTB Khalsa College University of Delhi	Dr Vimal Rarh Assistant Professor, Department of Chemistry, Deputy Director, Center For E Learning, SGTB Khalsa College, University of Delhi <i>Specialised in : e-Learning and Educational Technologies</i>
Paper Coordinator	Author	Reviewer
Dr. Mitu Rohatgi Assistant Professor Department of Psychology Indraprastha College for Women University of Delhi	Dr. Mitu Rohatgi Assistant Professor Department of Psychology Indraprastha College for Women University of Delhi	Prof P.C. Joshi Department of Anthropology University of Delhi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Learning Outcomes
2. Introduction
3. Paradigms in Qualitative Research
 - 3.1 Qualitative Research
 - 3.2 Paradigms and Methodologies
 - 3.2.1 Positivist Paradigm
 - 3.2.2 Critical Paradigm
 - 3.2.3 Interpretive Paradigm – Social Constructionism
4. Development of Social Constructionism
 - 4.1 Development of Social Constructionism
 - 4.1.1 Scientific Claims of Psychology
 - 4.1.2 Emergence of Paradigms
 - 4.1.3 Issues in Scientism of Psychology
5. Social Constructionism
 - 5.1 Social Constructionism – The New Paradigm
 - 5.1.1 Social Constructionism – Difference from Mainstream Psychology
 - 5.1.2 Criticisms of Social Constructionism
 - 5.2 Social Constructionism – Implications in India
 5. Summary

PSYCHOLOGY
Paper No 3: Qualitative Methods
Module No 3: Social Constructionism

1. Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you shall be able to

- Identify different paradigms in psychology
- Learn social constructionism – an alternate paradigm in psychology
- Know the development of Social Constructionism
- Evaluate Social Constructionism
- Analyze the social constructionist school in Indian context

2. Introduction

Social Constructionism is a relatively new addition to psychology as a school of thought as well as a research paradigm. Unlike the conventional schools of psychology that attempts to explain human behavior in an individualistic perspective, Social constructionists focus on the social processes and daily interactions through which people give meaning to the world around them as well to their experiences. According to Social Constructionism, knowledge is not an external and objective reality with universal laws that could be discovered. Instead, it is a human creation influenced by the social, historical as well as cultural contexts around people. Social Constructionism has great significance in modern world and it values the marginalized fields within psychology. This module provides a general introduction to paradigms in psychology, differentiating social constructionism from others. It briefly discusses the history of Social Constructionism, evaluate the paradigm in detail with its pros and cons, and finally provides its implications in modern Indian context.

3. Paradigms in Qualitative Research

3.1 Qualitative Research

In order to create a holistic understanding, it is necessary to take various dimensions such as biological, psychological, social, cultural, historical, political etc. into consideration. Therefore, restricting the research process to a single paradigm of knowledge will limit the quality of the results produced and consequently, the applicability of that knowledge in real life. Thus, research needs to bring together various perspectives and methodologies to generate informative as well as explanatory knowledge. Qualitative research attempts to find answers to questions regarding the meaning and experiences of human lives, without using statistical techniques or quantified data. Various perspectives are used in qualitative research.

3.2 Paradigms and Methodologies

According to Thomas Kuhn, at each point in history, social researchers choose different paradigms for research. A paradigm is a set of interconnected ideas, notions, beliefs and norms that guide research process. Each paradigm has its own ways of perceiving the world. Each paradigm presents its own set of assumptions regarding how to go about the process of data collection and data analysis, methods of doing research and approaches to observe, measure and understand behavior. The paradigms consist of core ideas, theoretical frameworks and research methods. At each point in time, researchers choose to follow one paradigm of research, until the paradigm is questioned and is replaced by another due to an intellectual shift in the community. Thus, there exist multiple paradigms to social research.

Many researchers disagree with the notion of having multiple paradigms and perspectives to research with the argument that it hinders the growth of knowledge. According to them, social researchers should come under a single paradigm of research and only this will bring consensus among the researches done globally. In contrast, those who support the view of having multiple paradigms identifies its limitations such as creating confusion regarding in understanding of the knowledge produced and difficulty in communication across researchers. Despite these issues, the usage of multiple paradigms bring about information from various perspectives that complement each other. According to this view, no single perspective is the best in itself, but the diversity that multiple perspectives bring about is best for research purposes.

Usually, social researchers adhere to any one paradigms of their choice. However they also acknowledge that other paradigms of research are important as well. The adherants might choose different research techniques within that paradigm, but not from outside that paradigm.

There are three major paradigms that guide contemporary social research. They are – Positivist/ empirico – analytical Paradigm, Interpretive Paradigm and Critical Paradigm. The Social constructionist perspective comes under the interpretive paradigms. The three paradigms are briefly described as following.

3.2.1 Positivist Paradigm

Positivist paradigm is one of the most popular as well as widely practiced approaches in psychology. Major researches under positivist paradigms are quantitative studies. Positivist approach focuses on research methods such as experiments, surveys or use of existing statistical data. These studies make use of statistical techniques and principles to establish causal explanations to understand social events i.e. hard facts. According to them, social reality is made up of objective and observable facts and information that already exist and can be brought out using objective measures. Two assumptions most important to positivist theorists are Replication and Nomothetic. Positivist researches require that if the research is repeated under similar conditions, identical results should be produced. They believe in the objectivity in research methodology and precise measurements. Thus, different independent researchers getting same result for a study indicates higher scientific accuracy. The nomothetic assumption of positivist approach leads to creating generalized laws and principles that can explain phenomena in a universal nature. The researches conducted to discover natural laws that help to predict and control events. They use logical deduction to create theories that explain events in concrete situations which can be empirically tested.

The positivist approach regards human beings as controlled by the external forces and selfish, as having no contribution to make from their own free will. The researcher's opinion is more valued than the participants'. Positivist approach considers common sense as different from science, thus branding social research as a value free process. Even ethics are external to the research process, simply providing guidelines to follow. Natural sciences follow positivist approach for research. In psychology, the Behaviorist school has applied the positivist principles to the basic assumptions of their philosophical orientation as well as research.

3.2.2 Critical Paradigm

The critical perspective focuses on action oriented research. According to them, knowledge is created to be used for creating advances in human life through social change. The critical perspective considers research as a value based process, thus involved in issues of political and moral domain, social justice as well as empowerment of common man and the marginalized sections of the society. The schools in psychology that follows critical perspective are Feminism and Psycho analysis.

According to Critical approach, Social reality is multi layered. The surface layers consists of myths and illusions created by the social systems and conditions that restrain humanity. These are not the true nature of human beings. The real objective nature of humanity lies within the deeper layers of social reality. Therefore, the purpose of social research is to uncover the hidden social structures and forces that evolved over a long periods, under the influence of various historical contexts. However, the perspective does not undervalue the surface reality. It is acknowledged that the surface reality influences the construction of life. The ultimate test of the knowledge created out of such action researches are *Praxis*. It refers to the extent to which the findings were able to bring together theory and action. Abstract theories and understandings are a matter of concern with all paradigms. However, when other approaches combine the theories with empirical evidences, critical perspective see how well it synchronize with concrete real life applications.

Critical perspective sees human beings as creative and adaptive beings, which possess great potentials within them, but are restrained by various social systems and civilization as a whole. The awareness brought out from the research findings are expected to help the people break free of these traps, realize their true potential and create a better life for themselves. The researches aim towards enabling the stakeholders involved in the research process to understand their own experiences in a historical context and improve their worlds. Critical perspective have ethics intrinsic to the research process and for them some values in the research process as well as people are more significant than others. The entire research process itself is considered empowering for all stakeholders involved.

3.2.3 Interpretive Paradigm – Social Constructionism

Interpretive paradigm is one of the approaches commonly adapted in social sciences. In psychology, Humanistic perspective adopted this view, as well as – Social Constructionism. Further details on interpretive paradigm will be made in the context of Social Constructionism.

According to interpretive paradigm, human life is quite unique and it cannot be explained merely using natural sciences. Social sciences and social research are necessary to understand human beings. The constructionist view of reality gives most importance to the interactions between people. The ideas, beliefs and perceptions that result from the interactions between people in a society construct the social reality for them. The social and cultural rules that guide life and social interaction are of ultimate importance here. It is an ongoing process that is fluid, shifting and constantly fluctuating. Objective and hard facts are not of importance here; rather the ideas, symbols, relationships etc. are of value. Many ideas constructed socially are studied in detail, such as religion, language, politics, history, gender, racial-ethnicity etc. the positivist perspective also attempts to study these factors. The factor that differentiates interpretive perspective is that, while positivist researcher studies them as separate from the environment around them, interpretive approach deals with the topic with reference to a social context in which it was evolved in.

Two major features of interpretive paradigm are idiographic and *verstehen*. The paradigm follows an idiographic perspective whereby specific and detailed descriptions are provided for each situation in order to explain the social phenomena. The social constructionism in particular provides specialized and highly detailed descriptions of micro situations to understand human nature and social reality. Common sense is considered to be the major source of knowledge here. *Verstehen* refers to empathetic understanding. The researcher attempts to understand the phenomena from the participants' perspective, from their social settings and backgrounds. The world view of each social group is understood in cognitive, affective as well as behavioral terms.

Interpretive paradigm attempts to find out how social rules are created and applied to life. It views human beings as creative beings constantly engaged in creating meaning to the world

around them. The values held by all social groups are of same importance since all of them are human constructions resulting from various backgrounds. Participants' opinions are given value here and the interaction between the researcher and the participant is important to the research process.

4. Development of Social Constructionism

4.1 Development of Social Constructionism

By the beginning of 20th century, psychology began to emerge as a separate discipline, independent from philosophy. Psychology emerged with a scientific perspective due to various reasons such as

- Humans being a part of the natural world, the study of human beings should also be a natural science.
- Scientism was predominant in 20th century.
- It was important for psychology to show its scientific status in order to justify its influence on social control.

4.1.1 Scientific claims of Psychology

In the beginning, psychology was deeply influenced by the natural sciences' claim for scientism and thus began an interpretation of human beings in a very mechanistic and reductionist manner. Human beings were compared to machines and attempts were made to bring down all behaviors into objective parts. The attitude of psychology in this period has generally been referred to as the physics envy of psychology as it made all attempts to gain the objective status of physical sciences. Physics was the model of psychology to show ultimate level of objectivity, neutrality and impersonality to achieve. Only empirical and objective fact collection and verification gave a discipline the scientific status.

This scientism was adapted into social sciences under the logical positivist paradigm. According to logical positivism only those knowledge that can be verified through objective measures and empirical evidence was meaningful. Thus, all subjects other than science such as arts, literature, history, politics etc. are meaningless. Logical positivism aimed at conducting studies objectively and logically formulating theories that can be generalized globally. This search for universal laws that can explain all behaviors led psychology into choosing a rigid positivist-empiricist paradigm.

However, later it was understood that even science being a human enterprise, complete negligence of human perspective was not productive. Social sciences are significant in understanding the deep and comprehensive world view of human beings.

4.1.2 Emergence of Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn proposed the principle that their History of Science was cyclical in nature. The sequence of stages in the history tended to repeat itself from time to time. Kuhn theorized the emergence of a paradigm and the consequential paradigm shift in the following manner.

During the first stage called the Pre scientific phase, there would be no consensus among different schools regarding which paradigm is to be followed. Each school consider their own choice as superior to others and attempts to solve problems using them. Eventually, one particular paradigm emerges that can deal with most of the issues in question. This becomes pre dominant and most of the scientific community begins to follow this paradigm. The new paradigm would present two factors, i.e. disciplinary matrix, and shared exemplars. Disciplinary matrix is the set of assumptions followed by a particular paradigm that cannot be empirically verified. Shared exemplars are the research methodologies that the paradigm follows. For a while, that particular

paradigm continues its domination until there arose questions that cannot be answered by that particular paradigm. These loosen the restrictions put by the existing paradigm. Gradually it leads to a crisis and confusion and return to the prior phase of chaos until another new paradigm emerges. New supporters as well as old supporters i.e. those who leave behind previous paradigms come under the new paradigm. According to Kuhn, cycle of paradigm shift is a dynamic and ongoing process. The paradigm shift from the traditional and scientific psychology came social constructionism.

4.1.3 Issues in Scientism of Psychology

The study of social behavior attempts to establish causal relationships and general laws regarding the factors that determine one's social behavior. However, Gergen (1980) opinioned that identification of any action is subject to infinite revision. Due to various cultural histories and contexts, those interpretations can change indefinitely, or can even have multiple identifications. Social psychology had always followed empirical and positivist paradigms and thus the connection made between theories and their real life aspect through research was often ambiguous. Various widely researched variables such as personality, attitudes etc. did not have generally agreed definitions. The theories were in such a state that none of them could be completely proven nor falsified using empirical evidence. If the researcher wanted to connect theories with real life applications, he/ she was to come up with own ideas regarding how to go about it. Slowly, the traditional dualistic model in psychology where pure science and applied science were two independent streams began to fade away.

5. Social Constructionism

5.1 Social Constructionism – The New Paradigm

Social constructionism began with the idea of an interpretive social science where an attempt was made to give meaning to one's experiences. The basic assumption behind social constructionism was that reality and knowledge are a result of the social process and are constructed by people themselves. The emergence of social constructionism began in the early 1980s and it came as a theoretical orientation in psychology. No single definition could explain all aspects of social constructionism; thus Gergen (1985) suggested the major characteristics of social constructionism.

- **Importance for marginalized knowledge –**
The mainstream psychology usually focuses on the conventional perspective and the knowledge thus created is often biased. The conventional outlook follows a Universalist, Essentialist, Realist, Individualist and Western perspectives only and other perspectives are neglected while drawing conclusions. In contrast, social constructivism takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge.
- **Historical and cultural specificity**
The main aim of mainstream psychology is to discover general, universal laws that explain and predict human nature; whereas social constructionism looks at the cultural and historical specificity in perceiving the world. Social constructionism views concepts and categories as products of specific socio- economic conditions during each historical periods and no one understanding is giving precedence over the others. It challenges the method of science where one perspective is considered better than others.
- **Knowledge created and maintained through social processes**
Social constructionism assumes that people construct knowledge through various processes involved in the social processes. The daily interactions between people are

of most importance here. As the ideas of people change over time, so will the knowledge. Thus, truth here is not treated as an absolute fact, but as the current accepted ways of understanding the world.

- **Knowledge in coordination with social action and empowerment**

According to social constructionist principles, people construct their own reality. Thus, the same event can create different interpretations and evoke different reactions. Thus, the social action designed to tackle issues or intervention programs aimed at them will have different patterns according to how people of each community define their ideas towards it.

5.1.1 Social Constructionism – Difference from Mainstream Psychology

Social constructionism is a relatively new field in psychology and it differs greatly with the traditional assumptions as well as methodologies followed by psychology.

- Social constructionism is anti-essentialist and it questions the realism of psychology. It does not follow the reductionist and essentialist tendencies of traditional psychology and does not attempt to discover universal laws that govern behavior.
- Historical and cultural specificity of knowledge. It focuses on how people's background influences them in the construction of knowledge; whereas the mainstream psychology attempts to view individual as an independent entity, separate from his/her environment.
- Language as a precondition for thought and a form of action. As the basic assumptions of Social constructionism focus on the daily interactions through which people construct their knowledge and reality, language is an important topic for study.
- Focus on interaction and social process. While other schools of psychology attempt to study only the human being, individually or in groups, social constructionism values the processes that occur between those human beings and try to find out how they influence them back.

Researchers agree upon the significance of understanding how people construct their worlds and the processes involved in it. The shared modes of discourse get special attention in social constructionism. Discourse and consequent action go hand in hand. Discourse is a form of action and not a source of all actions. They both function as outcomes of social practice. For example, in a conversation indicating grief, there would be so many cues involved, such as the facial expression, the tone of voice etc. Together, the cues help to convey the message and invoke appropriate reactions from others involved in the interaction. The studies in these areas have been neglected for a long while and it provides an innovative field of research for the social constructivist.

Social process in itself is a matter of interest for social constructionists. Studies done by Potter and Withrell (1987) showed how social patterns were constructed from conversational interchanges.

Social constructivism, unlike other contemporary schools, shows sensitivity towards other cultures and various historical periods. It focuses on the common sense realities of contemporary cultures and their construction of various concepts. For example, emotions and emotional expressions have been largely explained as a biological process, but the cultural differences found in them support the constructivist ideologies.

While making contributions to historical psychology, constructionism also speaks of the thrown conditions in focal realities. Thrown conditions refer to the multilayered environment that each individual is surrounded by. Researches indicate that even the thrown realities influence the construction of world by people. For example, universal ideas like the definition of childhood, mother's love, self-concept; romantic love etc. differs according to each time and space. As this difference does not indicate any timely changes occurred in the objects of interest, it is inferred that the changes occurred due to environmental influences. This takes the researcher's focus into the social origins of knowledge.

Social constructionism provides an alternative way of constructing experiential world. Researches conducted by constructionists are rarely meant to prove any concepts as true or false. Social and intellectual usefulness of having such a world view is given more significance. Gergen (1989) opined that following the reductionist and individualist perspective of mainstream psychology that only focuses on the psychological factors that determine behavior will restrict the range of psychology. Instead, more focus should go to the social processes that guide behavior.

5.1.2 Criticisms of Social Constructionism

Despite providing an alternative and innovative world view, social constructionism have been subjected to many criticisms.

- Even though social constructionism proved the inadequacy of positive- empiricist paradigm, they haven't provided an alternative criterion for evaluating knowledge and determining truth.
- No distinct research tools, methods or theoretical tools have been provided by social constructivists. Such tools will also have to balance a position between the principles of sociology and psychology.
- Extreme importance is given to language – it is considered as the only major tool that guides social interaction.
- Social constructionism has a relativist position.
- While supporting the idea of pluralism, social constructionists choose a stance against the idea of Global village, which aims to bring about international cooperation.

5.2 Social Constructionism – Implications in India

Psychology as an independent discipline arrived in on 1915, with the creation of a psychological laboratory in the University of Calcutta. Around that period, psychology in the west was mainly dominated by Behaviorist ideas. Works such as "Psychology as the Behaviorist views it" (Watson, 1913) attempted at providing Psychology with a scientific status. Considering the western view as superior, India simply adapted the ideas of western psychology and uncritically accepted them.

In early 1960s, cross cultural studies began to emerge in India. The blind adaption of western psychology began to be questioned and ideas of cultural relativism emerged. Providing a solution for the social problems became a matter of immediate attention. A shift happened in Indian psychology from laboratories to communities. By mid 1960s a clear reaction arose against the western psychology and the need for an indigenous psychology was eminent. The significance of socio cultural context in determining the lives of Indians was realized. Until this shift, culture has either been treated as an extraneous factor that creates unwanted influences on individual

behavior that should be avoided; or as an independent variable influencing behavior. The role of language as a symbolic system that guides the social interaction was given importance. The meaning making process was theorized as internalized within a particular social context. Culture, being a human creation, was found to be consisting of no universal laws.

Social constructionism began to take roots in India majorly due to two reasons. First, India needed an alternative paradigm different from those of western psychology to understand human behavior in the Indian social context. Second, in order to solve social problems, India was in need of indigenous theories that understood its specific social environment.

A study done by Jain (1993) demonstrated the influence of culture on the construction mental mechanisms as a result of social interactions. The study explored the topic of prejudice and how intergroup relations leads to labeling of biased and unbiased interactions. For example, biases that happen as a result caste system could be labeled prejudice in the western definitions, but it is a familiar social process in Indian social context. Therefore, researchers concluded that processes of mind happen as a result of social interactions within a social context.

Another example of indigenous social constructionism comes from self- psychology. The attempts to define the concept if self have been made by all schools of psychology and western psychology majorly define self as a distinct and independent entity being in unique possession of individual. However, classic studies done by Markus and Kitayama (1991) offer different self-construal according to different cultures that influence individual experience. Markus and Kitayama primarily proposed the idea of independent and interdependent self-construal for people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures respectively. For Indian cultural context, Markus and Kitayama proposed the principle of relational self, characterized by the major values Indians uphold, such as goal achievements, social concern, fulfilling one's duties, helping others etc.

Another construct that changes according to cultural contexts is Moral Judgments. Indians value immanent justice more and distributive justice less. This position refers to lowers stages of moral development according to Kohlbergian theory of moral development. This example demonstrates the influence of cultural ideology in moral judgment. In the Indian context where conventional obligation and natural moral order are of equal importance, Kohlbergian criteria become irrelevant.

As Social Constructionism focus on the role of culture in understanding people's local reality, the ideas need to be deconstructed and reconstructed to match the Indian reality. Misra and Gergen (1993) listed out factors involved in Indian reality.

1. Holistic and organic world view.
2. Coherence and natural order across all life forms.
3. A socially constituted and relational view of self.
4. Nonlinear growth in life.
5. Continuity across various life forms.
6. Social Individualism.
7. Temporal and atemporal existence of human beings.
8. Contextualized relationships according to time, place and person.
9. Emphasis on self-discipline.
10. Shared and rational notion of control.
11. Knowledge as rational and moral.
12. Functional belief in multiple worlds.
13. Duty centered moral code.

Social constructionism is specifically relevant to Indian social context for solving social problems too. Many of the social problems existing in India have causes deep rooted in culture and tradition. In order to solve them, an accurate understanding of social reality is necessary and this is to be brought out using Social constructionist principles. Psychologists from social constructionist paradigm can provide assistance in finding solutions to social problems as well as in applying them through social problems.

5. Summary

In summary, Social Constructionism provides an effective new alternative to the conventional paradigms in psychology. It provides an innovative perspective focusing on the social processes that guide human behavior. Ideas of knowledge as a human construction and human behavior as a result of socio cultural influences have great implications in applying psychology for social empowerment of individuals, groups and communities. Moreover, Social Constructionism has significance especially in India where community interests and social goals determine individual actions to a great extent. Psychologists can create policies and carry out interventions with the accurate understanding of social scenarios provided by Social Constructionism.