Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice offers an introduction to the different theorists and schools of thought that have contributed to the development of contemporary social constructionist ideas, charting a course through the ideas that underpin the discipline. From the *New Science* of Vico in the eighteenth century, through to Marxist writers, ethnomethodologists and Wittgenstein, ideas as to how socio-cultural processes provide the resources that make us human are traced to the present day. Despite constructionists often being criticized as 'relativists', 'activists' and 'anti-establishment' and for making no concrete contributions, their ideas are now being adopted by practically oriented disciplines such as management consultancy, advertising, therapy, education and nursing. Andy Lock and Tom Strong aim to provoke a wider grasp of an alternative history and tradition that has developed alongside the one emphasized in traditional histories of the social sciences.

ANDY LOCK is Professor of Psychology in the School of Psychology at Massey University, New Zealand.

TOM STRONG is Professor of Applied Psychology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, Canada.

Social Constructionism

Sources and Stirrings in Theory and Practice

Andy Lock
Massey University

Tom Strong
University of Calgary

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521881999

First published 2010
Reprinted 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
Lock, Andrew.
Social constructionism : sources and stirrings in theory and practice / Andy Lock, Tom Strong.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-521-88199-9 (hardback)
1. Social constructionism. 2. Sociology. I. Strong, Thomas. II. Title.
HM1093.L63 2010
302–dc22
2009049664

ISBN 978-0-521-88199-9 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-70835-7 Paperback

To Angus Macdonald who got me into this helping business, showing me how important it was to be irreverent while being helpful. And to John Shotter for inspiration, and for his intellectual leadership and good people sense. (Tom Strong)

For Tracy Riley and John Shotter (Andy Lock)

Contents

Preface

'Social constructionism' comes in a number of guises, but none seems to sit well with mainstream behavioural scientists. In the current climate, what is taught in undergraduate, graduate and professional courses is becoming more and more determined by the requirements of those professional societies that 'accredit' or 'approve' courses. By these routes, people can become, for example, 'registered' or 'chartered' psychologists, titles reserved for the identification of those who have received a 'proper' training in the discipline. It is also becoming increasingly common that people who attain these titles are required to 'keep at it', and demonstrate they remain up to date with the current discipline. They do this by undertaking various forms of 'professional development', particularly by participating in approved courses or attending approved conferences, lectures, seminars, and the like. It is quite possible to gain and retain this recognition without ever coming across any of the work, writers and ideas that we are concerned with in this book: in fact, it is generally the case. In our view, this is a rather odd situation.

Its oddity is well put by the philosopher Thomas Nagel. He pointed out thirty-five years ago (1974: 435–6) that 'the subjective character of experience … is not captured by any of the familiar, recently devised reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence … If the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed.' And the situation is much the same today: not only is the fact that humans have experiences ignored in the formulation of mainstream behavioural science theories, but so, too, for most of the time, is the fact that those experiences have an intersubjective aspect, and that without this the characteristic human activity of speaking with each other in ways that make various degrees of sense would not be possible. The oddity is, on this analysis, that what constitutes an approved education is clearly wrong-headed, because the problems of the discipline have been 'falsely posed'.

What might one do, having come to this realization? There are many options that have been taken up by people who would, to different degrees, feel that there was something amiss in the mainstream of the behavioural sciences. One is critique; another is rejection – either passive or active; another is polemic; yet another … There are many options. And many of these options appear, to us, only to increase the polarization between the camps. That is not our purpose here. Our concern is to see psychology going about its business as an academic and practical discipline more adequately than it currently does. In pursuit of this, we

have marshalled many of the sources in which people, past and present, have set out the ideas that are called on when issues of language, meaning, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, how conversations work, and so on, become a focus of inquiry. The material we present here is what we refer to in our title as the 'sources'. No set of ideas exists in a vacuum, and that is true of those that underwrite many current varieties of work that loosely comprise the various 'social constructionist' stances that are being taken. At the same time, these sources contain many under-utilized ideas that, we believe, provide a richer picture of the human skills that need to be better investigated and understood through psychology's efforts.

We use the word 'stirrings' to denote a different intention. These sources have been variously elaborated and used for different purposes, not just around the behavioural sciences, but in the social sciences more generally. They have 'stirred things up', a lot of things, and yet it is very difficult, we have found, when reading about particular emerging schools of thought, to gain a fuller idea their parentage, and what is new in them. In addition, our reading of these sources has served to stir us up. There are, inevitably, two voices here, and at least the vestiges of our arguments over our draft chapters will be apparent. But that is good, for that is the nature of human reality: it is located and constructed within the conduct of conversation. This book is intended in that spirit.

Acknowledgements

Andy Lock

My part in this book has its roots in two pivotal events in my life. The first was being assigned John Shotter as my undergraduate tutor back in the 1960s. At that time I was much more into those facets of the western cultural revolution my generation grew up in than the demands of the academy I had the qualifications to attend, and thereby keep myself out of what I took to be the potentially mind-numbing alternatives such as becoming a bank teller, a clerk, or a bulldozer operator. I started university studying zoology, botany and chemistry, but quickly dropped chemistry when I discovered I could get away with two hours a week as a subsidiary psychology student rather than the eight hours a week that chemistry required. I slowly drifted to psychology because the zoology I was being presented with was the science of living things once they were dead – the departmental motto could well have been: 'If it moves, kill it and cut it up.' Psychology gave me the opportunity to concentrate on what living things did in their lives, and my honours thesis, 'The socioecology of sand martin, *Riparia riparia*, breeding behaviour', came out of this move. But John's tutorials opened my world to totally new ideas. For a long time, John completely baffled even as he fascinated me. He responded to any question I asked with either 'Well …', or 'Actually …', and then continued for ten or more minutes saying things that I supposed were of relevance to what I had asked, but quite how I couldn't figure out.

My response was to write down the names of people he mentioned, and once he had mentioned somebody five times, I would spend a morning in the library looking them up: Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, T. S. Eliot, Kurt Vonnegut, Samuel Beckett; these were among the first group. My ignorance at the time is revealed by the fact that it was a shock for me to discover that only one of these people could traditionally be regarded as a psychologist. But that shock did enable me to pose my first ever sensible question to John in a tutorial: 'So what's this all about then?' His answer was: 'Well, that's what we have to try and find out.' And through working for a Ph.D. on mother–infant interaction, writing and editing some books on how language and communication were socially constructed, pursuing an interest in what it was like to be a human living in a different culture, I found myself, in 1994, still well ensconced in my ivory tower, at the tail-end of editing a book on the evolutionary origins of human activities.

That is when the second pivotal event occurred: I met Michael White and David Epston in Adelaide.

Michael was giving a keynote address at a conference on postmodernism and psychology organized by John Kaye, as was John Shotter himself. Since by then John and I had been part of the British academic diaspora in reaction to the Thatcherite transformation going on at home, it seemed like a good opportunity to catch up with him. The rest was just serendipity. I went along to Michael's lecture because it was a keynote. He talked about the ways in which selves were constructed out of the social practices and discourses that were in their cultures, and I could comfortably nod along with this. He then really shook me up, by shifting to how he and his 'brother' David were using these ideas in their therapeutic practice, and with new discourses, to help people who were variously troubled to find ways to reconstruct themselves, so as to be able to deal with their situations in more preferable ways. I went along to a workshop that he and David led, and that experience produced a realization that maybe, for the first time in my life, some of my ivory tower baggage, accumulated over the preceding twenty-five years, might possibly have some purchase on the real world, and be of use. Later, in conversation, David asked if I was that Lock who had written about indigenous psychologies back in the 1980s, because he had read it and quite liked it. In that case, maybe I really did know something that could be useful. At the same time, the event made me doubly aware of the continuing depths of my ignorance. I wasn't a practitioner. Their ways of talking were foreign to mine, which was loaded with an objective, expert stance, rather than their participant, ethical stance. Maybe, too, there was a vast amount of what I had read that I had never understood in the same way that they had. I am still not a practitioner. I have, through the privilege of writing some papers over the years with David and his colleagues, been taught by a master at how better to use language carefully, though I have a long, long way to go before I get out of my ingrained, enlightenment habits. And in this book with Tom I have been made to re-engage with those areas of ignorance that have been an ongoing part of being me since John first made me conscious of them.

This book originated in a collaborative course that Tom and I, along with Ken and Mary Gergen, teach online, and with contributions to our seminars from John Shotter and Rom Harré, as a part of the Discursive Therapies programme at Massey University. I am grateful to them, and to our other partners in the programme (see our home page at http://therapy.massey.ac.nz) for the supportive environment that they sustain. Ken and Mary, John and Rom have been particularly generous in providing us with materials, clarifications to our questions, and encouragement over the years. The students with whom we have explored these ideas over the past five years deserve a great deal of praise and sympathy for helping us clarify our understandings, and for adding the richness of their experiences as new perspectives for us to pursue. Thanks are also due to my colleagues here at Massey, particularly my last two School chairs, Ian Evans and Mandy Morgan, who have provided a protective atmosphere in which it has been possible to read and think – an opportunity that seems to be getting harder to find in present-day

universities. Tom's student, Melissa Gray, provided us with some invaluable assistance in marshalling our references; and Helen Page at Massey brought her skills to bear on bringing together the final manuscript from the ravages Tom and I inflicted on it through the different word-processors and operating systems our computers imposed on our drafts as they went to and fro through e-mail. We are also grateful for the efforts of Janet Tyrrell for her diligence and suggestions as copy editor as the manuscript moved towards production.

My biggest debt, of course, is to those closest to me. My wife, Tracy Riley, has stoically endured many late evening monologues on many arcane topics with a rare equanimity, and put up with continuing moments of my 'being there, but not being there'. I am most grateful for your support. And Hannah, Duncan, Joe and Shelby: thanks guys for putting up with a distracted Dad.

Tom Strong

For me, this book began about twelve years ago in cyberspace, between breaks in seeing clients as I shuttled from town to town, practising as a consulting psychologist out of hospital consulting rooms across north-western British Columbia. I was part of a time warp, it seemed, when innovative and exciting new ideas about practice (narrative, solution-focused, collaborative) had gripped the imaginations and conversations of many practitioners. The excitement died down, as did the energizing conferences, notices for new 'postmodern' books, and introduction of new practices. By the end of the 1990s a resumption of the scientist-practitioner narrative was in high gear as the *DSM-IV-TR* and evidence-based practices (largely CBT) assumed dominance in training, research and service delivery. But, in the mid to late 1990s I began a series of online dialogues with people from all over the world about this postmodern – later to be known to me as social constructionist – 'revolution' in thinking and practice. Thus began my largely online collaboration with Andy on the other side of the world.

Like me, Andy had become an occasional contributor to listservs such as the marriage and family therapy listserv, a Bakhtin discussion group and Lois Shawver's later postmodern therapies listserv. Andy had marshalled a very interesting group of thinkers together on his 'virtual faculty' at Massey, a number of whom are included in this book. In 1998 I left my gorgeous and friendly little town of Smithers, a marriage and that full-time, continually-in-transit, private practice. I resumed academic life and became further embedded in dialogues and thinking behind the social constructionist revolution in thought and practice I wanted to be more informed about. My view then was that there were different constructionist practices described by writers such as Michael White and Steve deShazer, but the ideas from which these practices were derived were *rich* and scarcely accessible to the average practitioner. Andy was well connected, and as I moved into academic life he asked me to join him in a very innovative 'discursive therapies' programme offered by Massey University in New Zealand. Andy would

be the researcher/theorist and I'd be the practitioner/theorist on a course where we shared the ideas of thinkers as diverse as Vico, Garfinkel, Wittgenstein and Bateson. My theory at the time was 'thin' and largely restricted to what I gleaned from the therapist-authors of the time. So, working with Andy meant filling my head with less than light reading. From our course materials, we thought: why not write a book? Thus, a new, but largely pleasurable ordeal developed as we went far beyond our original course materials to writing the book you are now reading.

Looking back, I have a lot of people to thank, and a lot of dialogues under way that were not part of my life when I first connected with Andy and these ideas. No single practitioner influenced my thinking and practice more than did Michael White, who embodied many of the values that guide me today: social justice, creativity and a deep respect for people's dignity and untapped resourcefulness. Of Harlene Anderson, David Epston, Jaakko Seikkula and Steve deShazer, similar things could be said. They took complicated ideas and translated them into collaborative and generative practices that are strikingly different from those in the scripts used in dominant forms of helping practice today. But, take a further step back and one finds incredible, path-breaking scholars providing the conceptual undergirding for these new practices: John Shotter, Ken Gergen and Rom Harré. Most remarkable about their influential writings were their abilities to critique dominant ideas and practices while synthetically drawing from audacious thinkers who strayed from the usual narrative that continues to inform mainstream helping practice. These people have been my practical and intellectual inspiration.

I picked up an extra family out of this collaboration, over my four trips to New Zealand these last few years: Tracy, Hannah, Duncan, Shelby and Joe (Andy's Lock–Riley clan), and by extension colleagues at Massey University. The University of Calgary has become a good home base for me to work from, with particular acknowledgement to Vicki Schwean. I also appreciate the support shown me while at the University of Northern British Columbia. I am very thankful for ongoing dialogues with Jerry Gale, Lynn Hoffman, Lois Holzman, Chris Kinman, Sheila McNamee, David Pare, Peter Rober, Sally St George, Nick Todd, Karl Tomm, Allan Wade and Dan Wulff. I have been particularly blessed to have worked with some great students who kept me thinking and reading: Robbie Busch, Shari Couture, Allison Foskett, Margaret Fuller, Greg Godard, Tom Hope, Dawn Johnston, Ottar Ness, Nathan Pyle, Olga Sutherland and Don Zeman, among others. On a more personal note, I want to thank those most supportive to me this last few years, particularly when I was going through some challenging times: my parents (Irv and Irene Strong), Heather Strong, Angus Macdonald, Phil Pine, Doug McDonald, and my new-found Cuban friends. Finally, to my daughter, Arista, I look forward to keeping our conversations developing in ways we both gain from.