Overview of Social Constructionism and Its Potential Applications for Social Work Education and Research in Vietnam

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Abstract: Social construction has been recognized as a prominent place in social sciences generally which contributes to the study of deviance, social problems, social movements, the self, the gender, race, education, health, emotions, family, disability, and other areas (Cromby 1999; Hibberd 2005; Burr 2007; Daly 2007; Harris 2010; Lock & Strong 2010). And it becomes the useful background for identifying and selecting suitable theoretical perspective, methodology as well as research methods, on collecting data and generating meanings from data, for many topics in both qualitative and quantitative research (Crotty 1998; ten Have 2004). Applying social construction as epistemological background supports social researchers to find suitable ways on creating the research framework, on approaching to sensitive topics as well as on generating data from those in vulnerable groups.

On looking at brief history of social construction and its variations, this paper aims at identifying its core and appropriate implications for social work education and research in Vietnam contexts.

Keywords: Social constructionism, social research, methodology, Vietnam, social work.

1. Introduction

In social research, a research project or topic is always initiated with the main questions on methodology and methods in terms of: what methods do researchers propose to use? What methodology governs researchers' choice and use of methods? What theoretical perspective lies behind the

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methodology in questions? And what epistemology informs theoretical perspective? [1] (Crotty 1998). They are called in aspects of basic elements of any research process.

From the Crotty's perspective, epistemology in social research includes three main stances: Subjectivism, Objectivism and Constructionism (Crotty 1998). Epistemology, the way to generating knowledge, is acknowledged as the background for selecting theoretical, methodology and methods for a

specific social research. Epistemology is the theory or science of the method and ground of knowledge. It concerns opinions about knowledge, is the "theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology…a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty 1998). Epistemology is defined as the way to creating knowledge on meaning of social life basing on questioning of what is the knowing? What is the known? And what is knowledge? (Lisa 2008, p.264).

Approach of social constructionism is based on the studies of Berger and Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann 1966), in which all knowledge is socially constructed, including our knowledge of what is real. The term of social constructionism refers to a tradition of scholars tracing the origin of knowledge and meaning and the nature of reality to process generated with human relationships (Lisa 2008,p.816). Social constructionism has been applied widely in social research which makes significant contributions to study of deviances, social problems, social movements, the self, gender, race, education, health, emotions, family and other areas (Holstein & Miller 1993; Hosking 1999; Harris 2010; Lock & Strong 2010). In spite of its fruitful development, it is hard to recognise its application, as well as there is lack of research and debates about social constructionism in Vietnam social research.

This paper as a part of my research, on social inclusion of children with disabilities in Vietnam, focuses on the brief historical development of social constructionism, its variations and main implications, and this paper also aims at making recommendations for its applications in Vietnamese social

research, especially in areas of sociology, social work and psychology.

2. History of social constructionism

Social constructionism has its own ideas on that human in some aspects construct the reality they perceive which can be found in many philosophical traditions. In epistemological approach, the idea is first given in the work of Immanuel Kant, then in the work of Karl Manheimn and others. They are existed in new forms in psychology, sociology and other studies in science, technology and society from the twentieth century (Crotty 1998; Lisa 2008) .

The work of social constructionism has been traced back to the sociologists of Chicago School, phenomenological sociologists and the works of William Isaac Thomas (Marshall & Scott 1988). The landmark contribution to social constructionism by Berger and Luckmann is acknowledged in their book of 'The Social Construction of Reality' (Searle 1995; Crotty 1998; Hibberd 2005). Other contributors identified the fundamental concepts about social constructionism to earlier theorists as Schutz with his phenomenological sociology and his student Garfinkel's radical ethnomethodology. These contributors with Berger and Karl Mannheim (student of Luckmann) are also linked in the development of social constructionism, which has been seen to even extent to Marx and Hegel (Franklin 1995; Crotty 1998). In general it can be said that social constructionism is connected to the interpretive disciplines such as the ethnomethodology, sociology, anthropological and psychological research (Gergen 1985). While the development of social constructionism was initiated from

1960s, it became better known in 1970s worldwide (Franklin 1995).

Thomas Kunh, the author of the famous book "The structure of scientific revolutions" (1966), was considered as the great contributor to the development of the social constructionism after Berger and Luckmann. He stated that knowledge is "instrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all" (Kunh 1996). By which the term of "scientific knowledge" was applied and then was broadened to "knowledge" in general with researchers that followed such as Rorty whom ideas are closed to them of Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Bricher 2000).

Kitsuse has also played an important role focusing on "claims making" rather than a "theory of conditions" (Kitsuse & Spector 1975; Weinberg 2009). That contribution is that "only the symbolic interactions of human individuals and/or human collectives were given credence as either causes or constitutive features of social problems (Weinberg 2009,p.64).

3. Current ideas on social constructionism

The concept of social constructionism refers to a tradition of thoughts that looks the origin of knowledge and meaning and the nature of reality to processes generated within human relationships (Lisa 2008). Besides, the term of constructivism is sometimes used interchangeably (Gergen 1985; Franklin 1995). On distinguish the use of social constructionism and constructivism, Franklin outlines six ways for their differences and similarities as: They are similar in that (a) they emphasize human agency and assert that reality is socially and/or psychologically constructed; (b) they do not believe in an objective reality; (c) they both see the importance of language and social processes as impacting on the ability to know an objective reality comprehensively. Besides, they are different in that (a) the importance of cognitive structures and developmental processes in term of constructivists vs. language, culture and social process in forming constructions and understandings in term of social constructionists; (b) constructivists are more experimental/clinical in their approaches; and (c) social constructionists focus on social-contextual issues and people' stories (Franklin 1995, p.396-7; Rogers & Pilgrim 2005, p.15). In brief, social constructionism refers to the development of phenomena relative to social context. It is a sociological construct. While social constructivism is an individual's making meaning of knowledge within social context, it's a psychological construct.

In term of epistemology, social constructionism is a reaction to positivism (Gergen 1985; Rogers & Pilgrim 2005; Burr 2007). In describing, explaining and accounting for the reality as social process, "the aim of constructionism is to investigate new ways of relating social structures to experience of showing social etiology in disease and illness" (Burr 2007). Such statement is based on the idea that reality is not self-evident, stable and waiting to be discovered but is a product of human activity (Rogers & Pilgrim 2005, p.15) which is closed to the postmodern ideas on multiple constructed realities and truths (Franklin 1995; Hibberd 2005). For social constructionist, each person has a unique view of the world in line with his/her own perception and description of himself/herself and their reality, so the application of social constructionism has been

used widely in the fields of disability, mental health, gender, race, and ethnicity (Burr 2007).

There are four assumptions on social constructionism stated by Green and Blundo as following:

The manner is which people study the world is based on available concepts, categories, and of scientific or research methods; these categories are a product of language.

The various concepts and categories that people use vary considerably in their meanings and from culture to culture as well as over time.

The popularity or persistence of certain concepts and categories depends on their usefulness rather than on their validity; ideas tend to persist because of their prestige or congruence with cultural values.

The way in which people describe or explain the world is a form of social action that has consequences.

(Blundor & Greene 2008, p.243)

These ideas open ways for researchers selecting the suitable methodology and methods on research the specific topics as well as creating the suitable ways on generating meanings in the context of research problem.

Language, the tool for communication, is the part of social construction as interactions between people determine how we understand and view the world. It is vehicle for the exchange of ideas, information and creation of meaning (Gergen 1985; Burr 2007; Blundor & Greene 2008). Such ideas is also emphasised as "When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed"(Burr 2007, p.8), "talk involves the creation or construction of particular accounts or stories of what world is like" (Eldly 2001, p.437), so using language and focusing on analysing the stories, talks are the direction for understanding the meaning of context and research problem.

4. Varieties of social constructionism

The applications of social constructionism are various in disciplines with regarding to the settings. In debating, scholars classified the social constructionism into three forms: strict, debunking and contextual constructionism.

In the *strict constructionism*, scholars are stated as being strict constructionism who focus on that analysing on social problems should avoid making assumptions about the reality (Best 1989). By which such scholars emphasise on perspectives of claim-makers, policymakers and other members of society rather to judge the accuracy of the member's statements (Best 1989, p.246). They also find that it is impossible to find the relationship between the objective and subjective, especially the existence of the objective in any forms (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; Burr 2007). Best also makes comments on looking at strict constructionism as an important role on reconciling constructionist and objectivist theories which saw members' claims rather than the validity of those claims (Best 1989).

The approach looking at constructionism is *debunking* while drawing a basic distinction between social conditions and members' claims about the conditions. Scholars draw attention to mistaken or distorted claims also describe those claims as socially constructed which equates social construction with error and ignored the ways all claims and human knowledge are socially constructed (Best 1989). Best stated that debunking constructionism assumes the analysts know the nature of objective reality. It is the crude form of constructionism (Best 1989).

Scholars identified *contextual constructionism* falling between these above forms of constructionism (Best 1989, p.246). It focuses on the existence of conditions being studied than its contents (Crotty 1998). It allows for the social context to provide meaning for the experiences of individuals (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). Contextual constructionists argue any claims also be evaluated and often apply official statistics to access claims about social conditions being investigated (Best 1989). Claim-making process is the main idea on contextual constructionism, in addition such process is analysed and evaluated in specific conditions socially and culturally (Best 1989, pp.246-247)

The contextual approach takes into account the time and cultural aspects on the conditions and individuals, labelled as ontological gerrymandering (Best 1989; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994; Burr 2007). Investigating and understanding social issues as created within the community rather than the individual has been described as the social model of disability in contrast with the individual and medical models which identifies the problem in the individual and make recommendations for normalisation (Burr 2007).

Besides, social constructionism is also identified in terms of light and dark forms (Danziger 1997), while the former is the work and theorising originated from speech act theory with ethnomethodology and deconstruction which concerns more on language than social practices, closed related with conversation analysis, the latter tends to be coming from contributions by Foucault and focusing on researching other social practices as language and having interested in power and subjectivity (Jones & Elcock 2006, p.265).

In sociology, social constructionism is analysed in models of objective and interpretive models: Interpretive social constructionism is considered as the radical form of constructionism, originated from pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology. The other orientations and developments are also in narrative analysis, cognitive sociology, semiotic sociology, and the interpretive constructionist movement. The main principle of this approach is on 'the meaning of things is not inherent' which is reflected by H.Blummer's premises of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969, pp 2-6). Blummer argues that meanings are created, learned, used and revised in social interaction. This principle assists researchers to look the research problem meaning in its context and relationships rather than investigate it alone, and it need interpreting than describing ((Harris 2010)). And Objective social constructionism has its own arguments which do not focus on the meaning creation, they can be made without attending to what things to actors and intricate process through which diverse meanings are created (Harris 2010).This form of constructionism has its roots from broad range of sociological perspectives. The real social phenomena are produced by the action of individual actors or groups, by constraining social forces.

5. Natures of social constructionism

On looking at natures of social constructionism, as the backgrounds for its applications in research and practice, scholars identified its natures in aspects of:

(1) social constructionists reject the traditional positive approaches to knowledge that are nonrelexive in nature;

(2) social constructionists take a critical idea on relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social reality which are seen as the significant ways to consolidate the interests of dominant social groups;

(3) social constructionists promote the belief that the way people understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people;

(European Commission. Directorate-General for Employment Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Unit E2., #1490) social constructionists maintain that the goal of research and scholarship is not to produce knowledge that is fixed and universally valid but to open up an appreciation of what is possible.

(5) social constructionists represents a movement toward reidentify psychological constructs such as the mind, self, and emotions as social constructed processes that are not intrinsic to the individual but produced by social discourse.

(McLeod 1997)

By these ideas on its nature, there is an integration of the existing literature on social constructionism which shows that there are several principles: *realities are socially constructed; realities are constituted through language; knowledge is sustained by social progresses; and reflexivity in human beings is emphasised* (Lit & Shek 2002, pp: 108-109).

6. Implications of social constructionism for social work education and practice in Vietnam

The main consideration of constructionism is about the meaning of social fact. To regard social fact that is socially constructed is to focus on its dependence on contingent aspects of social selves. Constructionism also considers how social phenomena operate in particular social settings. The meaning of phenomena is not discovered but can be constructed. Crotty claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they participate in the world they are interpreting (Crotty 1998). From focusing its history and ideas, there are some implications for applying it in Vietnamese social work projects as following:

On concerning research process, social constructionism is a guideline for selecting the suitable methodology and methods as well as theoretical stances for research topic relating to meaning generation or experiences of research participants.

Using social constructionism approach, social problems as the content of social research are focused as being generated in social context, as products of social claiming, labelling and other constitutive processes. This application supports researchers on reaching to the approach about identifying, analysing and making recommendations relating to social problems as research problems.

With those research topics relating to vulnerable groups or sensitive groups, social researchers are able to apply this approach in order to drive suitable methodology and methods on approaching, collecting data as well as generating meaning of research problems. Research relating 'constructing of X (a research problem)' is acknowledged with un-ended long lists in social research which is a evidence for the prospect and ability of social constructionism in reality of research.

As an epistemological background, social constructionism drives researchers on identifying the suitable theoretical framework, methodology, research methods and methods

on analysing data. Such driving creates the research process with four elements as stated by Crotty. This process is clear and applicable in Vietnam context and with Vietnamese respondents on collecting data. Especially it is easy on applying for those research topics with sensitive problems and need long-time on approaching the respondents and understanding their daily life experiences. Social constructionism is very useful in social research on Vietnamese culture, people with disabilities, marginalised people, vulnerable groups, minority groups as well as with unbalanced power people, the poor, people in crisis…

7. Foreseen difficulties on applying social constructionism in Vietnamese contexts

The following arguments are presented for identifying the difficulties of social constructionism in Vietnam context:

It is found that the idea of social constructionism will be in middle between objectivism and subjectivism, which are clearly existed in philosophy and social research in Vietnam (knowledge generation). In Vietnam, the positivistic worldview of reality is prominent in social research. By applying this theory, researchers tend to assert themselves as "pioneers" by their attempts to maximise their linkage to a scientific model of knowledge. They are aiming at having a sense of security by adopting a positivistic, scientific of knowledge.

Looking at social work activities in Vietnam, it reveals that social constructionism is minimally introduced in teaching at graduate and postgraduate levels as well as in social researching. So there is lack of background for understanding its history, implications and further application in Vietnam context.

On applying social constructionism in research relating to counselling, social work or therapy, there is an uncertainty about the effectiveness. Because people working as counsellors or social workers are trained to be professionals, solving problems of people.

On the abroad cultural level, the lack of demand for vigorous activities in counselling or social work practice from the general public is an implicit cultural barrier to the promotion of social constructionist intervention in the practice context, Vietnamese people are afraid of frank express their situations with strangers or with public space, so they are not so conscious about their choices in intervention.

In spite of such foreseen difficulties on its applications, with its natures and directions for making the right social research process in general and social work research with different topics in particular. This epistemological and theoretical approach is applicable in areas of sociology, psychology, social work and other research with sensitive research topics and with unbalanced power participants. With its coverage on research topic and research process, social constructionism is expected to be applicable and prospect in social work education (including in social work theory and perspectives for social work pactice) and practice in Vietnamese context.

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