Challenges for Inquiry and Knowledge in Social Construction of Reality

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Abstract

As 'social construction' philosophy has found footings in contemporary field of knowledge and inquiry, scientists interested in exploring social phenomenon tend to develop relevant methods. However, there exists a philosophical critique on the efficacy of inquirers to accurately explore socially constructed realities and consequent creation of knowledge to be attributed as a real scientific knowledge. This paper aims to argue and expound how the philosophical assumptions behind the conception of socially constructed nature of reality are informed by the principles of scientific inquiry and creation of knowledge.

Keywords: Social Construction; Inquiry; Science; Knowledge; Challenges.

Introduction

In the quest for knowledge, the idea of socially constructed reality, which mainly gained momentum from Luckmann (1966) book 'The Social Construction of Reality', forced influential sociologists of their times to challenge the objective nature of reality, and take into consideration the social aspects of the world that is constituted as thoughts in the minds of people. Knowledge is largely attributed as an outcome of inquiry which starts with an understanding about the interaction between thought and reality, and ends with socially approved truth. In other words, the philosophy of knowledge can be described as a process of converting metaphysical inquiry into knowledge. However, there are several philosophical concerns related to the nature and origin of knowledge and truth, in other words epistemological and ontological facets, that need to be addressed during the conversion of inquiry into knowledge or/and truth.

Mainly, based on realistic ontology, positivism in this regard has long had supremacy in the social sciences with its objective and value-free perspective of social reality and the process of inquiry-to-knowledge see i.e. (Hughes & Sharrock, 1980; Proctor, 1991; Wicks & Freeman, 1998). Taking inferences from Cartesian's body-mind split, positivists believe that social reality (or knowledge) is objective, exists separate from humans, and thus there is no need of any interpretation or the presence of any human to explore it. Theories and concepts based on

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positivism primarily assume that humans and social entities are composed of and operate in separate parts, and can easily be observed or studied by applying the objective principles of inquiry. On the other hand, people holding interpretative philosophies take opposite position and deny the possibility of the separate prevalence of knowledge and social entities and that it can be observed as objective things (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). These scholars believe that social entities are dynamic and humans are embedded parts of these entities. Knowledge about these entities is situational, bodily, subjective, relative, and emergent and thus can only be known through participation and interpretation of inquirer/researcher (Latané, 1996; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McPherson & Rotolo, 1996).

Although positivism has enjoyed a dominant position in social sciences till the last century, the concept of social construction of reality has gained momentum, and many scholars are using its assumptions and philosophy to study varied social realities. However, as it has been mentioned above, knowledge holds the elements of metaphysical inquiry, the acceptance of any phenomenon that does not contain any physical or chemical existence leads toward confusion. As per true spirit of any scientific inquiry, social scientists should endeavor to bring clarity in this area; instead they tend to disregard the prevalence of any knowledge about the socially constructed reality by declaring it a non-scientific mode of inquiry. Since, focusing on any specific paradigm and ignoring the other could be fatal for social sciences (Nonaka & Peltokorpi, 2006; Phillips, 1990), this paper attempts to mitigate this rivalry by arguing that the exploration of socially constructed knowledge, during the conversion of inquiry into knowledge, does follow all the principles of scientific inquiry.

Role of Inquiry in Knowledge

Knowing involves a knower endeavoring to know something (Hawkesworth, 1989). It establishes a relationship among the known and the knower which is based on an incomparable link between a mind and an object. Without knower, known, and a process of knowing, knowledge cannot take place. Knowledge encompasses three fundamental elements i.e. the *subject* or the knower; the *object* or that something known, and the act of knowing called *cognition*. Knowledge is corollary to the interaction of object, subject, and knowing (Clinchy, 1994). A knower could be a scientists/researcher who goes "out of himself" to develop his/her interaction with other beings. But, it is interesting to note that the act of knowing in the interaction between subject/knower and object/known is somehow inverse. It is the extra-mental thing that is received by the human subject not outside, but within the knowing subject.

It is pertinent to inquire that why a man knows, while a wall does not know? It is because of the ability of receiving the form of another object, which human has, but non-human does not. In order to be a knower it is must to receive the form of other object. In this man-wall instance, when a man becomes knower after receiving the form of the wall, the knowledge involved in this knowing is immaterial instead of any material object. Immateriality thus, in other words, is the fundamental base of human knowledge. For an object to be known, it is necessary to be able to transfer something to the receiver. And for a man to be knower, it is a must to be able to receive the configuration of others. The wall, in this case, has the ability to convey its configuration to a man, but it is not able to receive the form of that man in return. Similarly, as has been mentioned earlier, being a knower of wall, a man can communicate the form of wall to others.

Inquiry involves the way scientists deal with facts and ideas. They manipulate it, convert it into novel shapes and formats, integrate it with different aspects of the world, and play with it in many known and unknown ways. Inquiry assumes that scientists hold control on their own learning, as they can manipulate facts and ideas to build their understanding about the unknowns of the world. While doing so, scientists learn about the designs, processes, and challenges of their own way of inquiry to convert unknowns into knowns. Science has been conceptualized, and most of the scientific literature is a collection of facts or a body of knowledge for scientists to learn from. However, the problem with this conceptualization is the impression which leaves scientists to consider science as nothing more than memorizing facts and establishing theories.

Criticism on this understanding is made as it omits the room for intuition, hypotheses, and imaginative learning in science. In other words, this conceptualization strongly rejects the fact that science entails room for inquiry. Scientific inquiry in social world is viewed as a diverse way in which scientists study the natural world and make their understandings in light of the evidences derived through their interpretations (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). Scientific inquiry can also be referred to as the activities which scientists go through to develop their knowledge about and understanding of the natural world by using the principles of prevailing logic and rationale.

While moving on to the learning about and exploration of different aspects of natural world, scientists may go through the following behaviors demonstrating the essence of scientific inquiry. Scientists:

- Raise questions by using critical and logical thinking
- Construct explanations
- Compare explanations with prevailing scientific knowledge
- Communicate their ideas to others
- Develop their assumptions
- Consider alternative explanations

The concept of "social reality"

Reality has long been viewed as a complex concept by different philosophers. We intend to view our world as principally physical, and are less aware of the distinction between the objective or physical and subjective realities. In order to understand the existence of subjective world, a new concept emerged as "social reality". Social reality is viewed as something different from the biological reality or cognitive reality. It includes human features of the world, but it goes beyond individuals' motives and interests, as it covers beliefs, opinions, and interpretations of people in relations to their impact on the behavior of the community. The phenomenon of social reality has been extensively debated by philosophers i.e. by Schutz (1970) in phenomenology, who used the term "social world" to explain this new facet of reality, by Durkheim (1975) as "social kingdom", and by Spencer (1895) as "Super-organic". Schultz differentiates reality into two categories; first, which can be experienced directly, and second, which cannot be grasped directly until and unless it comes into human notice. Many other proponents of social construction phenomenon explained social reality as above and beyond the biological and psychological reality.

Social reality fundamentally belongs to a particular group where more than one person agrees upon a single meaning of anything. This should be regarded as a set of social judgments that people belonging to one group agree upon. In other words, it is people's common subjective understanding about social phenomena. In a room full of people, there can exist as many social realities as there are sets of groups. Schutz (1970) used the word "typifications" to explain people's understanding of everyday experiences on what the world is, and how people should act within it. These "typifications" about the meanings of actions provide people with a "common sense" about the nature of social reality. For Schutz, "common sense is graced by *the natural attitude*— a sense of the everyday world as taken-for-granted and structured independently of one's immediate experience." Common sense entails true elements of social reality, as one believes that others are viewing the world in a more or less similar manner as I do. It is pertinent to understand that common sense does not appear out of the blue instead it involves long social interaction and interpretation of people to construct collective meaning of an observed reality.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) by developing the ideas of Schutz (1970), Schutz & Luckmann (1973), Max Weber (1949), Émile Durkheim (1975), George Herbert Mead (1932), introduced a dialectical approach of construction of social reality. They compared processes that human and animals follow to develop a social order. According to them, in animals there is an in-built biological instinct to develop social order which humans lack. Humans build social order through their central nervous system, by using symbols and language as point of references to construct an artificial world order. The very first step that takes place in this process is "externalization"

in which people use words and images to explain the world around them. However, once these words and images are created, they take on a life of their own, and then people are ruled by those meanings which they construct.

Existence of Social Reality

Social scientists and scholars have paid much attention to the true nature and existence of reality. There has been a fundamental difference between objectivists and subjectivists regarding the nature of reality, where former believe in objective and latter in socially constructed nature of reality. However, within the proponents of social construction of reality, one school of thought believes in social construction of reality, but departed from the agents who construct it, and other school views reality as an ongoing outcome of the social interaction between the social agents.

Since this paper does not intend to verify the claims made by both schools, discussion will continue in terms of identifying commonality between both groups. One thing which is clear from both groups' arguments is that social reality involves an interaction of people, where reality is constructed as a result of interaction between agents' beliefs, values, opinions, and worldly experiences. According to traditional Realists, reality even having its objective or physical presence seeks perceptions and conceptualization of social agents who experience and make contextual sense about it (Searle, 1995). For instance, a piece of paper in its true form has an objective presence, however its conceptualization as money bill associates monetary value with it, which is truly a result of community based social judgment of a piece of paper. This example brings into consideration the link between objective and social nature of facts, and the presence of social nature of meaning associated with every objective or physical reality.

This debate can be somehow concluded by taking an assumption that every reality is a product of human interaction and consequent construction of meanings. Scholars such as Searle (1995) argue that "a socially constructed reality presupposes a reality independent of all social constructions (pp. 190)". However, at the same time, he accepts that social realities are humanly created, and in order to understand the continued existence of such realities it is necessary for researchers to get involved in this social process and explore the complex and dynamic contours of such social constructed realities.

Social Reality as a Paradigm

Berger and Luckmann (1991) shed light on the basic process of the social construction of reality and argued that once certain fundamental structures of experience are shared, they come to be experienced as objective entities and thus take on the force and get characterized as partial autonomous realities. Sandri (2009) in his "Reflexivity of Social Reality" explained that social agents intentionally interact with such socially approved realities to make sense of their surroundings in order to reach at certain common and socially enacted state of meanings. While doing so, their preconceived notions and past experiences build unique mental models through which they inevitably make sense of emerging situations and thus form mental realities. This process can be explained by using the inferences made by Maturana & Varela (1980) who introduced the concept of "autopoiesis" according to which a living system carries ability of producing its own ingredient internally, without taking much from the external environment. In case of people's process of giving meanings to social events, they usually use linguistic and cultural cues from their previously prevailing mental models to interpret external world internally, without taking external world's conception at that particular time frame. The notion of autopoiesis in social reality can further be backed up by the work of Luhmann (1995) on systemic theory which states that realities are constructed in a social system where agents receive flow of information from their environment to give meaning to experienced realities.

It is pertinent to understand that although realities are socially constructed, it is not necessary for any socially constructed reality to exist in actuality. In order to claim that there exists a reality, it means it's only from people's perspective. In other words, the reality in order to obtain

legitimacy of existence is dependent on the psychic-social contexts in which it exists only because people believe that it exists. Having said so, it is clear that any knowledge and inquiry taking place from the sociological perspective will be fundamentally based on the elements of agents involved in the construction of any inquired phenomenon.

Social Reality, Inquiry and Knowledge

As it has been explained earlier, since knowledge is a relationship between the knower (cognition, thought) and the known (object), the debate goes on to the exploration of truth and reality. In the philosophy of knowledge, knowledge is conceptualized as *a metaphysical inquiry into truth*. Although, philosophy of knowledge has been widely studied as a part of metaphysics, it cannot be fully attributed as the basis of metaphysics (also called ontology— the study of being). In the realm of the construction of knowledge, the Pre-Socratic Milesians like Anaximenes, Anaximander, and Thales based their inquiries on cosmological issues and did not take into account the principles of epistemology. These philosophers, known as "naturalists", assumed that man has a capacity to explore and to know the natural world. After Milesians, the firm advocator of empiricism and phenomenology, Heraclitus (from Ephesus) and Eleatic emphasized on the "sense knowledge" and the role of intellective knowledge in the understanding of the true reality.

Upon the intervention of Sophists i.e. Protagoras and Gorgias, the pertinence of epistemological assumptions came into forth, which established foundations for Skepticism and Relativism. However, it was the great Plato who should be viewed as a real inventor of "science of epistemology", as he first raised the questions about the nature of knowledge, validity of sense-knowledge and intellectual knowledge, the relationship between belief, opinion, and knowledge and so on. Although Plato's work has always been considered substantial on epistemology of knowledge, it is not free of criticism. Aristotle, pupil of Plato, later on challenged the exaggerated to realism of his teacher and brought his new framework of moderate realism, which was later adopted by Thomas Aquinas. It was Aristotle's death and rise of Hellenistic philosophies that gave rise to phenomenalism, relativism, and sensim in the philosophies of Epicureanism and Skepticism.

In the quest of knowledge, according to the philosophies of Skeptics, knowledge is considered a product of doubt. While asking ourselves if "we really know" the world around us, we are into a state of knowing where we will differentiate the trustworthy beliefs from the untrustworthy ones. Kant's "critical system" in this regard comes up with a modern theory of knowledge that in fact is in direct opposition of Hume's Skepticism. Kant brought the role of cognition in inquiry and asked "what can we know, and how can we know it." Kant categorized knowledge in two domains i.e. knowledge through experience, and "a priori" knowledge, which is not based on our experience.

In order to understand the inclusion of different philosophies, which eventually led to theoretical frameworks, it is convenient to discuss the role of inquiry into knowledge construction by categorizing inquiry into three broader areas (1) structured inquiry, (2) guided inquiry, and (3) open inquiry. In structured inquiry, scientists/researchers establish parameters and procedures for inquiry. They start with a cosmetic problem for investigation along with the pre-determined variables and procedures to finish their investigation. They explore relationships among stated variables and get into generalization of the expected outcomes from the collected data. Structured inquiry allows scientists to use their learning experiences in other types of inquiry, such as guided or open inquiry. Positivism, objectivism, empiricism, and partially skepticism are commonly used philosophies which help scientists/researchers to define procedures and processes to undertake inquiry. Fundamental in these philosophies are the assumptions that only logical/mathematical treatment generated authentic knowledge, that human beings verify reality through senses which are the only faculty of knowledge.

In guided inquiry, scientists/researchers start with the problem; however, the procedures and methods to investigate the problem are defined by the scientists/researchers themselves. This kind of inquiry allows investigators to construct knowledge during the process of inquiry instead

of relying only on the outcomes of inquiry. Interpretivism, relativism, subjectivism, symbolic interactionism, and interactionism are the main philosophical paradigms that provide guided inquiry with theoretical foundations to explore realities. The scientists/researchers in light of these philosophies undertake inquiry by assuming that researchers should focus on interpretation of social actions; there is no absolute truth, rather it is relative to a particular frame of reference; subjective experiences are also source of knowledge; people are product of social processes and processes are derived from human interactions. Open inquiry is totally scientist/researcher driven. In this type of inquiry, the scientist/researcher formulates his/her own problem that might be based on experience or observation and then he/she identifies suitable procedures and methods to investigate that problem. This type of inquiry is considered as "analogous to doing science." Inquirers are involved in activities that shape concepts and after that concepts are labeled with formal names.

In open inquiry, the investigator uses imagination, observation, and experimentation to explore and explain the natural world. Grounded theory, rationalism, and partially post-modernism provide open inquiry with a base to investigate the phenomenon in a logical order, starting with observation and ending with conclusions. Open inquiry intends to deal with concepts and concerns that humans face in their day-to-day matters and the process through which they convert them into social realities. Since these realities, because of their social and reciprocal nature, emerge in a spiral way it becomes ought for an inquirer to be part of the social process through which such realities are established and then made permanent part of human beliefs. In this process mental schemas and criticality of inquirer becomes a scientific tool to examine social nature and construction process of realities to draw plausible inferences.

Conclusion

The prevailing criticism on efficacy of social scientists, who follow interpretive framework and believe in socially constructed nature of reality; in meeting pure scientific principles of inquiry and knowledge creation is mainly due to the limited understanding of the research philosophies (i.e. epistemology, ontology, methodology) behind the social construction of reality and the role of inquiry in the knowledge creation process. However, while undertaking inquiry it is pertinent to ponder various research paradigms because these philosophical assumptions or frameworks describe perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions about the nature of reality and truth. These philosophical frameworks influence the way researchers strategize their inquiry from design through to knowledge. It is important to realize and describe these frameworks in order to align principles of scientific inquiry with intended knowledge creation process in social settings.

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