

More than ever a relational approach is needed: Social Construction and the global pandemic

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Volume 3

Issue 1

Autumn 2020

Keywords:

*Social construction,
relational change,
Covid-19, pandemic,
societal change*

Citation Link

Abstract

We are living in challenging times, surfacing many reactions, thoughts, visions and beliefs in an attempt to understand and offer ways to cope with the COVID crisis and the recovery of the world. We believe a constructionist stance can help us respond to this moment. Everyday life is uncertain, although we most often act as if it is predictable and dependably redundant. We organise our lives around certainties that lead us to feel that we are in control. The pandemic has pulled the rug from under our feet and uncertainty is now the slogan of our time. However, one “silver lining” of the pandemic might be the way it exposes the unfolding nature of our worlds. To that end, the pandemic helps us embody and thus “know from within” (Shotter 2010) a constructionist sensibility. This embodiment of social construction takes us far beyond a simple academic understanding. The confluence of the pandemic and learning about social construction can create the opportunity to put ideas into practice and, in so doing, our understanding of constructionist ideas is deepened.

From a constructionist perspective, COVID-19 is not separate from us. It is happening through us, in us, between us and because of us. Social construction helps us see the world as an interconnected and complex system in which macro and micro levels, as well as human and non-human entities are constantly creating and re-creating possible realities (Simon & Salter 2020). Indeed, this highly contagious virus, initially framed as a public health issue, soon revealed its complexity, having also political, social, economic, environmental and relational entanglements. Our attempt to balance the shutdowns (staying at home), for health protection, with the economic need for business to operate is an illustration of how interconnected these systems are. The virus also makes it necessary to balance physical distance with social connection and collective support.

Despite the fear and discomfort, the potential for change ignited by this global crisis is substantial. By coming together with a diversity of voices, experiences, and perspectives, new performances can be enacted, new ways to respond and cope can be imagined, and new forms of living can be created – and these are all changes that could possibly be sustained once the pandemic has passed. The pandemic therefore is a perfect time for dialogue and innovation. Dialogue and relationality are fundamental pillars in the construction, de-construction and re-construction of knowledge and society (Gergen 2009a). Change starts with us in our interactions, one interaction at a time. Social construction invites us to come together and share the challenges we face, co-creating new possibilities for health and connection. Through collective interactions, new meanings and possibilities emerge; we re-invent realities.

How can we address this interconnected and complex reality? And how do we ignite change that supports a reconstruction of our world in ways that address the inequities we currently face? What are the social conditions that can ignite new forms of understanding that generate new and resourceful ways of living?

Me or Us?

As we look at responses to these interconnected problems the virus has initiated in our political, social, and economic contexts, we note that most embrace the tradition of individualism. The individualist perspective of an isolated, cognitive, and rational decision-maker has dominated Western thinking for several hundred years (Sampson 1993). In this tradition, individuals with their individual characteristics/capabilities and their individual actions have been the unit of analysis. The assumption is that we must study the self-contained individual if we want to understand the social world. This traditional vision of individuals as bounded beings (Gergen 2009a) invites separation between self and other.

This individualist approach discourages us from investing in or attempting to understand the other and the context that surrounds us, which is essential in building relationships and realities. This individualist mode of thinking – seeing individuals as independent, as a driving force for problem solving – generates a misleading separation between individual and society, thereby alienating people and intensifying division between self and other (Gergen 2009a).

Yet, particularly in this time of crisis, it has become clear that we are connected and intertwined with others and society; our political, economic, and health contexts cannot be separated. It is a good time to develop a more complex understanding of ourselves as social beings. Social construction offers a conceptual understanding of the relational nature of our being (Gergen 2009a). It helps us envision a world without oppositions between self and other or us and them.

Social construction offers a dialogic understanding of the person and views the person's relationships as the source of reality forming (Gergen 2009a). Shifting from the conceptual understanding of individualism and moving toward a more relational understanding, opens the door to new ways of thinking about the complexity of self-others and self-society relationships. It invites us to explore conditions for transforming the quality of relationships for a more participatory and engaging world.

What Does Social Construction Have to Offer?

We believe that social construction can play a central role in connecting, creating learning communities and transforming our ways of living together. As constructionists, we embrace the uncertainty amongst which we live. We acknowledge that our actions are critical in constructing our world. We also acknowledge a deep commitment to relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen 1999). Let's take a look at these constructionist notions.

Uncertainty. Central to social construction is the inclination to hold our ideas and our actions lightly: there is a willingness to suspend our commitments to an idea and critically examine our own beliefs, to question our assumptions and to entertain a wide diversity of perspectives (McNamee 2019). In many respects, this moment – the moment of the virus – demands that we live amidst unfolding uncertainty. Given the complex, multifaceted nature of the virus's impact, one answer (offered with certainty) will not provide a solution. How might we occupy the space of uncertainty in such a way that we can invite others into dialogue and, through that dialogue – holding on to our uncertainty – open ourselves to diverse understandings? Can we learn to accept the unfolding emergence of new propositions that we can test? Through the stance of uncertainty, new ideas begin to make more sense.

Words/actions creating worlds. We create our worlds in interaction with others and with our environment (Gergen & Gergen 2004; Burr 2003). The emphasis is on *what people do together*. Meaning is always an emergent process of persons in relation (with each other and their environment). This suggests that meaning is in constant flux, always open to new possibilities, to new constructions (Camargo-Borges & Rasera 2013). It is useful to think of our social activities as *invitations* to others. We *need* each other to accomplish that performance. The responses to one's actions are required in order to realise – make real – a particular understanding. Communal coordination is *required* to make meaning, to give value, and to create beliefs. As Edward Sampson says, "*the most important thing about people is not what is contained within them, but what transpires between them*" (Sampson 1993, p. 20). The significance of placing meaning in the joint activities of participants, as opposed to in the heads of persons, is precisely the aspect of social construction that offers us alternatives to traditional attempts to alter the public's attitudes, beliefs, and values around issues of our current crisis.

In our present moment, this means that how we say things, how we use words and actions, the context in which we believe we can or cannot speak, the hidden voices are all shaping who we are and shaping society as well. We are co-creators of the world and of our relationships with each other, but also of our relationship with the material world (Simon & Salter 2020). These engagements create and re-create our world and this moment of global crisis cannot escape the by-product of our micro interactions. How we relate to the world around us, how we describe and name it, shapes how we respond. We do not have unilateral control over what is created but our responses are critical.

Relational Responsibility. In this moment of global crisis, we find ourselves interdependent. We must rely on our family, friends, colleagues, and people we pass on the street to maintain social distance, to wear face masks, to wash their hands, to not take health risks. If our orientation to the world is individualist, we believe we can do what we want; all we need to do is take care of ourselves. On the

other hand, if our orientation is constructionist, we shift our sense of responsibility from one's individual responsibility to relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen 1999). Relational responsibility requires that we attend to the process of relating, itself. Our focus is not on individual actions or words but is on the ways in which we all contribute to an unfolding situation. Our reflections in the current moment shift from taking care of oneself to ensuring that one's actions invite and encourage taking care of us all.

These elements and concepts can support this global crisis and its impact on the way we think and behave, offering ways to support the creation of new collective beliefs. The virus has introduced disruption to our taken-for-granted forms of life. Jazz musicians (Spann & Martin 2020; Barrett 2012) talk about disruption as useful because it demands we pay attention to what has become normalised over time. With this renewed focus, innovation emerges. It seems to be a good time for dialogue that can inspire just such innovation. A first step in this current situation is to come together to share the challenges each of us are facing.

How to Enact/Ignite These Elements – Learning Communities

Learning communities might be a good way to start. By coming together with a diversity of voices, experiences, and perspectives, new performances can be created. We can generate new ways to respond to this crisis. And new forms of living may emerge. Learning communities are collaborative spaces where new knowledge, experiences, and diverse perspectives are shared (Camargo-Borges & Ferragi 2020). In the current situation, a learning community can advance a coordinated response to COVID-19 and potentially benefit not only the learning community's participants but the broader community, as well as society as a whole.

We are part of a community that embraces and works with the ideas of social construction in learning communities. That means we focus on dialogue and relationality as fundamental pillars in the construction and de-construction of knowledge and society. An important element in this construction/deconstruction is language. Words create worlds! But language is much more than words; it entails all embodied activity (McNamee 2009). It is important to note that embodied activities take place not only in the presence of others but in material contexts. The construction of our worlds is achieved in our interactions with each other and with contextual non-human elements. Thus, in our learning communities, it is not only the participants who collaborate in meaning making but the environment. Is the learning community face to face or online? Is "in person" learning in a home or a school or an office? Is it in a field, a forest, or a mountain top? Is an online community on a static platform or a dynamic one? What can be shared on the platform? Can participants collaborate? If so, how? All these and more questions remind us that the knowledge that is constructed is relationally achieved.

Every course or training we offer has a strong learning community approach. Within learning communities, we design spaces and interactions where dialogue can support participants in re-signifying- and re-inventing alternative formats through collective discussion of possibilities.

In this article, we share one learning community – an experimental setting – that took the form of an online course. This was a course introducing social constructionist principles, offered by the Taos

Institute.¹ The course is offered each semester to practitioners and researchers interested in learning more about social construction and how to apply constructionist ideas in their own practice and research.

While the main focus is on introducing social construction to course participants through readings and discussions, we also embrace the social constructionist principles to create a learning community. We design a learning space where participants can gain an understanding of Social Construction while at the same time build a community where they share life experiences and learn from each other.

In the remainder of this article, we share reflections and experiences of the last cohort who participated in this learning community. The course coincided with the global lock-down and participants had the opportunity to share their experiences related to the COVID 19.

Narratives and Stories of the Pandemic

The Context

This is a six-week course where, in addition to an online platform offering readings, activities and assignments, members are required to participate in weekly online, synchronous meetings, as well as weekly dyadic meetings with a “learning partner.”

All participants were experiencing the lock down caused by COVID-19. We created a learning environment in which participants could coordinate their responses to COVID-19, bringing diverse perspectives together, thereby generating new insights focused on coping with this crisis. By sharing their experiences, they could make sense of the uncertainty and generate new meanings for the moment while dreaming upon the future.

The Participants

The course had thirteen participants from eight different countries: two from Brazil, one from Canada, one from Cayman Islands, one from Japan, one from Spain, one from Sweden, one from India, and five from USA.

Collection of Meanings and Experiences

Throughout the six weeks of the course, the participants were asked three questions concerning how learning about social construction affected their relationship to the pandemic. Each question centred on a different level: (1) the micro level, (2) the macro level, and (3) the conceptual level.

- **Micro level:** How are you re-inventing yourself? Do you notice new ways of being and relating? What are the practices you are developing in this time that you would like to continue? How can this group/learning community support who you are becoming and/or the directions you would like to take?

¹ The Taos Institute[®] is a non-profit organisation designed to advance social constructionist ideas and practices.

- **Macro level:** How could social construction address and support change in times of COVID-19? How do we ignite that?
- **Conceptual level:** How do you see social construction playing a role in these challenging times?

A space for posting daily experiences that might differ from the readings for each week's topic was provided on our online platform, called the "learning café." In addition to this online sharing space, each weekly session started with a collective *check in* where participants could talk about their experiences since our last meeting. As participants shared their experiences with each other, they also learned from the experiences of others. All the meetings were recorded, and the participants agreed to be part of this inquiry. The stories and narratives were collected from both the participants' written descriptions of their pandemic experiences as well as during our *check in* moments at the start of each live meeting.

Lived Stories

At the end of the course, we collected all the conversations related to participants' ways of thinking about and dealing with the pandemic and started to make sense of the variety of experiences shared. From the conversations collected, we clustered the meanings into the three levels connected to the questions framed – micro, macro and conceptual, – and some themes emerged:

- The need to be aware of and attentive to beauty in difficult times
- Attentiveness to the locality – what is happening in my community, in my family, in my relationships
- Dealing with the present and dreaming upon the future
- The pandemic and social construction.

Participants had the chance, during this six-week course, to learn about social construction while experiencing its values as they related to the peculiar moment of quarantine. The tragedy of being locked down and the fear of contracting the virus was very real for everyone. This reality offered participants the opportunity to engage – at a visceral level – the constructionist notion of continually unfolding possibilities. Unlike the certainty offered by modernist discourse that attempts to provide answers and direction, participants had the opportunity to put uncertainty and the multiplicity of perspectives into practice, thus underscoring the vulnerability of our relational dependency. Participants were eager to explore alternative perspectives and ways of dealing with the pandemic and were less apt to critique or correct each other. By embracing constructionist concepts, other perspectives on the pandemic were respectfully considered, leading to new experiences. What traditionally would be seen from a single perspective - the pandemic and the crisis – was reframed into opportunities.

Micro Level Narratives

The need to be aware of and attentive to beauty in difficult times: Art and culture as interactions and relationships

Participants talked about how painting, reading, and drawing were resources to cope with the lock down, helping them to interact with themselves and others in alternative ways. Art and culture were described as a means/tool to relieve stress and anxiety during the crisis.

This mirrors social media offerings during the pandemic. Artists from all over the world, together with amateurs and ordinary individuals started posting their artwork online, giving expression to their meaning-making of the situation as well as connecting with others (in a time when being together is impossible). Many of these movements and initiatives went viral as can be seen in the hashtags #covidart and #covidartmuseum that had more than 100,000 posts on *Instagram*. Furthermore, singers and musicians from all over the world were offering their music for free, creating collective spaces for songs and dance through live events on social media.

This learning community also found art and culture useful tools for expression as well as having a healing power. They shared books they were readings, videos from theatre and dance performance. Some of the participants described the power of engaging in artistic activities: “Art-making, though it’s a solitary work, I find that the conversations I have around my art since the pandemic started are engaged and co-creative.”

An artist from the group shared, “The need for beauty and communication on a more interactional level seems to have increased, and I find myself also changing, feeling less like I need to ‘deliver’ good art.”

Attentiveness to the locality – what is happening in my community, in my family, in my relationships

Many participants talked about (re)connecting with their locality – their neighbourhood and their neighbours – paying attention to places and spaces that, prior to the pandemic, went largely unnoticed, such as parks, gardens, local restaurants etc. It is very interesting to see how the impossibility of mobility invited people to look at small things that were always there but unnoticed. Such attention to what had already been “right under their noses” enlivened new perceptions of their own environment. “I’m getting to know the neighbours much more. While doing gardening we see each other and talk.” “At a personal level, being confined and having to close my business made me fully realise the pace of life at which we’re going, and in my new me, I want to slow the pace to do nothing, to reflect, to play, to create...”. “In this period, I’ve started walking in my town and connecting with my neighbours again. I’ve also connected with the members of a community action committee . . . and new projects are starting to arise. Giving support to individuals and organisations I value has also become a priority.”

Macro Level Narratives

Dealing with the present and dreaming upon the future

Participants shared that, during their isolation, there was a struggle between dealing with immediate concerns about the virus and taking a bigger perspective by entertaining many possibilities for the future of humanity. “There are immediate concerns for individuals who face losses during this time: illness, death, loss of work, loss of purpose, loss of hope for the future.” “...At a macro level, it seems that we are at a crossroad and that the future of humanity could go in many directions.”

New behaviours and new positions in life invited the participants to start thinking of what the future might bring. The uncertainty moved slowly from worry into the possibility of dreaming. Many conversations focused on dreams, hopes and freedom. There was a tension between the need for dreaming and the difficulty of looking ahead, not knowing what kind of hope they could have.

In one of the “check in” conversations about dreaming, participants shared how difficult it was to dream when you are in lock down, alone, not knowing what will happen next. How can you dream? What can you dream about when everything is so uncertain? One of the participants said that when she started feeling less controlled in her actions, she felt like she could dream again. Furthermore, participants shared that when officials started talking about “opening up” and they were able to stay a bit longer outside, they started dreaming again. Participants addressed how this bit of freedom became a great opportunity to dream. One participant said that hearing the other participants’ stories of dreaming helped him to dream. He referred to the group as a supporting system by which he was inspired and reminded of things he could do.

The sense of freedom seems to be closely connected to dreaming. As the world “opens up,” dreaming and freedom emerge as fresh energy, with a new flavour. It is almost as if you can feel it, smell it and not take anything for granted anymore. One example from participants was seeing family and friends, which, according to their experience, becomes a very special activity.

Conceptual Level Narratives

The pandemic and the social construction

When examining and experiencing the pandemic from the stance of social construction, participants shared how useful this approach can be in challenging times. They felt invited to “be aware that we are all connected” and always “remember that we constantly build the world together”. As participants were reading, posting and discussing a diversity of content on social construction, they were connecting and articulating constructionist concepts with the unfolding nature of the pandemic. They were noticing how social construction could support making sense of our current situation. Of particular use to the participants were the vivid demonstration that: 1) the world is constructed; 2) the construction happens in coordination among people; 3) the validity and sustainability of knowledge and meanings are maintained throughout time not by an empirical truth but by social processes; and 4) language is action and in language we frame and reframe the world (Gergen 2009b).

The constructionist approach emphasises the ability to create realities in language. Participants realised that their way of making sense of this crisis is already an invitation for action and an action holds already possibilities of change. One of them mentioned: “Our actions do have an impact in the world”.

Furthermore, participants also realised that we socially construct our world and that we are - very much - part of such constructions. One participant mentioned, “...invites us to be aware that it is with others that we become and that it is through our social interactions that we build our world. Having that awareness affects our way of being, and it motivates us to participate in any small way and in any capacity towards making a better social world.” Appreciating that your actions have an impact in the world is an invitation to commit to creating the best of it. It also brings the realisation that how we interact will create different possibilities post-pandemic. One participant reflected “The coronavirus pandemic offers a good example of meaning-making in action, which touches all of us. There are various ways to interpret the situation. The interpretation that becomes dominant will be the one to stay at the end and will affect how we go on with life in the future. In the worst scenario, we might end up isolating ourselves more from each other; we might end up defining a class of people that are not useful, a “useless class”, in the economic world we live. In a more hopeful scenario, we might end up becoming responsible for what happens on earth and living in a sustainable way.”

Discussion and Considerations

This moment is a humbling moment. We are facing a devastating health crisis and that crisis is transforming every aspect of our lives: education, commerce, travel, the economy, politics, and, of course, healthcare. We can no longer take for granted our movement around our village, town, city, country, or globe. We begin to understand what life is like for people who must deal daily with food and housing insecurities, with joblessness, and with an inability to support the education of their children. For those of us privileged enough to take these things for granted, the pandemic has offered an awakening.

The pandemic has created the conditions where inequities can no longer be ignored. The pandemic has also created the conditions to show that we have the power of change.

For decades, higher education in many countries has been financially out of control, costing students and their families previously unthinkable amounts of money, mostly secured in long-term loans. Wealth has been assured to 1% of the population. Competition in the marketplace – generally seen as good for keeping innovation and equality alive – has emerged in the past decades as the mechanism for ensuring that the 1% remain in power.

All of these institutional and macro-level by-products of the past few decades are now in question. They cannot be sustained. The pandemic has awoken us to the house of cards within which those of us who are privileged have been living. While each region of the globe, each country has its own issues in need of transformation, there is no question that re-building our communities to mirror what existed pre-COVID is not viable. We are now challenged to think seriously about the strong tie between modernism’s focus on the individual and the creation of inequality, social injustices, and a

plethora of social problems. When our focus is only on ourselves, or our own family, our own community, our own country, we neglect to acknowledge how interdependent we are. A healthcare pandemic has toppled the global economy and brought our institutions to a halt. Dillard describes how Ubuntu can be understood "as a symbiotic and cooperative relationship between people that provides the basis for a spiritual reading of community and community making from an African standpoint." (2012, p. 65). Now, the challenge is to see if we can reconstruct our globe with a relational sensitivity – one that draws on the Ubuntu philosophy of "I am because you are".

It seems to us that learning communities, inspired by a constructionist view of relationality – holding uncertainty, embracing relational responsibility and co-creation – has the potential to generate a supporting system where collectively new actions might be created. This six-week course, with participants from eight different countries and cultures, each living different realities but connected with some common sharing, shows us the possibility of organising ourselves globally while maintaining a local sensibility. A space that is co-created, as achieved by this learning community, offers a way to expand our power, our ideas and make the change we want to see.

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Citation

Camargo-Borges, Celiane and McNamee, Sheila (2020). More than ever a relational approach is needed: Social Construction and the global pandemic. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 3, 1, 130-140. <https://doi.org/10.28963/3.1.18>

