

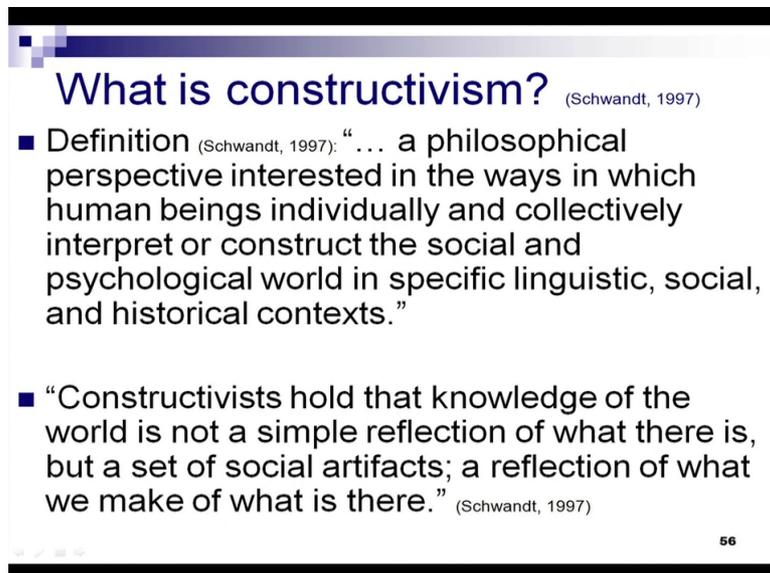
Qualitative Research Methods
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Lecture 09
Constructivism

Welcome back to the NOC course on Qualitative Research methods, my name is Aradhana Malik; I am helping you with this course, and in the previous sector we discussed what interpretivism as a paradigm of Qualitative Research is, you know, how do we understand Qualitative Research, on what from, what mind set to put it extremely simply, from what mindset do we approach Qualitative Research, so we discussed the concept of interpretivism.

In this lecture we are going to talk about constructivism, what is constructivism, how constructivism helps us conduct or how, what we understand by constructivism and how does constructivism as a mindset help us understand qualitative enquiry and conduct qualitative inquiry. So, that is what we will talk about in this lecture.

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What is constructivism? (Schwandt, 1997)

- Definition (Schwandt, 1997): "... a philosophical perspective interested in the ways in which human beings individually and collectively interpret or construct the social and psychological world in specific linguistic, social, and historical contexts."
- "Constructivists hold that knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what there is, but a set of social artifacts; a reflection of what we make of what is there." (Schwandt, 1997)

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Constructivism, what is constructivism? Again this is from the book by Schwandt and I have taken excerpts from the book by Schwandt and from the article by Schwandt for the most part, that appeared in the handbook of Qualitative Research methods and I will give you the Complete References also when the slides are put up. So, the definition of constructivism according to Schwandt is "...a Philosophical perspective interested in the

ways in which human beings individually and collectively interpret or construct the social and psychological world in specific linguistic, social and historical contexts “ .

How do we understand our world? How do we construct the meaning of our world? You know, it all boils down to the signals we receive from our environment and how we organized those signals we receive from the environment, what meaning to be assigned to the signals to the stimuli that you received from the environment. Environment is constantly bombarding us with stimuli, now, the meaning that we assign to this bombardment of stimuli is, you know, if we construct the meaning and we will talk more about this as to how we construct meanings.

So constructivism deals with how with understanding, how we individually on our own and we as rooted in our own specific cultures as connected with our larger groups, communities, culture, mindsets, collectively construct or assign meaning to the filtered stimuli. or How do we filter the stimuli from the bombardment of stimuli that we receive from our environment and How do we assign meaning individually and collectively to these filtered collections or not even collection for want of a better word ,these filtered messes of stimuli that we receive from our environment.

In specific and how do we assign meanings? We use language to sign meaning, we use language to define to understand like we discussed in the previous lecture, we use language, we use linguistic symbols, we use language as a means of what language is a tool of giving of assigning meanings .Now, how do we understand something, we define it, we talk about it, we give it a representation, we give it a, you know, we try and understand it within a context.

I am telling you but Qualitative Research for most of you whatever I am saying may seem like oh it's all out in the air, what is she talking about? What is she going on and on and on about? and unless I connect whatever I am saying to something that you understand and something that is out there and I use language and I am hoping that the language I am using, the words that I am using, will be accepted in the same manner or in a manner similar to the one that I am using those words in. Okay.

So language is facilitating this transference of the way I understand Qualitative Research ,to the way I would like my students to understand Qualitative Research to be excited about this whole field of Qualitative Research and carry it forward. And language is facilitating it

.Language is the conduit, language becomes the channel, it becomes the medium and I'm using these words interchangeably, conduits, channel, medium. I mean, all of these words have independent meanings, but I am using these words interchangeably for to make things a little simpler. Okay.

Now and in specific linguistic context, in specific social context and in specific historical context, we situate the meanings of what we try to understand in historical context, how is it related to something that happened earlier? How, why should to anyone today be excited about whatever it is that we have discovered or understood. That is the social context. How is how does it fit in with today's reality? You know, when we talk about the social context, which language do I use to describe it to understand it?

How does it fit in with my social reality today and how is it connected to something in the past and how will it be connected to something that happens in future? Okay, so that is historical situatedness, how it fits in with my reality today is the social situatedness and the linguistic situatedness is the language that is used to understand, to define, to describe, whatever we are trying to understand. Okay, and that is what constructivist do.

“Constructivists hold that the knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what there is but a set of social artifacts, a reflection of what we make of what is there”. Whatever is out there is captured by us in a specific form and using a slightly disconnected example. Many times when we meet somebody who's not on the same wavelength as us, many times we are talking about something that people we are close to, or people who we are talking to a not familiar with.

So this lack of familiarity then results in our interpreting a situation in a specific way and the interpretation of the same situation in a different way by somebody else. Two people in the same situation interpret the situation differently. I'm not talking about the glass being half full or half empty; two journalists recording the same event will record it differently. Two Businessmen, looking at the same money making opportunity will look at the same money making opportunity differently.

They will both want to en-cash on that opportunity in a different manner. So, that is what we mean, we make sense of the reality, we accept reality, we understand reality in specific ways

and the ways in which we understand reality is rooted in our past experiences individually and collectively in the past experiences of us as individual human beings.

And us as representative of the collectives, that we are parts of. So, sitting here faculty at IIT Kharagpur, are parts of a collective called the IIT faculty. IIT Kharagpur faculty is one collective within IIT Kharagpur faculty, with different departmental faculty are one collective, then we have the IIT Kharagpur faculty, then we have the entire faculty the larger body, then we have professors or educators of Higher Education. So, that is one big collective.

Then we become Indian educated, so that isn't even larger collective and so on. So, as Aradhna Malik, I understand the teaching of Qualitative Research in a specific manner, but when I connect it to the way qualitative research or any subject that is applicable or that is going to be useful for students in higher education is going to be taught, then I will understand it differently.

And the way I understand it, the way I would like to share it with my students will be very different from the way another colleague in this same department would understand it and would want to express it, how they situated. So, you know, all of these things are made it so Complex and is mind boggling and that is what constructivism talks about.

Constructivism essentially highlights the fact that we make something of the reality, we are, you know, we all understand our realities differently and reality is what we make of it. So, the knowledge of the world is not a reflection of what is out there; it is what we make of it.

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Constructivists inquire into the natural occurrence of phenomena, not the categorizable, rule-driven 'should be' ways of the occurrence of phenomena and events, but the real, dynamic, unpredictable, natural dance between the ways of occurrence, and understanding of the ways of occurrence of phenomena. (Schwandt, 1994)

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Constructivist inquire into the natural occurrence of phenomena. They inquire into how phenomena occur in their natural settings, not the categorizable, rule driven, should be ways of occurrence of phenomena and events, they don't talk about normalcy; they don't talk about what should happen. Constructivist likes to study phenomena as they are happening in their natural settings, in an unpredictable manner as possible.

If the phenomena is predictable, fantastic! If they are not, no harm done. The lack of predictability of a phenomenon does not become a hindrance in the manner a constructivist studies. It's ok, so that is what is meant by this, but the real, dynamic, unpredictable natural dance between the ways of occurrence, and understanding of the ways of the Other of occurrence of the phenomena.

So how it occurs and how people understand it as it occurs and there is a dance between these two, there is a connection between these two, because people who are studying it are also affecting the phenomenon as it is happening. Ok, so that the dance of the phenomena and understanding of the ways of occurrence of the phenomena is what constructivist study. What happens? How do we make sense of it? What is real? What is not real? What do we learn from the way things are going on is what constructivist study.

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Constructivists believe . . . (Schwandt, 1997)

- "That knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind."
- "... learners construct understanding. They do not simply mirror and reflect what they are told or what they read. Learners look for meaning and will try to find regularity and order in the events of the world even in the absence of full or complete information." (Bodner, 1986)
- In the pluralistic character of reality: "... reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems;
- In the plastic character of reality: "... reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents."
- "... contrary to common sense, there is no unique 'real world' that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language."

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Constructivists believe that, knowledge and truth are created not discovered by the mind. Okay, so constructivists believe that truth is what we make of a situation, the truth will vary, the truth is relative, it will vary from person to person, from situation to situation and will come to it in a minute.

Constructivists also believe that, learners construct understanding. Learners don't learn things as they are, they construct understanding, they don't simply mirror and reflect what they are told or what they read learners look for meaning and will try to find regularity and order in the events of the world even in the absence of full or complete information.

We try and complete the information the stimuli that we receive from the environment in ways that they make sense to us. In psychological terms it is called perceptual organization. Okay, so, we are bombarded with a large number of stimuli, with large amounts of, immeasurable amounts of Information and how we make of data sorry and the information that we extract out from the same data varies from person to person, situation to situation etcetera.

How we complete these holes, you know, data that we get is not organized it is not Ordered and we being in the situation. When we are trying to learn about something, we look at everything, sometimes the learning is conscious, sometimes it is unconscious, but, we are receiving everything that we are getting from the environment and then we are organizing. Whatever we are getting we are trying to fill in the gaps of whatever we are getting.

And that is what constructivist believes. That we are being bombarded by a large number of truths and because the numbers are so huge, we try and categorize, we try and assimilate, we try and combine this large amount of information that we are getting, about the large about the phenomenon that we are studying into a understandable whole.

The shape that we give to the whole is rooted in how we make sense of all this of this whole plethora of information that we receive, shifting out the information from the data and then giving it a shape and that is where construction real construction, you know, with a hammer and chisel takes place. What you want to keep, what you want to throw away etcetera.

A constructivist believes in the pluralistic character of reality they believe that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems. Constructivist believe that, the same reality can be expressed through different ways .we can assign different connotations to the same reality, when we talk about symbols, we're talking about connotations so the same reality can be understood in a variety of ways that is a pluralistic nature of reality.

And that is where construction takes place, We shift out what makes meaning to us, what is what makes sense to us. I'm sorry, we shift out what makes sense to us, and then we give it a shape. We give it a structure and that structured shifted out combined coagulated whole is the meaning that we like to believe. That is what constructivist do. We construct the meaning out of whatever we pull out of whatever we filter out.

Then they also believe in the plastic nature of reality, they believe that "...reality is stretched and shape to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents" .Yesterday we talked about the intentionality of a human action, so every action has an intention behind it .It has a motive behind it, there is a reason why human beings, how a human beings behave the way they do and constructivist believe that reality is stretched and shape.

So if we understand something that doesn't fit into the or that is that we are unable to situate into the big our current existence into our current believe, then we stretch it, we dent it, we give it some shape to connect it to where we want to situate it. So we pull it down so reality can also be stretched, it can also be dented in order to fit into something that we understand it, these things will become clear as we go on, as we start talking about how we start discussing examples of qualitative research.

Constructivist believes that reality is what can be fit into the current social existing historical believes. Okay alright. They also believe that contrary to common sense, there is no unique real world that we exist and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language. You'll be surprised to know that I found a wonderful paper by professor of chemistry in Purdue University on Qualitative Research.

And you know the common notion is that, scientists to empirical Research and they don't believe in qualitative research. I disagree with that notion, because one of the papers that have referred to teach this class was written by a professor from Purdue University, a professor of chemistry and he try to understand how students of chemistry learnt the subject of chemistry and in doing so, he came across qualitative research. Got interested and wrote paper on it.

So, I'm going back to what we were talking about, Constructivist believe that there is no unique real world. Scientist, pure scientist would say there is one real world, we study the same material, is somebody who to study the same thing today and then maybe 500 years from today using the same technology, maybe they would come up with the same things. But, their interpretation their research may be the same.

But the interpretation of those results will be situated in the social historical linguistics reality, linguistic situation of the time and place that they study at in. Okay, so that's what they say.

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“... constructionists are concerned above all with the *production* and *organization* of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the process of social determination.” (Fuss, 1989, in Schwandt, 1997)

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“...Constructionists are concerned above all with the production and organization of differences and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the process of social determination”. So, they talk about differences, how the difference is produced or how the differences organized and so they, say you know, the whole idea of pre-existing reality is only serves the purpose to situate the current reality.

What happened in the past happened, but what is happening today needs to be connected to what happened in the past so the pre-existing reality serves as an anchor, it serves as a glue, it serves as a place where today's reality can be fit into and that is the only purpose. That is what happened in the past is no longer the only reality, reality's boundaries have been extended, okay, to include what is happening to the same thing today.

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Goodman's constructivist philosophy

(Schwandt, 1997)

- “Through our nonverbal and verbal symbol systems we create many versions of the world in the sciences, the arts, and the humanities.” (Goodman, 1984, in Schwandt, 1997)
- “... worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand, the making is a remaking” (Goodman, 1978, p. 6, in Schwandt, 1997)
- “These ‘remakings’ are not simply different interpretations of the same world, but literally different world versions.” (Schwandt, 1997)
- “Stated somewhat differently, our frames of interpretation (versions) belong both to what is interpreted (worlds) and to a system of interpretation.” (Schwandt, 1997)

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According to Goodman's constructivist philosophy, “Through our nonverbal and verbal symbol systems we create many versions of the world, in the Sciences, the arts and Humanities”. Goodman's constructivist philosophy discusses that, we use language to understand the world in different ways, world making as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand, the making is a remaking.

So, we are not we are not ,I mean, Goodman says , whatever we are dealing with or whatever we are talking about today, whatever we are understanding today whatever we are experiencing today has already happened. Whatever we are trying to understand today has already been understood in a different manner in the past and we are only re-understanding it, we are all world making what we make of the world.

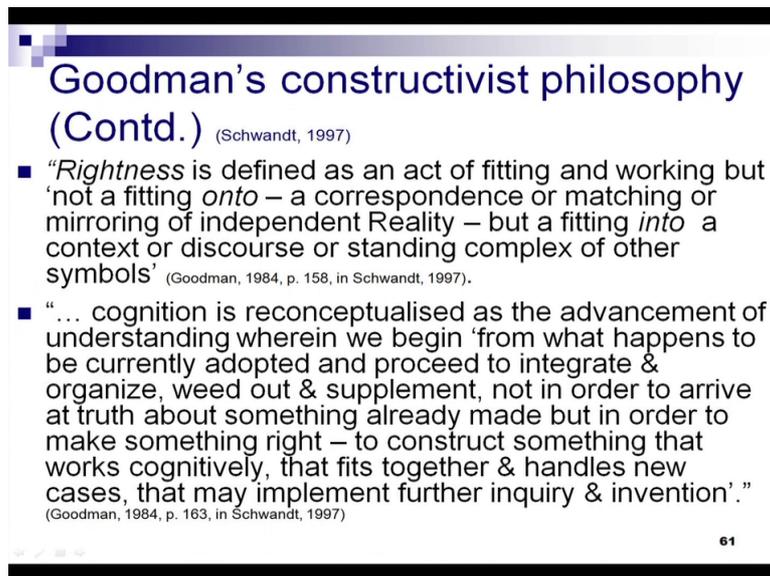
How we understand the world is only a remaking it, is only a replication of the effort that went into understanding the world earlier also. These remaking some not simply different interpretations of the same world, but literally different world version, so these remaking are not dealing with what happened to the World after it had been understood in the past, so they are not just mere interpretations they are also Constructions.

They are also different versions, so versions meaning that the world has also develop since the time it had been studied. In the past and when it is studied ,again the same reality is studied again something else must be added to it by virtue of it been interpreted in the past

and the world as it existed plus the interpretation of it, plus the reactions to that interpretation then added on and gave us what we are studying today.

And what we study today will be a mixture of the way the world exists today, plus our interpretations of it today. “Stated somewhat differently, our frames of interpretation (versions) belong both to what is interpreted (worlds) and to a system of interpretation”. And that's what I was telling you. So, what we see today plus how we interpret it is the real frame. Is the real context. Okay.

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Goodman's constructivist philosophy (Contd.) (Schwandt, 1997)

- “*Rightness* is defined as an act of fitting and working but ‘not a fitting *onto* – a correspondence or matching or mirroring of independent Reality – but a fitting *into* a context or discourse or standing complex of other symbols’ (Goodman, 1984, p. 158, in Schwandt, 1997).
- “... cognition is reconceptualised as the advancement of understanding wherein we begin ‘from what happens to be currently adopted and proceed to integrate & organize, weed out & supplement, not in order to arrive at truth about something already made but in order to make something right – to construct something that works cognitively, that fits together & handles new cases, that may implement further inquiry & invention’.” (Goodman, 1984, p. 163, in Schwandt, 1997)

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Good Men also says that “Rightness is defined as an act of fitting and working, but not a fitting into - a correspondence or matching or mirroring of independent reality- but a fitting into a context or discourse or standing complex of other symbols” So, rightness is not fitting onto, we don't take a reality and say ok this is how it is connected. The reality ceases to exist if it is not a part of it, is not superimposed, it is juxtaposed, it is connected to what is happening today.

Our interpretation is connected to it, as an extension of what we study, it is not superimposed on it, we can't just distance ourselves and say ok I am connected at Point A, Point B and Point C and so on, No, unless I become a part of the reality. I am studying, I cannot understand it, I cannot fully make sense it, so, my understanding of the reality becomes an extension of the reality that exists. Okay, so you fit into the reality and that is rightness.

“...Cognition is reconceptualised as the advancement of understanding wherein begin from, what happens to be currently adopted and proceeds to integrate and organize, weed out and supplement, not in order to arrive at truth about something already made, but in order to make something right- to construct something that works cognitively, that fits together and handles new cases, that may implement further inquiry and invention”.

It seems, you seem like a very long complicated sentence, but what we are really getting at is, knowledge as we know it, knowledge is constructed, it is an advancement of understanding, we start from something we already know and we stretch our understanding to what we would like to know, how we would like to interpret or what we know more about it. So, whatever new we discover is connected it is.

It is amalgamated with whatever we already know it becomes a part and an extension of what we already know and it is stretched and that is when we start understanding something greatly and when these two appear as one whole.

The extended understanding and the existing understanding mesh, they mingle, they appear as one whole then that forms the basis for further inquiry that starts out as a different thing that is slightly connected to something that forms an extension of what all that already existed. Ok? So that's how constructivism takes place.

Now, that is all we have time for in this lecture, in the next lecture ,we will talk about types of constructivism and you know, the difference of paradigms of constructivism and so on, but all this may seem very complex, very complicated, but it's not so difficult to understand. So please try and reflect on whatever I have told you and will take the discussion further from this point in the next lecture, thank you very much for listening.