The sociological theory of social constructionism

Social Constructionism essentially represents a sociological theory of knowledge that studies the development of various sociological phenomena in social contexts. A social construct, the anchor of this theory, refers to a concept that is the artefact of a specific group. Social constructs, to elaborate, dispense with take away from commonly accepted inherent qualities of items, concepts, or issues, and instead focus on their dependence upon, and the contingent and conditional rationale of, our social sense. They describe such issues and things are more easily described as the result of numerous human choices, rather than of natural laws or divine intention.

The origins of present day social constructionist theories go back to the writings of Immanuel Kant. Kant argued for the existence of a world that was independent of human minds, thus implying that humans should not assert that they created the world. This world, he said, is without structure and is not divided into things and facts. Structure is imposed on the world by perceiving it and thinking of it in specific ways, as also and by the adoption of particular sets of beliefs, (rather than instead of others) about it. Vivine Burr (2003, p 2) argues that social constructionism enables individuals to adopt critical attitudes towards their conventional and traditional methods of perceiving and understanding the world and their own selves. It provides humans us with fresh ways on perceiving ideas and things that are considered to be commonplace and are unquestioningly accepted. Numerous things like for example money, newspapers or citizenship are socially constructed and. All of these things would not obviously have existed in the

absence of society. Each of them furthermore could have well been constructed differently.

Social constructionism encourages people to question the widely held perception that conventional and accepted knowledge has sprung has come about from objective and impartial examination of the world. It is as such opposed to the positivist epistemology of traditional science and spurs thinking individuals to constantly question their assumptions about the appearance of their environment and its various components. This short study deals with the implications of social constructionism for social workers and how its use can help them social workers to understand human behaviour. Specific emphasis has been given to the use of social constructionism in understanding commonly held perceptions and attitudes towards mental disorders.

The Use of Social Constructionism by Social Workers to Understand Human Behaviour

Social workers have two fundamental objectives, namely the strengthening of the ability of individuals and groups to cope with and overcome the many difficulties and challenges they confront in life, and the bringing about of improvements in various social and environmental circumstances areas, in order to improve the satisfaction of human needs; especially of people from underprivileged and oppressed social segments.

Social workers plan and attempt their various interventions through their understanding of environmental circumstances, the various reasons for such these conditions, and the client system. Such understanding and knowledge

and the consequent adoption of theoretic approaches significantly influence the point, the tool, and the nature of social work intervention. It becomes evident that adoption of theoretic preferences, based upon an understanding of the reality of the client environment, is crucial, both to social work theory and its practice.

Theories of classical empiricism assert that the truth about the world is established and is independent of the individual. Social constructionism conversely puts forth argues that such truth is certainly not independent of individuals but is actually depends upon their thoughts, perceptions and beliefs. Social workers, by using social constructionism, will be able to understand the various dimensions of reality within such individual thoughts, perceptions and beliefs. Constructionists state that reality cannot be known separately from our elucidation of it. Social constructionism works on the principle that reality is constructed socially and places emphasis on language as a critical route for interpretation of experience.

Whilst objectivists state that individuals make discoveries and find out about the reality of the world through the construction and testing of hypotheses via the actions of neutral observers, constructionists debunk such assumptions arguing that the interests and values of observers can never be separated from their observations and are thus bound to influence the final construction of common perceptions about world realities. Gergen (1985, p 270), states that generation of ideas of reality is initiated by social, rather than individual, processes and that the touted objective reality of the positivist approach is actually the result of various social construction processes that are influenced by historical, political, cultural and economic

conditions. With such knowledge being essentially constructed, it can change over time and diverge across cultural groups that embrace different perceptions and beliefs about human nature and development. Considering that the norms, beliefs, values, traditions, attitudes and practices of different cultural groups vary from each other, the social construction of their knowledge is also likely to differ significantly. An understanding of this fundamental principle can help social workers in their realisation of the different perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of different individuals towards similar social phenomena or stimuli.

Social constructionism helps social workers in adopting critical stances towards established assumptions on regarding the social world that reinforce the interests of powerful and dominant social groups and assists them in realising that the world has come about because of historical processes of communication and negotiation between groups and individuals. Gergen (1985, p 266), states that people see the world through the eyes of their particular communities and cultures and respond accordingly. Established assumptions, understandings and behaviours of people are sustained by social, political, economic and moral institutions.

Payne (1997), states that reality, according to social constructionism, can be stated to be the guidance of behaviour by individual perceptions of knowledge and reality. Individuals arrive at shared perceptions of reality through the sharing of their knowledge via different social processes that first organise such knowledge and thereafter establish it by making it objective. Social and individual activity thus becomes habitual with individuals sharing their assumptions about their perceptions of reality.

People behave in line with social conventions that are based on such shared knowledge. These conventions are furthermore institutionalised because of the agreement of many people on such understandings on different aspects of society. Such realisations and accords become legitimised by processes that integrate these ideas about reality into ordered and believable systems.

Social workers need to realise that social understanding is finally the combined result of various human understandings through the operation of circular processes, wherein individuals contribute to the construction of social meaning within social structures of societies through processes of institutionalisation and legitimisation. Societies consequently create conventions through the participation of individuals in their structures, which, in turn influences the behaviours of people. Spirals of constantly moving influences build and rebuild the conventions that people adopt and by which they live.

Berger and Luckmann, (1966), state that individuals experience the world to be an objective reality, comprising of persons and events that exist separately of individuals perceptions. Language provides the means through which individuals make sense of their environment, classify persons and events, and interpret new experiences. The shared reality of everyday life by different individuals distinguishes it from individual realities, (like dreams). Language helps individuals in sharing their experiences and making it available to others. Such sharing of reality leads to institutionalisation and thereafter to habitual ways of working. Habitualism makes the behaviour of different individuals predictable, facilitates joint activity and perpetuates social control mechanisms. Knowledge is as such institutionalised within sub-

groups, or at social levels, and significantly influences the behaviour of people.

Social constructionism allows social workers to question dominant structures of knowledge and understand the impact of culture and history. Social workers by and large understand the requirements of humans through the interplay of different ideological, ethical, political and economic factors. An understanding of social constructionism can help them in understanding the responses behind the actions of both dominant and vulnerable groups of society and decide upon the adoption of the best suited routes for bringing about social change.

Social Constructionism and Mental Illness

Much of modern day society's perceptions about mental ailments are influenced by the medical and psychological models, which state that medical illnesses are real; they concern disturbances in thoughts, experiences, and emotions and can be serious enough to cause functional impairment in individuals. Such ailments make it difficult for individuals to sustain interpersonal relationships and conduct their jobs. They can also sometimes result in self destructive actions, including suicides. The more serious of such illnesses, like extreme depression and schizophrenia, can often be chronic and lead to serious disability.

The social constructionist approach states that such much of modern day perceptions about mental ailments are caused by the specifically constructed vocabularies of medical and psychological models, replete with their elaborate terminologies for mental disorders and focused their focus on

deficits. Social constructionism can help social workers in understanding the socially constructive and destructive illusions that have been created put up by existing medical and psychological models and deficit based language. Walker (2006), states that vocabularies of medical and psychological models, including the concept of mental illness itself, are essentially social constructions. They are made up of vocabularies that describe deficits and diseases and perceive human beings as things that can be examined, diagnosed and treated, much in the manner of machines. Such perceptions (a) lead to obsessions with compliance, (b) distinguish between normal and pathological states, and (c) position practitioners as experts, even as clients are represented built up determined as passive and obedient recipients of treatment. Recommended treatments focus on elimination of symptoms, support established paternalistic roles, and are not focused on actual client needs.

Examined from the perspective of linguistics, reified categories like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia appear to be defined by clusters termed as symptoms; schizophrenia for example is concerned with the occurrence of audio hallucinations. Such terms, it is evident exists only because of the creation of consensus among the dominant groups of doctors and psychologists and persist because of convention. Mental illnesses are often described akin to physical ailments like diabetes, where individuals are required to manage their lives with specific medications. Such comparisons are used to explain the working of medications and to make the diagnosis and recommended treatment for mental ailments acceptable to clients.

Such analogies however breakdown completely considering if it is realised that discussions about thoughts and feelings of individuals concern their identities and not their bodies. Social workers need to understand that the vocabularies of medical and psychological models essentially position clinicians as the most suitable interpreters of client experiences. Even apparently harmless terms like " clinical" or " treatment plans" establish contexts where clients are perceived to be abnormal or having pathologies, even as clinicians are established as authorities with abilities to perform interventions for assisting clients in overcoming their pathologies. With the power of definition lying with clinicians, the labelling of people as mentally ill pushes them to the borders of society and takes away from them their intrinsic rights and privileges.

Social constructionism helps social workers in understanding that whilst political and human pressure has helped in eliminating the incarceration of the mentally ill in mental hospitals, the distinction created by vocabulary on mental illness leads to the movement of centres of power to clinicians and undermines efforts for self determination and community integration. Such medical and psychological vocabularies constitute obstacles to more inclusive mental health programmes and undermine social understanding of people with mental disorders.