

Social constructionism, identity and the concept of deviance assignment

[Sociology](#)



Social Constructionism, Identity and the Concept of Deviance Social constructionist use the term social construction to imply that our understanding of the world in which we live is constructed from the social interactions we have on a daily basis. In reference to identity, social constructionist theory (SCT) proposes that we as social beings actively construct our identities using social tools as the means in which to construct our identities, the foremost one being language. This particular theory views identity as conditional and self motivated as well as being related to one's culture.

Although other theories on identity consider the personal and social identity to be separate, SCT considers the personal and social identity to be one and the same, which is then used as the social means that makes it possible for us to navigate through life (Hewitt, 2007). Essentially the main purpose of this essay is to help the reader develop an understanding of how identities are constructed in regards to the social constructionist theory, as well as give a better understanding of the concept of the term deviance.

Language is without a doubt one of humankind's most influential social tool, which is what makes it possible for people to communicate effectively as well as share our own understanding of the world around us to create what social scientist call " natural understanding" (Hewitt, 2007). However, the fact that language is designed and constructed, this fact alone suggests that concepts such as identity are constructed according to social interaction.

According to Ann Phoenix when someone tries to get a better understanding of self through taking the Twenty Statements Test, our social relationships

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and roles are responsible for constructing our identities. Another example of constructing identity was given by Kenneth Gergen; a personal account of his identity depicts how his own identity was constructed through social relationships. He associated his own central identity with a pen, although through his esteem of his parents he acknowledged that he could also gain influential social status as a published academic.

He did not consider this a natural development, rather an aspect of his life which he constructed himself, hence constructing his own identity (Mapping Psychology, 2002). Another aspect of constructing identity can be applied to the concept of deviance, symbolic interactionist refer to deviance using the labeling theory, which refers to the meanings that stem from labels, symbols, actions, and reactions that people have toward one another. This theory states that behaviors are only deviant if and when society labels them as deviant.

This being the case, members of society that have conformed to what is considered non-deviant behavior, (normal behavior) then interpret behaviors that go against social norms as deviant and as such, attach the label of deviant onto those individuals (Hewitt, 2007). The concept of deviance fits right into the SCT because the individuals that are labeled deviant have in some way shape or form constructed the deviant identity that warrants such a label.

Our autobiographical narratives also support the construction of identity, by using cultural models of self narration as well as drawing on our own experiences, who we associate with, when and where, all have an impact on

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how we tell our stories (Hewitt, 2007). This serves in understanding how identities are fluid and are always changing from situation to situation, an aspect which anyone from the psychosocial school of thought would disagree with.

As language dominates the reasoning of this theory, it's worth understanding how the meanings we associate with it affect the way we assemble our identities (Hewitt, 2007). Language is chosen in function of the discourses available in that society at that time. Research has supported this by observing that people select different ways of answering the Twenty Statement Test depending on whether their society is considered collectivist or individualist (Mapping Psychology, 2002).

Collectivist societies such as China describe themselves in regards to their relationships to other people, their place in society, where as the Unites States is actually an individualist society, and as such, are more focused on their selves as individuals within society, without including the contexts of their identities(Hewitt, 2007). People with physical disabilities strive to alter the way language is used to describe them; this lends further support in understanding how the discourses available are used to construct identity (Mapping Psychology, 2002).

The historical period and culture have immense effect on the social tools available to us to construct identity and thus are crucial in understanding the formation of identity. This can be reflected by taking the historical and cultural contexts in which theories of identity have been produced, such theories as, psychoanalytic theory, social cognition theory, learning theory

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and psychosocial identity theory. Erickson's psychosocial identity theory was influenced by his own turbulent adolescent years.

Being raised by his mother and step father, his social world within that historical context led him to concentrate his theories on identity crisis and the importance of adolescence (Mapping Psychology, 2002). SCT benefits from not being originated by a single author who may have had historical and cultural limitation but rather is a theory that encompasses all ideas socially produced (Mapping Psychology, 2002). This theory thus makes no distinction between personal and social identities. In trying to understand the concept of identity the present theory offers a useful interpretation of the purpose of identity.

Unlike psychosocial theory which suggests that identity is an achievement, SCT suggest that the identities we construct for ourselves are also a social tool which enables us to shape our behavior (Hewitt, 2007). In an account of " life as a disabled child" (Mapping Psychology, 2002) identity is used as a resource " Can we go early Miss, because we're disabled" (Mapping Psychology, 2002). The fluidity and change from situation to situation can also be observed in this account when the child states "...we're not, always disabled" (Mapping Psychology, 2002) as a result the setting changing to accommodate wheelchair basket ball.

This furthers the idea that identities are provision and dynamic. A key aspect to understanding identity is to comprehend diversity and difference. SCT can explain how different identities can be formed in response to the same event. For example the situated identity can affect the development of

specific sensitivities to certain events. And other identities such as social and personal identities can be considered the identities that motivate and shape the way we respond to other people and their roles in the situation as well as ultimately causing us to form new situated identities (Hewitt, 2007).

Take president Barack Obama for example, he is a liberal Democrat and his political views are sided to the far left, this fact has produced considerably different reactions depending on how the public identifies with him. For instance, a percentage of the black population find themselves conflicted, on one hand they want to support the first black president, on the other hand they are motivated to stand up for their own conservative values, the ultimate decision will depend on whether their identity as being conservative Republicans prevail over that of being black. This is a perfect example of the social constructionist theory that people construct their own beliefs about the groups for which they consider themselves a part of. This further illustrates that no specific identity can be considered central and that single identities are actually decentered and function as a result of their association to others (Hewitt, 2007).

Another example would be individuals with physical disabilities; they are likely to deny having one collective disabled identity, specifically because people with disabilities have a propensity to view their disability differently, whether they have the same disability or not. The social constructionist theory is essential in helping someone develop the understanding that identity is a product of one's relationship with society, and that all concepts in life including identity are given meaning through the use of language.

The meanings that one correlates with language are greatly influenced by the individual's interpretation of the language based on the historical and cultural settings in which they live. Theories that suggest that identity is "natural" are fundamentally flawed, specifically because we as human beings construct what is known as natural, through our creation of language.

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