Applying Social Constructionist Epistemology to Research in Psychology

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Abstract

This contribution presents three methods for collecting information on research in psychology, inspired by the premises of social constructionism. First, we propose that the position of not knowing allows formulating research questions that balanced the power relationship among the researcher and child participants living on the streets. Then, we present a new methodology of joint construction of life stories with adolescents in conflict with the law, who are deprived from freedom. Finally, we exhibit how social constructionism led to the recognition of multiple voices in the study of social support with migrant women in Bolivia.

Keywords: research in psychology, social constructionism, methodology, position of not knowing, joint construction of stories, vulnerable population.

Introduction

This article is the result of a seminar on social constructionist epistemology, conducted as part of our doctoral training. As a product of this seminar, our investigations were profoundly transformed, allowing us to find new directions and generate new findings. In this sense, we present three methods of data collection in the field of psychology, with populations in situations of social vulnerability. These methodologies were motivated by the principles of social constructionism. We hope this contribution will inspire other doctoral students who are beginning the journey.

First, we present a theoretical review of the main ideas of this epistemology, applied to research. Then, we describe and explain the basic premises of the social constructionism research in the field of psychology and finally we present three types of data collection methodologies.

Social constructionism was linked to psychology in a moment of crisis in the research area (Hosking and Morley, 2004). However, it had been promoted since long before that (Jost and Kruglansky, 2002). Its birth can be sifted, through the influence of three main sources: the Goffman dramaturgical approach (1959), the publishing of The Social Construction of

Reality of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Symbolic Constructionism (Maths and Meltzer, 1972).

On the other hand, as a current of thought, it grew due to the contribution of several authors (Yu and Sun, 2012), which included Saussure's contribution to structural linguistics observation; Wittgenstein's philosophical view, illustrating that the meaning of words is derived from their public use; Barthes criticism of the method of interpreting texts based on aspects of identity and intentions of its author; Derrida, who suggested deconstruction of words, which implies that words refer only to other words and, the sociological critique of Foucault on power and control of knowledge, through its standardization.

However, the origin of social constructionism in psychology is attributed to Kenneth Gergen. The proposal made by this author began with the challenging idea of understanding psychology as a product of the interaction between people and the historical, cultural and social context within a specific period of time (Gergen, 1973) and since then, his ideas and premises have been settling and expanding immensely.

Social constructionism is applied both in clinical practice and in research in psychology. When applied to clinical practice, client´s narratives are understood as a result of social relationships and the need to maintain coherent and intelligible with the expectations and demands of society (Anderson, 2012). In other words, it proposes that psychological reality is determined by the language and social consensus through which we understand the world (Young & Collin, 2004). When applied to the field of research, an inquiry is seen as a collaborative process between those involved (researchers and participants), in the construction of new ways of knowledge (McNamee, 2012). So, as suggested by Cisneros-Puebla (2007), the actors involved in research construct meanings and realities within the interaction process.

This also implies that the role of the researcher needs to become transparent in both data collection and subsequent analysis. Furthermore, the analysis includes the relationship between the researcher and the participants as an active part of the data. Thus, the findings are not presented independently and objectively, but as a result of the subjective construction (Lock and Strong, 2010), which is a relevant and unique result of the moments of interaction between the researcher(s) and the participants (Arce, 2005).

Moreover, knowledge produced in the investigative encounter can not relinquish from the linguistic, historical and cultural context from which both actors come from, but rather, it is understood as a product of interdependence and exchange of those factors (Gergen, 1989; Cisneros Puebla, 2007).

Finally, researchers conceive social constructionism theories as a product of society at a given time and in a given context (Gergen, 2007). Thus, psychological discourses that provide a frame of reference for research are understood as social products within cultural traditions (Romaioli, 2011) that have the power to generate or degenerate the people described (McNamee, 2012).

To complete the panorama of the implementation of social constructionism in research in psychology, we present and describe some essential premises in the following paragraph.

Principles of Social Constructionism Applied to Research in Psychology

Starting from the work of Burr (1996), we summarize and explain eight premises of social constructionist epistemology applied to the field of research in psychology:

1) It is anti-realist: it understands psychology as a socially constructed discipline, based on the interactions of authors with their historical, cultural and social context. Thus, findings depend on the moment when research is conducted; therefore, they may not be generalizable, absolute, or replicable.

2) It is anti-essentialist: it challenges the psychological notion that people have a unique nature which can be discovered. This implies that people are in a constant movement and growing process, thus by the time the researcher approaches a person, s/he has already changed.

3) It is based on the understanding that language constitutes reality: researchers seek to be aware of the theoretical frameworks from which the investigations are born; nonetheless, theoretical references are considered to be embedded in language that shapes thinking and understanding of the world.

4) It focuses on interaction and social practices: It does not intend to take an *X-ray* (emphasis added) of the subjects under investigation. It rather understands the impossibility to grasp the individual essence. That is why the interaction process from which the data is generated, it is also part of the analysis.

5) It recognizes the impossibility of the existence of a universal psychology: on the contrary it comprises the historical, cultural and social context of psychological knowledge and analyzes it as a part of the research data.

6) It understands investigation as a form of social action: therefore, it invites researchers to reflect on the responsibility that accompanies the action of writing about other people. Consequently, the language used to present findings is carefully constructed as it may influence the way in which persons under investigation relate to society and its institutions and vice versa.

7) It focuses on processes: it seeks to generate knowledge from the dynamics within the interaction of relationships. It emphasizes on processes more than structures; therefore, knowledge is understood as something that is constructed, not something one possesses. Consequently, the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched is balanced, whereby everyone brings their experience and expertise in their own fields to the research encounter.

8) It promotes curiosity within the research process: this attitude is based on the premise of *not knowing*, presented by Anderson and Goolishian (1992) that challenges the researcher to deviate from theories or models that attempt to explain or make sense of their own data.
Rather it is an invitation to recognize research as a liberating experience, where the researcher is willing to acknowledge which data fits with their prior knowledge and which does not.
Based on these principles, in the following section we will present practical examples of data collection methodologies inspired by social constructionism.

Applying the Principles of Social Constructionism to Research in Psychology: Three Practical Experiences

In the year 2010, the Bolivian Catholic University "San Pablo" opened the Doctorate Program in Psychology for the first time. In order to be subscribed to this program we had to submit research proposals containing the research design we would follow. In this context, and unaware of the social constructionist epistemology, we presented our projects following a positivist stance. Throughout the process of the doctoral training, we transformed our research inspired by the ideas presented in the above sections. In the following paragraphs, we showcase this process of transformation.

Researching with Children Living on the Street: Transitions from the Position of Power to the Position of Not Knowing (Marcela Losantos)

In this section I will describe the transformation of my research thanks to the position of *not knowing*. This position benefited the process of data collection with children and adolescents living on the streets of the city of La Paz - Bolivia, allowing myself to hear their voices regarding their stay in the streets and to understand this phenomenon as a much more complex process than only their individual decision.

My relationship with this group of population began in the year 2003, when I took up a position in a welfare institution where I worked for 10 years. Within this time, my knowledge about them, in terms of how they were defined, their characteristics, lifestyle and intervention strategies for this population, was shaped by the descriptions I found in the literature and institutional discourses.

When I later started a research about this group in 2010, my construction about them met the criteria of a high risk population who had broken their family ties and needed to be rescued from the streets and reintegrated into society. The aim of the investigation was to answer why children remained in the street, when there were other alternatives that included family reintegration or institutionalization and, from my point of view, were better options than remaining homeless. Thus, the inquiry began by trying to understand the linkage of these children to the streets, which I aimed at approaching from the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1985). From this theory, the primary bond that the child establishes with her/his caregiver is crucial for the way his/her subsequent relationships are configured. Therefore, understanding that the main cause of these children for being in the street was family breakdown, it was logical to assume that most of them

would present an attachment disorder. The procedure would follow a quantitative design: designing a test, submitting it to assessment of reliability and validity criteria, applying it to a statistically representative sample, and finally identifying the attachment disorders to understand why they prefer the street rather than safer spaces like home, school or a welfare institution.
At first I felt satisfied, for I had found a theory that would allow me to explain the reason of the *erratic and improvident behaviors* of children living on the streets. However, after a few months a crisis came when I found dozens of studies describing what I also wanted to describe. A second moment of crisis appeared when I began a literature review and found a huge amount of research about children in street situations detailing their characteristics, lifestyles, places of origin, types and family structures, street group dynamics, health status, etc., which led me to conclude that there was nothing new to *discover* to what I had not learned myself working in the institution.
At this crucial moment, I had the opportunity to participate for the first time in a summer institute with people who worked in several practices inspired by social constructionism. This encounter allowed me to make a radical turn in the way my research had been originally planned. Particularly inspiring was learning about the position of *not knowing,* presented by Goolishan and Anderson (1992).

This term was conceived within the clinical practice of psychology, to designate a therapeutic stance through which the therapist seeks to understand the client´s experiences from learning *about* the client, but also learning *from* the client, considering him as an expert in his own life. This does not imply that the therapist denies prior knowledge about psychological theories, but refuses to stay in the position of knowing, in order to transcend to the curious position that allows him to modify his knowledge throughout this relationship (Jankowski, Clark and Ivey, 2000). Applied to research, the position of not knowing involves an attitude that transforms both, how the researcher poses the research questions and how data analysis is conducted, thereby enriching the understanding of the participant's experience.
Inspired by this premise, I began to understand research as a joint experience, where children would be the ones guiding the journey. Thus the first turn, motivated by the position of not knowing, was the research question. The first version sought to answer, what were the explanations that allowed us to understanding why children remained on the street? From this version, my intention, as an expert, was to reveal why children chose the street stemming from attachment disorders, which surely I would find. However, when my conversations with them started, a much deeper question aroused: What do they have to say about the decision of living on the streets?

Understanding the answer to the research question was not mine to construct but theirs to give, led me to a second turn. I could have power, as a stakeholder of theoretical information, but they also had power by having factual information about the street life. Therefore, neither I as the researcher nor the children as the researched had more or less knowledge; on the contrary, we possessed information that, in interaction, might result in the construction of knowledge.
This shift had a great impact on an even more important level: my position as an adult researcher. I was able to recognize in myself a prior attitude of superiority, from which I used to

think that children did not have enough knowledge to tell their stories and experiences, thereby I needed to collect them. It was then, when the third turn aroused.

To recognize that children were experts in their own lives, were autonomous and reflective of all their decisions, led to a feeling of respect that I had never experienced before. I realized then, that the best way to build knowledge was through my curious conversations with them.
The first investigation took place from a photography workshop, where the children took pictures to answer the question: what would you like people to know about your situation of living on the street? The images and stories were compelling. A complex plot of contextual, institutional, cultural and social circumstances influenced children´s permanence in the streets.
The next phases of research were constructed from the conversations that began from a single question: would you like to tell me about your life? The question did not intend to talk about a specific topic; on the contrary, the purpose was to let them propose topics that were important to them, and so, I started collecting stories where the questions came from the previous answers. Thus, when analyzing the conversations, two recurring themes were particular named: the importance of the street group and the use of *el vuelo*; I decided to approach them again to verify if they would like to deepen into these relevant topics.

Upon their approval I decided then to investigate these two issues separately. Questions about the street group would be addressed on conversations that began with the question: what does the group you belong to mean to you? And again the next question depended on the previous answer. This led me to an understanding of what the street group meant, namely not only a space for social interaction, but also a place where they felt protected and could redeem their roles par excellence, such as from bad children in their previous family life, to good children within the group; and from bad parents with their biological children, to good parents with new children from the group.

Finally, we reflected upon their exploration of using vuelo. My work experience had shown me that children had a strong shaped discourse in this respect that included explanations regarding that it helped them to survive, allowing them to deal with hunger and cold. I feared that, if this issue was addressed in a conversation, the answers would lead to the same conclusions. Therefore, I proposed to investigate it from what we, in concert, decided to call creative activities. Hence, I presented a series of seven activities to the group that included: a) the use of drawings about the vuelo, b) writing fictional stories where the vuelo would be a character, c) collages, d) making bracelets where each thread would represent a meaning given to the vuelo, e) writing a song regarding the use of the vuelo f) making a theater play where the vuelo would be represented as a character and, g) a nonverbal representation of their relationship with el vuelo. I asked the participants to vote in order to determine which of the proposed activities motivated them to participate. The final selection included four activities.

This approach allowed me to understand that the use of el vuelo had a multiplicity of meanings, depending on their public or private use, which must be taken into account in the design of interventions.

In this way, the position of not knowing guided the transformation of both, the research itself and my role as a researcher and the role of children as active participants, generating two important benefits: 1) the research questions were posed in interaction with the participants. Consequently, children were not merely passive transmitters of information, but active participants in the construction of knowledge 2) the relationship of power, always present in the context of research, became balanced, understanding that both actors in the research process, myself and the children, had power in different areas of experience and expertise.

Joint Construction of Life Stories in the Context of Deprivation of Freedom (Tatiana Montoya)

In this section I will present how social constructionist epistemology has offered me a space for conversation, through which adolescents deprived from freedom (ADF) as participants, and myself as a researcher, jointly constructed the meaning of being deprived of freedom.
This contribution is divided into three parts. First, I will contextualize the problem of ADF; then I will present the methodology of joint construction of stories inspired by the social constructionist principles and, finally, I will reflect on the advantages of using this methodology in contexts that may appear to be adverse for research.

Currently, there are 2038 adolescents and young people between 12 and 25 years old who are in prison in Bolivia. Out of this, 150 have a sentence (Ayllon, 2013; Ceretti, 2013) while the rest remain in prison preventively. Furthermore, once in prison, they could remain their for months or even years without a sentence, either because of a delay of their audiences, the absence of a party or components of the judiciary system or the shortage of personnel responsible organizing these processes. Unfortunately, these facts reflect a violation of their rights; principally, their right to be heard.

Given these conditions, any effort of research that seeks to hear them, becomes virtually impossible. In my case, it took me five months to get permission to enter the detention centers and, once inside, they imposed several limitations on my research, such as not allowing me to talk with the adolescents alone, nor to record the conversations.
Given this difficult context for research, it became necessary to develop an appropriate collaborative methodology for collecting information. Therefore, the methodology of joint construction of life stories emerged.

This methodology implied promoting discussions with adolescents, which were written on a laptop computer, with the particularity that the transcript of these stories was conducted simultaneously with the conversation. This mechanism allowed me as a researcher, to talk with the participants and to write down the conversations at the same time, while participants read the transcriptions simultaneously. In doing so, we added details and meanings and resignified life stories together.

Next, I present an outline of the main steps of this methodology:

1) Joint presentation.
This step had two moments: At first, I conversed with the adolescents about the initial thoughts we had about each other and about the expectations we both had of the research. This step, although apparently obvious, was a key to build the foundations for the emergence of meanings.
In the second moment, the logistical aspects of the methodology were agreed upon. I would sit with each one of them, side to side, and as we talked about their story and the events of their life, I would write them on the computer. If there was any doubt I would explicit it, and if they wanted to they could clarify it to me. On the other hand, they could correct or add something to the story if they wanted to.

2) The Joint Impulse.
After the first step, we began the joint construction of meaning of being in a situation of deprivation of liberty, starting from the question: What does it mean for you to be deprived of liberty? This step was an invitation that motivated both the adolescents and me to initiate the construction of their stories.

3) Methodology implementation: The joint construction of life stories.
At this instance, the conversation started. Although I had prepared a question guide, the dialogue arose naturally leading to many of my questions to be answered without even asking them.

Once the session was over, we read the story together and we clarified, added and modified fragments of information that the adolescent was not comfortable with, when the meaning varied during the narration of the story, when they wanted to offer further explanation, and/or if I needed some clarification.

Furthermore, once outside the detention centers, I read the transcript of the stories and if there were any questions or the need to delve into some aspect, then I would include it for the next meeting. Adolescents also had the opportunity to do the same process, meaning they could reconstruct their story and their meanings on our next meeting.
Additionally, I also used fieldnote diary throughout the entire research which was also available to adolescents. In this diary, doubts and emotions that arose in the course of the conversations were exposed.

Thus, the impossibility to record the adolescents' voices, inspired a new way of writing their life stories, giving them the possibility to read, assign meaning and reevaluate that meaning on a computer screen; also giving them the opportunity to take ownership of their own meanings, in a particularly collaboratively way.
Moreover, I experienced that the research process had an etical stance because both the transcription and the fieldnote diary were available to adolescents, entailing a transparent data management.

The joint construction of life stories allowed me to conduct my research in a context where both the adolescents and I found ourselves in a situation of deprivation of liberty from different points of view: adolescents were locked up, and I had little freedom to do my research. Nonetheless, through this methodology, we both listened, we both were heard, and we both learned the meanings we assigned to the situation of being in detention.

This way of constructing meaning was fundamental when assessing how much impact was caused by the committed offense, how it had affected their lives, their immediate context and especially the victims. This process, new to them, also helped them to organize and plan their future, agreeing that the criminal environment was harmful; and that if they went back there they might commit crime again.

Finally, some of the participants realized that despite being aware of the damage caused to others and themselves, they had no choice because of their economic situation. They also considered that the fact of belonging to gangs, being homelessness, or being adolescents in street situation forced them to commit crimes. Hence, the mere fact of writing and having their own story – giving meaning to their reality- on a computer screen, generated other versions of themselves, redeeming themselves from the committed crime by displaying the difficulties and successes that they had been through in their life.

As for my resignification process, I noticed that, word by word, I changed my way of seeing these adolescents, from judging them to giving them the opportunity to be heard, which made me realized how involved I was in their situation and in the small alternatives that society and I, as part of it, could offer them. This made me feel part of the construction of meanings of their reality.

The social constructionist epistemology as conciliation of the recognition of multiple voices in a study of social support (Mariana Santa Cruz)

In this section I intend to present the course of my doctoral research entitled "Social support and migrant mothers" conducted with women who had moved from the countryside of Bolivia to the zone of "Los Lotes" in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. During the research process, questions emerged, which demanded an attitude of reflection as a researcher and the abandonment of traditional research paradigms.

My first approach to the migrant mothers, was with the intention to make a quantitative research that would allow me to identify the type of social support perceived by them during their adaptation to their new context. Thus, I initiated a review of theories and studies on female migration and social support. Most of these investigations concluded in generating a list of sources of social support of different types, such as instrumental, occupational and emotional. Moreover, very few of them focused on the understanding of social support in vulnerable populations.

It was in this scenario that a first profound topic about the research process emerged.; Considering that the migrant mothers who participated in this study belonged to the indigenous Quechua culture, they have social practices that they take with them during their migration processes, such as the *Minga,* which entails a practice where the community works collaboratively to achieve a common goal. This factor alone, made the understanding of social support very difficult from the perspective of standardized instruments.

My second concern arose from the interaction with the institution that offered help to this group, where I was able to conduct my research. The organization allowed me an unrestricted rapprochement to the population, offering me an adequate physical space where mothers went to carry out their daily activities such as food preparation, cleaning and childcare. During my participation in these activities, there were conversations that revealed their strong desire to share their migration experiences with me.

Given these circumstances I wondered: could I conduct a research that would provide knowledge created within the community and not just restrict myself to collect data as an instrument? Above all because I was seeking to understand how the informal social support network was created and how it was functioning within this community.

This question was intensified as I continued my visits and the idea of collecting data on social support with the use of instruments was becoming an alternative totally disconnected from what I was experiencing at that moment. In that sense, I decided to work with a qualitative approach of data collection, which I considered to be more consistent with my experiences during my working in the field.

At that point I started to bring a fieldnote diary with me, in order to write down all those experiences, comments, ideas and even informal conversations that I had with the mothers. Every visit to the dining room, where they carried out their activities, allowed me to get closer to understanding the construction and functioning of social support; making social events visible, throughout the telling of their stories.

So, I started the journey with the narratives that emerged from the participants themselves. Nevertheless, a third question surfaced. Everyday, when leaving the institution, the conversations with the mothers flooded my thoughts generating reflections on the methodology and on the construction of social support. I wrote these reflections in my diary, which later on continued to become dialogues with myself, as they were written in the first person. Thus, I realized that I needed to involve them given the fact that the women´s life stories and informal talks were a joint construction with myself.

This insight was reaffirmed during my participation in a workshop of ethnography, where I discovered autoethnography. This discovery allowed me to recognize myself as part of the research and to understand from what position I was participating. Additionally to the scientific

knowledge that I possessed on the subject, I was also a migrant woman who had migrated some years ago.

I started writing my autoethnographic document using the notes from my field diary, which eventually turned into stories of my own experiences, thoughts and feelings that, at any given moment, could interact with the voices of the life stories of migrant mothers regarding social support. Through this exercise, I discovered a great richness which was explained by Richardson (1999): "neither the document should be separated from who writes it; nor the methodology that he uses to get to know reality".

In this way, due to the methodological questions and the method of autoethnography in response to them I was able to acquire:

a) The recognition of elements of social support that are not visible to contemporary theories as experiences, feelings and ideas of leader mothers with histories that opened up spaces for the construction of social support. These elements arose from conversations that were taken as research data itself, putting: "In the foreground, the moment by moment interplay of interlocutors and tracing meaning within patterns of interdependence" (Gergen, 2007, p.233).

b) Self-reflection through autoethnography that allowed me to describe the questions I had to face and the paths I needed to take to respond to these inquiries.

In such a way, my doctoral research was transformed through social constructionist principles, applied to narrative methods. This turn allowed me to understand that reality is manifested through human action withinrelational processes.

Conclusion

This contribution aimed to share our experiences as researchers, presenting three doctoral inquiries in psychology inspired by social constructionism, in vulnerable populations in Bolivia.

In the first place, we propose that the position of *not knowing* was able to transform the data collection methodology with children living on the streets, making it a process of joint construction between researcher and researched. The process of interviewing, where the interviewer asks questions and the interviewed responds to them, was transformed into a conversation where questions were born from the answers of the participants. That allowed to balance the power relationship in the context of the investigation.

Secondly, we presented the methodology of joint construction of life stories with adolescents deprived from liberty. Based on this methodology, a collaborative process with adolescents was established, that not only allowed the researcher to give meaning to the situation of incarceration, but allowed participants to construct a meaning. Moreover, it allowed them to reevaluate themselves by constructing new versions of themselves in each conversation.

Finally, the abandonment of traditional research paradigms and inspiration provided by the social constructionist epistemology allowed us to study social support through narrative methods such

as autoethnography, life stories and small stories that recognized migrant mothers and the researcher's voices; considering the conversations as research data and thus, promoting the joint construction of stories.

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End Note

[1] Volatile substance composed of gasoline and thinner that is inhaled to produce psychoactive effects.

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