Applications of interpretive and constructionist research methods in adolescent research: philosophy, principles and examples

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Abstract

This paper attempts to give a brief introduction to interpretivism, constructionism and constructivism. Similarities and differences between interpretivism and constructionism in terms of their histories and branches, ontological and epistemological stances, as well as research applications are highlighted. This review shows that whereas interpretivism can be viewed as a relatively mature orientation that contains various traditions, constructionism is a looser trend in adolescent research, and in the narrow sense denotes the "pure" relativist position, which refers to a discursive approach of theory and research. Both positions call for the importance of clearly identifying what type of knowledge and knowledge process the researcher is going to create, and correctly choosing methodology matching with the epistemological stance. Examples of adolescent research adopting interpretivist and constructionist orientations are presented.

Keywords: adolescent research; constructionism; constructivism; interpretivism.

Introduction

One of the paradigms that has been used to conduct qualitative research in social science is called interpretivism, or

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"interpretive social science" (1), sometimes interchangeably named social constructivism (2). It is even presented as "the constructivist/constructionist/interpretivist paradigm" (3) or "the constructivist (or interpretivist) paradigm" (4) held as an alternative to the positivist paradigm. In most cases, interpretivism, constructivism and constructionism are used interchangeably. In this article, we attempt to clarify the three terms, present our understanding based on comparison of interpretivism and constructionism, and further illustrate the differences in empirical studies.

Interpretivism, constructionism and constructivism

Interpretivism is seen as a paradigm that differs from positivism but is not mutually exclusive with it. Theoretically and methodologically, there are various traditions in interpretivism, all of which come to light from an intellectual position that "takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world" (5) (p. 13). Interpretive inquirers attempt to discover and understand how people feel, perceive and experience the social world, aiming to gain in-depth meanings and particular motivation for their behaviors. They hold that it is necessary to understand how people's subjective interpretations of reality affect the formation of their reality in order to obtain complete explanations of social reality. In short, it is a position that argues against the positivistic notion of a passive, mechanistic and reactive human being.

Regarding the term "social constructionism", it is associated with much recent academic debate since the publication of "*The social construction of reality*" by Berger and Luckmann (6). This phrase, often used as *constructionism* for short, delivers the notion that "concepts, theories, scientific practices and bodies of knowledge are all items which may be socially constructed" (7) (p. 2). From a philosophical orientation, social constructionism can be seen as a loose assemble of diverse approaches such as "critical psychology", "discursive psychology", "discourse analysis", "deconstruction" and "poststructuralism" (8) (p. 1). There is no single portrayal of constructionism. Instead, it is "a rubric for a mosaic of research efforts" (p. 5) with various but common theoretical, methodological and empirical foundations and implications (9). What links varied constructionist researchers together is their shared motivations and ambitions (9), and key assumptions to its foundation (8). According to Burr (8), social constructionism takes a critical position against taken-for-granted knowledge, highlights historical and cultural

specificity, believes that knowledge is produced through daily interaction and maintains that our constructions are tied to power relations. As an empirical research format, conducting constructionist research is neither a synonym of qualitative inquiry nor an equivalence of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology or ethnomethodology (9). Instead, constructionist research is more often described as a type of effort to answer the questions of "what is constructed" and "how the construction process unfolds" (9) (p. 5).

Both social constructionists and constructivists hold a relativist position. They believe that the structures that exist outside cannot be objectively grasped, but they differ in their respective outlook on the importance of inner psychological structures and developmental courses vs. the significance of language, culture and social processes in the creation of one's constructions (10). Hence, the term constructionism is inclined to be applied as "a more socially center usage" (9) (p. 8), giving emphasis to "language", "narratives" and "sociohistorical and cultural processes" (9) (p. 60–61) as major aspects in understanding one's constructions (10), particularly in anthropology, sociology and some branches of psychology. In contrast, the application of constructivism is pertinent to science, mathematics and technology studies, as well as research on inner psychological space, for example, constructivist psychotherapy (9). When it refers to the inquiries in psychology, constructivists stress cognitive structures such as "core ordering processes", "deep structures", "neural feedback", "feedforward mechanisms" (p. 60–61) and the process of human development (10). In short, whereas social constructionists see the reality as a product of social processes (such as consensus and discourses), personal constructivists focusing on the person sees the reality as subjectively defined and it is "beauty on the beholder side".

Comparison of interpretivism and social constructionism

Generally, in terms of their origins and intellectual development, interpretivism and constructivism, or constructionism, or the term presented as interpretivism/constructivism, share some common history. The seeds of interpretivism can be traced back to the ideas of Immanuel Kant, who belongs to the German idealist tradition (5). Kant's work stresses that "human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head-process of the knowing subject" (11) (p. 63). In other words, an objective reality cannot be split from the individual who is experiencing, processing and marking the reality. This is also considered to be the central tenet of constructivist/constructionist thinking (6).

Much of Kant's thinking was later expanded by Edmund Husserl (12), the leading German philosopher whose inspiration of phenomenology, to some extent, became the foundation of interpretive research in social science (5). From the viewpoint of Husserl, it is in human consciousness itself that "reality" exists. It is not to reject the ontological existence of the outside world. The central argument is that "even its material reality comes into being through acts of social interpretation and meaningful sense making" (5) (p. 13). Thus, phenomenology

attaches importance to the way we organize and interpret our world, as well as to how we deal with these interpretations (5). The philosophical elements of phenomenology were assimilated by some pioneering social scientists, notably Max Weber (13) and Berger and Luckmann (6) into their distinct frameworks for understanding the social world (5).

Another prominent figure in the history of constructivism/interpretivism was Dilthey. Rejecting Cartesian reductionism and objective stress, Dilthey suggested the significant division between *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science) and *Geisteswissenschaft* (human science), where the former seeks for scientific explanation (*Erklaren*), whereas the latter aims to gain understanding (*Verstehen*) of the 'meaning' of social phenomena (14). The goal of constructivism/interpretivism is to understand the "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) from the standpoint of the research participant (6).

However, despite their common historical roots, interpretivism and constructionism developed their own branches or traditions. Interpretivists argue that explanatory models provided by inquirers should be rooted in "an understanding of some 'complex of meaning' that is ascribed to the actors involved" (15) (p. 5). Regarding interpretive tradition, major scholarly branches inspired by the phenomenological assumptions and interpretive ideas have developed in distinctive ways. According to Prasad (5), the divergent, yet shared, branches of interpretive traditions include (i) symbolic interaction, (ii) dramaturgy and dramatism, (iii) hermeneutics, (iv) ethnomethodology, and (v) ethnography. Symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy and ethnomethodology primarily evolve within sociology; hermeneutics and dramatism emerged from literary theory; and ethnography was developed within cultural anthropology (5). Here, we briefly outline these interpretivist traditions.

As a philosophical tradition, phenomenology contains an array of branches such as transcendental, hermeneutic and existentialist invariants, each of which denotes a particular position about the role of language and interpretation and the nature of being and human action (16). Generally speaking, phenomenology draws attention to the experience of people under particular circumstances and times, especially "the phenomena that appear in our consciousness as we engage with the world around us" (16) (p. 52). Proponents of phenomenology hold that we cannot separate the external world from our experience of it. With different situations, standpoints and conceptions of the objects, people's perceptions of the same phenomenon can be rather varied. According to Willig (16), two major approaches can be specified within phenomenological research, one of which is descriptive phenomenology and the other interpretive phenomenology. The first approach, also called empirical or psychological phenomenology (17), is informed by transcendental phenomenology that concerns the ideas and judgments implanted by perceptions. Descriptive phenomenology suggests that the researcher presents the phenomena experienced by participants while "bracketing" his/her own knowledge at the same time. By contrast, interpretive phenomenology or hermeneutical phenomenology (18) does not only attempt to grasp the attributes and textures of

participants' experience but also emphasizes the importance of interpretive engagement with the text and transcripts.

Symbolic interactionism is inherited from German phenomenology and American pragmatism, coming into view from the insights of George Herbert Mead (19) and Charles Horton Cooley (20). Although symbolic interactionism does not deny the idea about shared reality constructions stressed by traditional phenomenology, it takes more emphasis on the individual dimensions of interpretation, which are used to understand the construction of the self and its implications for meaningful social action (5).

The dramatic tradition as a version of interpretivism can be mainly identified in two forms, dramaturgy and dramatism (5). Dramaturgy is more concerned with understanding the microlevel of social interaction rather than offering systemic and structural analysis of the social world (5). It compares social life to a theater, stressing on the front stage and backstage of social life that requires researchers to examine "both public performances and behind-the-scene activities" (5) (p. 43). Unlike the basic assumption of dramaturgy of the theatricality of social life, dramatism (sometimes called rhetorical analysis) maintains that life is more like a drama than a theater, thus emphasizing meanings kept by performances of diverse actors instead of the estimated invention of social performances.

Hermeneutics originally referred to the activity of explaining and elucidating in order to make the vague more clear. By now it has set-up itself as a tradition dedicated to working with all types of texts (5), yet being neither a single nor abiding interpretive tradition. According to Sandage et al. (21), modern hermeneutics was formed by the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) who indicated the significant concept of *hermeneutical circle*, William Dilthey (1833–1911) who further elaborated hermeneutics beyond theoretical text into all types of behavioral and cultural consequences, and Martin Heidegger (1884–1976) who underlined uncovering hidden meanings and the role of language in serving to shape reality. Based on these ideas, hermeneutical tradition is infused with more critical elements. Han-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) pointed out the tenet of all interpretation as value-laden and the two arcs of the hermeneutical circle (21). Whereas Jurgen Habermas (1929–) developed the "hermeneutical dialectics" emphasizing intersubjectivity and mutual understanding, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) proposed a dialectical hermeneutic philosophy that integrates existential phenomenology with the more empirical disciplines of structural linguistics (21). Provided the varied philosophical impacts on hermeneutics, there is no single line in research practice. For instance, whereas critical hermeneutics is concerned about revealing the power relation behind the text, phenomenological hermeneutics is more aware of interpreters' tendencies and biases during their hermeneutical work, and realist hermeneutics stresses a dialectical view of reality as both discovered and constructed (21).

Ethnomethodology, a blend of phenomenological sensibility with an interest in the social practice of reality creation, refers to the approaches and procedures employed by ordinary people to make sense of and to act on their daily lives. It emerged out of the ideas of Garfinkel (22), who indicated that social structures are fabricated through a daily and ongoing process by numerous experienced individuals. The central question attempted to be answered by ethnomethodological tradition is how social actors come to know, and know in common, what they are doing and where they are carrying out their activities (5). For the tradition of ethnography, it evolves within cultural anthropology. It refers to an array of methods and methodologies characterized by in-depth field work and participant observation (5).

All the interpretive branches presented above are steadily based on the interpretive insights which seriously concern subjective meaning. According to Prasad (5), these interpretive traditions share two tenets, one of which is the common goal to understand the process of subjective reality construction in all aspects of social life. In other words, the priority is to understand meaning and intentionality rather than causal explanations. The other tenet is the emphasis on social dimensions of reality construction, which is referred to as intersubjectivity by phenomenologists. Put it in another way, although there are a multitude of personal interpretations in a given situation, the inquirers strive to gain the common construction and shared interpretations and reality. All the interpretive branches have integrated the ideas of social construction, meaning, intentionality, intersubjectivity, while they are modified and expanded for specific research interests (5).

For constructionism, with the publication of *"The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge"* in 1966, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann brought the phrase "social constructionism" into heated academic debate (7). They were primarily interested in how knowledge was formed by social processes, especially in how meanings are generated through social interactions. Later on, an array of social scientists with diverse methodological and theoretical interests conducted research under the general rubric of constructionism (23). As a result, constructionism absorbs nutrients from critical theory, feminism, literary theory, rhetoric and more, and then "reverberated across the social sciences since the 1960s" (9) (p. 3). Being used as a frame of understanding and a vocabulary for conducting empirical research, as well as a starting place for some postmodernists and critical scientists, constructionism becomes "a highly variegated mosaic of itself" (9) (p. 4). It can also be resembled to a big umbrella, under which intellectual scholars from diverse disciplines share some fundamental arguments, thus constituting a loose assemble.

The central argument of constructionism focuses on reconsidering the widely accepted positivist/empiricist position of reality and knowledge, and maintains that scientific knowledge claims are mediated by culture, history and ideology. In other words, our perceptions and experience are never a direct reflection of the world where we live but the products of our active construction. This does not indicate that nothing can be really known, but that there are "knowledges" rather than "knowledge" (16) (p. 7). The constructionists thereby do not focus on some objective reality but on the various meanings with which our worlds are implanted (24). To understand the constructing process, language is a key concept. The same event can be presented in diverse ways, and all the ways of depicting it could be acceptable. Take Willig's (16) example,

we can describe a glass of water as "half-full" or "half-empty", the former expression conveying a positive annotation about the condition, whereas the latter stressing the shortage. Yet, either of the descriptions is accurate. Indeed, the attention to the role of language in reality construction has a far-reaching impact on some traditionally more empiricist disciplines. Since the 1990s, some psychological researchers have showed growing interest in the social constructionist perspective in general (25–27) and in discourse approaches in particular (28).

It is based on the arguments above that the constructionist researchers call for reconstructing ourselves and the social world towards a more facilitating way. According to Burr (24), if we acknowledge that what ourselves and others being are constructions rather than objective reflections, and it is human beings that create these constructions, it is possible not only to reconstruct ourselves in the individual level but also to reconsider the entire classifications such as gender, race, disability and illness. Thus, in the practice of constructionist research, most constructionist inquirers address the questions of how social reality is assembled, what is the constructed reality, and sometimes a combination of how and what (9).

Constructionist research could be further described as varying in terms of their focuses, scopes or forms. Based on different criteria, constructionist theory and research can be generally differentiated into two dimensions: micro vs. macro, and objective vs. interpretive. For the micro- vs. macro-constructionist theory and research, the former type is mainly concerned with micro structures of language use in interactions, whereas the latter type focuses on the role of linguistic and social structures in shaping our social world (8, 9). Despite the differentiation, these two versions of social constructionism should not be regarded as mutually exclusive (8).

The micro-scope of constructionism concerns reality construction within daily discourse among people in interaction. Inquirers hold that there is no version of the worlds that can be viewed as more real than others, and that the text of the discourse is the only reality we have access to (8). They work with face-to-face or interactional situations of construction courses (29, 30), focusing upon narrative, talk, situated interaction, local culture and interaction order (9), which resonate the interests of symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists. One representative approach of micro-constructionism is discursive psychology. Inspired by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, discursive psychology is concerned about "the negotiation of meaning in local interaction in everyday contexts" (16) (p. 95), that is, the clinical processes of construction of accounts in interaction. Studies with a discursive psychology approach concentrate on how speakers manage issues of stake and interest. Whereas some of them specify discursive tactics such as "disclaiming" and "footing" and investigate their function within some particular circumstance, others make use of "metaphors and analogies, direct quotations, extreme case formulations, graphic descriptions, consensus formulations, stake inoculation and many more" (16) (p. 97).

Although macro-social constructionism discloses the constructive power of language, it views it as shaped by material or social structures, social relations and institutionalized practice (8). It is concerned with constructed social forms and collective representations which have been demonstrated in sociological analyses of deviance (31) and social problems (32). The concept of power also attracted close attention to this macroscopic application, often viewed as embedded in historical and cultural discourses. The representative approach of macro-constructionism is Foucauldian discourse analysis. It is rooted in the work of Michel Foucault and some post-structuralists who stress the role of language in the formation of social and psychological life (16). According to Willig (16), Foucauldian discourse analysis focuses on the available discursive resources in a particular cultural and historical context, and explores the implications for local people. This research approach "sets the analytic stage in terms of the historical/genealogical discourses that provide the institutional frameworks mediating subjectivity and everyday life" (9) (p. 7). However, Foucauldian discourse analysis and discursive psychology should not be viewed as completely distinct, as some researchers (33) suggest that it is possible to combine or synthesize these two research approaches.

Another way of distinguishing constructionist analytic forms hinges on what is being constructed. Two forms of constructionist analysis, objective and interpretive, stand on each end of a continuum. In objective analysis, according to Harris (23), what is constructed is the real state of affairs, actual behaviors, conditions or entities. By contrast, in more interpretive analysis, what are formulated are meanings of phenomena. In terms of the questions researchers asked, the former form focuses on why things occur as they do, whereas the latter addresses how things are defined as they are.

Objective constructionists assert that "something is 'socially constructed' when a real phenomenon derives its existence or its dimensions from other social factors" (23) (p. 6). What are made, produced or created are not interpretations but the real state of affairs. Instead of dealing with the "real things", interpretive social constructionism focuses upon "meanings" (23) (p. 5). Its core idea is that "the meaning of things is not inherent" (23) (p. 2). Interpretive social constructionism roots in a series of different traditions including pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology, as well as narrative analysis, cognitive sociology, semiotic sociology and post-modernism. Here what Harris (23) means about interpretive constructionism has some overlaps with the interpretive traditions as mentioned above, which nonetheless moves far beyond to a more recent intellectual development. Interpretive social constructionists argue that as the interpretation is guided by substantial and conceptual resources of agents and shaped by the social and physical restraints (9), everything can be presented in various ways. These two positions can be further differentiated in terms of essentialism, which means an inherent nature that builds something what it is. The objective constructionists hold that the real behaviors and traits are not inevitable but are conditioned by social factors, whereas the interpretive constructionists examine more cautiously what people claim to be the reason for some events, and how these claims are raised, validated and questioned (23). In other words, interpretive constructionism denotes meaning-centered essentialism rather than causal-centered essentialism held by objective constructionism.

Despite the identifiable distinction, Harris (23) maintained that the divergence between objective and interpretive constructionism is a matter of degree. Here, he located constructionism in a continuum ranging from realist to relativism, expanding the traditional understanding of constructionism to a broader scope. It is this widespread scope that reminds us to be cautious because even the same theoretical origin or conception can be used with different meanings. What we need is not the dismissal of the metaphor but we need "more precise, careful and self-conscious applications of it" (23) (p. 2). To achieve this, peculiar branches and approaches of constructionism should be specified. This is also what motivates us to clarify between interpretivism and constructionism in this paper.

Apart from the distinction of micro- vs. macro- and objective vs. interpretive constructionism, there are three types of constructionist research that should be noted (34). The first type of constructionist research is regarded as strict social constructionism, holding that one should not make assumptions about objectivity. The second type of constructionist research, named as objectivist social constructionist, proposes an objectivity stance compatible with empiricist orientation. The third type is contextual social constructionism, which is adopted by most constructionist research.

Given the diverse versions of interpretivism and constructionism, sometimes interpretivism and constructionism are even equally used. Thus, it is important to identify the ontological and epistemological positions when we claim to conduct *interpretivist* or *constructionist* research, so that the readers can understand what kind of interpretivism, constructionism or interpretivism/constructivism the researcher refers to. In addition to the specific traditions, interpretivism and constructionism can be further differentiated in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Ontology

Focusing on the nature of reality, ontological stance can be presented as "realism" and "relativism". Realism claims that an external world made up of structures and objects exists independently of our representations of it. Our representations including perceptions, thoughts, language and material images such as pictures are underlined by this reality (8). We can acquire knowledge about the reality in the form of a cause-effect relationship with one another. By contrast, relativist ontology suspects the "out-there-ness" of the world and highlights the diverse interpretations of it (16). Proponents of relativism argue that even if a reality described by the realist position exists, it is impossible for us to access it. The only things accessible are our different representations of the world, and none of them is more "true" than another. In principle, both interpretivism and constructionism/constructivism denotes relativist ontology.

For interpretivism, most of its traditions can be traced back to the phenomenological idea that objective reality is impossible for human beings to perceive because of the "intentionality" of our perception. They neither share the positivist view that our perceptions are directly determined by the outside world nor make any claim about the external world (24). What interpretivist researchers are interested in is the participants' subjective interpretations rather than the objective world. Nevertheless, if interpretivism is regarded as a continuum ranging from realism to relativism, a number of interpretivists tend to stand close to the realist side, labeling their research as, for instance, "hermeneutical realist" (21).

For constructionism and constructivism, they both reject the naive realism of positivism, sticking to a relativist position that takes up multiple and equally compelling realities. In essence, personal constructivists assert that reality is formulated in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an outwardly single entity. Research processes can be argued "to evoke, rather than to represent, realities being investigated" (15) (p. 282). Constructionists also question realism, holding that "real phenomena, our perceptions and experiences, are brought into existence and take the particular form that they do because of the langue that we share" (8) (p. 92). They claim that there exists no truth but a multitude number of reality constructions shaped by cultural, social and historical factors. Nothing is given or inevitable by nature. However, as suggested by Burr (8), although the tenets of social constructionism seem to orient automatically to a relativist position, some social constructionists (e.g., critical and objective constructionists) defend against this, holding that there is some reality existing outside of discourse and texts. In addition, if we take the version of objective social constructionism proposed by Harris (23), we can find that his position is more or less a positivist taste influenced by realist ontology.

Epistemology

Epistemology is about the nature of knowledge and the way people understand the world. It mainly focuses on the relationship between the "knower" (research participant) and the "would-be knower" (researcher) (6). Corresponding to ontology, the epistemological position in qualitative research can also be adopted ranging from naïve realist to radical relativist (35). A realist position leads to the belief that the data we collect should provide us with information about the external world, whereas a relativist position holds that there is no 'pure experience' and that the aim of research should be an exploration of how cultural and discursive resources are used to construct diverse versions of experience within varied contexts (16). According to Willig (16), there also exists a variety of positions in-between the "realist" and "relativist" epistemological endpoints of the continuum, such as the viewpoint identified as critical realist, which incorporates the realist goal of seeking to understand the "real" world with recognition that the data collected might not assure the direct access to the reality.

Interpretivism, taking phenomenology as an example, emphasizes noncommittal and neutral discovery of meanings from the viewpoint of research participants, and that the way leading to meanings is from appearances – by scrutinizing concrete experiences, arriving at essences through intuitions and reflection on conscious acts of experiences, leading to ideas, concepts and understandings (36). In this regard, phe-

nomenology is close to the endpoint of realism. By contrast, classical constructionism takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge about the world and challenges the conventional view that knowledge comes from objective, impartial observation of the world (8). The epistemic sense of constructionism also resides on the belief that our accounts of the world are presented in the form of language. Nonetheless, sometimes constructionism can be expanded to a broader sphere. If the epistemological stance of constructionism is viewed as a continuum with a range from realism to relativism, there are somehow different positions travelling distinct distances from one end, such as "strict social constructionism" vs. "objective social constructionism" vs. "contextual social constructionism" (10) (p. 63) and "objective social constructionism" vs. "interpretive social constructionism" (23) (p. 138). Harris argued that objective social constructionists are confident about their capacity to locate the social factors that "socially construct" (p. 5) the real state of affairs (23). By contrast, interpretive inquirers tend to be more self-conscious and humble about the knowledge claims they provide, while acknowledging that anything claimed can be deconstructed (9). Thus, what Harris (23) means by objective social constructionism is closer to the endpoint of realist epistemology, while paying less attention to the meaning people provide to some event. Thus, his "objective social constructionism" somewhat deviates the "classical" understanding of constructionism illustrated by the prominent researchers in this area (6, 8, 9).

Instrumental utility

What differs between classical constructionism and interpretivism is that although it is acknowledged by interpretivists that knowledge claims provided by inquirers can never be regarded as certain, these claims can contribute to help people understand the world and take actions. In other words, as long as knowledge claims emerge out of reasonable methods of doing science, they can be viewed as guidance for other inquiries about reality (15), thereby they can be utilized to assist human beings to take conversant actions regarding the world. By contrast, constructionism, presented as "trusting constructivism" (p. 283) by Nomm (15), is suspicious of those realist-oriented positions. Constructionists argue that if knowledge production is organized in the interpretivist way, "to" will be led to claim resource to the evidence of reality. However, the "reasonable reference to reality" can tend to "run anathema to people's trying to build trust" (p. 283) by defending their perspective and strategies as part of their engagement with substitute discourse (15).

The role of language

Qualitative inquirers put varying degrees of emphasis on the role of language in terms of its constructive nature of reality. According to Willig (16), at one end of the continuum, researchers hold that it is possible to describe events where language is viewed as a tool or a means to an end. At the other end of the continuum, researchers believe that language plays a central role in meaning construction, and that the core interests of researchers are how those constructions are formed, how they vary across cultural and historical situations and how they make an impact on people's experience.

Interpretivist inquiries are somewhat different from constructionism/constructivism research in terms of the role of language. Interpretivism in general, and phenomenological analysis in particular, mainly depend on the "representational validity of language" (16) (p. 66). That is, language as a means can describe what is going on in some circumstance. However, the notion on language in many phenomenological studies is opposed to the position of classical constructionism/constructivism that locates language at the heart of the construction process (8). From the 1950s, language as "a social performance" (37) (p. 92) was redefined as productive as serving to construct a version of reality and accomplish social objectivities. Meanwhile, the nature of language as steadily shifting and varying in its meanings becomes the grounding of constructionism (8). Proponents of constructionism argued that the world is viewed as textual and discursive. Even if there were something "real" behind discourse or discursive accounts, it is impossible for us to describe it, because portraying the "reality" necessitates providing an account of it, hence translating it into a discursive affair (26). Because expression of the world is presented as discursive products (theories, descriptions, facts, knowledge) of the social scientists, who more or less interface with such factors as interests, social and linguistic conversations, cultural traditions and living habits, those discursive products are changing and vary (7). That is, if we admit that language constructs, rather than represents social reality, there exists no objective perception of the reality (16). It is in this way that constructionist research brings the application of language into the center.

Researcher and the researched

In addition to the role of language, interpretivism and constructionism are somehow different in terms of the extent to which they stress reflexivity. Although all qualitative approaches, including interpretivist and constructionist qualitative research, acknowledge that researchers are implicated during the inquiry process, the roles of researchers are different "in the extent to which qualitative methodologies see the researcher as being the author, as opposed to the witness, of research findings" (16).

Although interpretivism claims its recognition of the implicated researcher's role during inquiring processes, it is criticized of its ambiguous account upon how the researcher plays his/her part. The critique especially focuses on some more "classical" interpretivist tradition, for instance, the interpretative phenomenological analysis. According to Willig (16), interpretive phenomenological analysts believe that researchers can acquire participants' psychological world only through their engagement with and their interpretation of the participants' account. Hereby, the researcher is implicated

in the inquiry process, which becomes both "phenomenological" (referring to the goal of presenting participants' vision of the world) and "interpretive" (referring to the influence of the researcher's stance) (p. 70). It is implied that a position of reflexivity is indispensable. Nevertheless, the interpretive phenomenological analysis does not bring reflexivity into a theoretical way. That is,

> "It recognizes the importance of researcher's perspective but does not actually tell us how to incorporate this insight into the research process and it does not show us how exactly the researcher's own conceptions are implicated in a particular piece of analysis. Thus, although interpretative phenomenological analysis does not claim privileged, or direct, access to participant's meanings and experience, the terminology used in the presentation of its findings invokes a sense of discovery rather than of construction" (16) (p. 70)

This type of critique is also indicated by Nomm (15) who maintained that similar to positivism, non-foundationalism, and scientific realism, interpretivism – here he mainly refers to Weberian interpretivism – shares with them the tenet of value freedom. Thus, although interpretive inquiries attempts to employ research strategies for developing knowledge of the social world, they do not need to "conceptualize research processes in terms of their contribution to attaining knowledge of realities posited to exist outside of the knowing process" (15) (p. 282). Such inquiry practice is challenged by "classical" constructionism.

Constructionists and constructivists, with a clear-cut stand, appeal for the democratization of the research relationship (8). They agree with interpretivists that objectivity is impossible and the research is essentially a coproduction between researchers and participants. Moreover, they place the researcher and the researched in a new relation to each other.

> The subject's own account of their experience can no longer be given an alternative interpretation by the researcher who then offers their reading as truth. In the development of alternative research practices, the validity of the participants' accounts must be acknowledged (this is part of what is referred to as 'reflexivity') (8) (p. 154)

Constructionism requires an attitude of reflexivity, which refers to "an awareness of the researcher's contribution of meanings throughout the research process", and "an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research" (16) (p. 10). According to Willig (16), constructionist researchers are required to reflect on how their own conceptions, values, experiences, interest, social identities and so forth affect the research, as well as to reflect on how the researcher's epistemological stance influences the research process and its findings.

Methodology

Guided by the researcher's epistemological stance, methodology refers to a general approach to studying research subjects. As both interpretivism and constructionism bring meaning into their research focuses, they automatically tend to prefer qualitative research methods than quantitative methods. Given the considerable overlap in their historical roots and intellectual source, research approaches developed within interpretivism and constructionism are somewhat similar. Both of them emphasize meaning in context, requiring the researcher actively to engage with the research process. Thus, both of them acknowledge a subjective factor in the research process. It is in this regard that traditional criteria such as reliability, validity, generalizability and objectivity are far less meaningful to evaluate interpretivist and constructionist research. Instead, criteria such as transferability, adequacy, resonance and authenticity, accountability, fruitfulness, trustworthiness and soundness are preferred. Here, we concentrate on what Nomm (15) called "accountability" to discuss the differences about how we judge the quality of research informed by interpretivism and constructionism, respectively. By accountability, Nomm (15) referred to social scientists' efforts to "develop plausible accounts of the motivating meanings that constitute social existence" (15) (p. 5).

For interpretivist inquiries, accountability of researchers involves developing dense and rich theory grounded in participants' experience. Sensitive to the circumstances of social interaction, researchers strive towards theorizing in order to expand our knowledge of social reality. Here, accountability in interpretivist research is evaluated by the way in which researchers conduct the investigation process to build up explanatory models grounded in human experience. Thus, researchers are required to "defend the possibility of accounts offered by showing how results can reasonably be argued to relate to people's meaningful experience" (15) (p. 281). In other words, to assure the quality of their research, interpretivist social scientists have to defend their selection of research approaches and techniques, at the same time recognizing alternative ways of exploration.

Similar to interpretivist researchers who have to defend their choices of strategies for inventing compelling and plausible accounts of social reality, classical constructionist researchers, sometimes called discursive oriented constructivist researchers, are also supposed to account for how the selection of approaches and techniques has emerged while recognizing alternative methods. This implies that research findings are delimited by particular approaches and techniques applied, and that there is room to conduct the studies in alternative ways (15). However, classical constructionism holds that all knowledge is contestable and not fixed, and that accounts are attributed to particular history and culture (8), thus making knowledge more important than discovery. The criteria used to assess the accounts of an event shift from "truth" to the conception of "fruitfulness, adequacy, viability and coherence" (7) (p. 7).

When the constructionist researcher turns to the endpoint of the relativist position, they deny the notion that entities such as human experience, thoughts and feelings are accessible by research methods. Sometimes this type of stance is called "radical constructionism" (16) (p. 154) or "strict social constructionism" (34). The criterion of accuracy or authenticity is

far less important for radical constructionist research. Instead, they are replaced by internal inherence, deviant case analysis and reader evaluation (35). According to Madill et al. (35), internal inherence implies the degree to which the accounts closely link together and does not entail chief inconsistency. It is similar to the criterion of coherence. Deviant case analysis refers to a test of a rising theory with the aim to define the context of applicability. Reader evaluation means the extent to which the research is viewed as expanding the understanding and insights of audience. It often requires the researcher to provide verbatim quotations or extracts from interview transcripts so that readers can have their own interpretation of the data.

No matter what the extent of relativism one ascribed to, classical constructionist researchers acknowledge that the definitions of knowing themselves might influence the formulation of ways of social life (15). On the one hand, they suspect that the researcher's position is identical with that of the participant (8) and indicate that it is through paying close attention to participants' application of language that can help participants' orientation reflect in the research material (8). Thus, constructionist researchers are particularly interested in categories, identities and interactional issues used by participants.

On the other hand, although classical constructionist researchers agree with interpretivist emphasis on meaningful formulation of social life, they pay further attention to the ways in which social research itself becomes implicated in the meaning-creating process (15). From the viewpoint of classical constructionism, researchers should be aware of that they themselves could be involved and implanted in the realities with the participants they are constructing. In this regard, researchers are no longer performing as they observers "who can act as 'change agents' through supplying knowledge of consequences of pursuing lines of action" (15) (p. 117). Constructionist researchers should be responsible for the consequent likelihood that their own insights, manners of accounting for and dealing with these, can influence the experience perceived by participants. Thus, it is important for classical constructionist researchers to take an attitude of reflexivity in investigating, questioning and verifying their social identities, their interests and their motivations, as well as how their own positions affect the construction of their research material.

Apart from classical discursive oriented constructionism, in particular radical constructionism as pure relativist stance, there are other types of qualitative research loosely assembling under the big umbrella of "constructionism". For instance, the form of objective social constructionism indicated by Harris (23), considering its focus on the influencing social factors on particular phenomena, essentially prefers the criteria in positivism such as reliability, validity, objectivity and value freedom. This version of constructionism is similar to what Best (34) meant by objective social constructionism. Another version of constructionist research is informed by contextual-constructionist epistemology, which requires the researcher to display the relationship between accounts and context. This means that accounts must be grounded in cultural, social and local circumstances where they are created.

Research is expected to account for not only participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings, but also the researcher's own analysis and interpretation of data collected. This type of research is akin to most interpretivist research, thus presented as "constructivist-interpretivist" research. It shares the assessing criteria with interpretivist research.

Therefore, to be able to assess the knowledge contribution of an interpretivist or constructionist study, it is important to have a clear understanding of the epistemological stance of the research. Also, researchers themselves need to provide detailed accounts about how they define the knowing process, so that they can have appropriate criteria to comply with. Here, we present the differences in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology in Table 1.

Examples of interpretive and constructionist adolescent research

In this section, we provide two research examples that adopted interpretative phenomenology and social constructionism, respectively, to illustrate how these approaches are applied in and guiding empirical research in studying adolescent development (Table 2).

An example of interpretive phenomenological research

Example 1: Adolescent inpatient treatment for anorexia nervosa: a qualitative study exploring young adults' retrospective views of treatment and discharges (38).

This study was aimed to explore young adults' retrospective views regarding the helpful and unhelpful aspects of the inpatient care they received for anorexia nervosa during adolescence. The research attempted to understand their views on the treatment effect, how they perceived the balance in addressing physical and psychological/emotional needs, their experience in the hospital, their sense of control, and their views on peer relationships and family relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven young adults treated in general adolescent psychiatric units. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted to analyze the data. Four major themes emerged from the transcripts: "1) removal from normality vs. connecting with the outside world; 2) treated as another anorexic vs. a unique individual in distress; 3) control and collaboration; 4) the importance of peer relations".

In the study report, the authors did not specify their ontological and epistemological stance. Fortunately, the choice of IPA informs us their inclination to relativist position and their concern on subjective experience. Guided by the tenets of interpretivism, the authors did not account for in detail how their roles influenced the interviewing process, thus defaulted themselves as knowing observers. There was no illustration about how they dealt with reflexivity either. What the researchers needed to do was to describe the young adults' retrospective experiences on anorexia nervosa treatment and discharge and to provide interpretation of them.

Table 1 Comparison of interpretivism and constructionism/constructivism.

	Content of the term	Branches	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology (assessing criteria)
Interpretivism	A relatively clear research stream rooted in phenomenological philosophy	• Phenomenology • Symbolic interactionism • Dramaturgy and dramatism • Hermeneutics • Ethnomethodology • Ethnography	• Generally relativist stance • Some close to realism, e.g., hermeneutical realist	• Instrumental utility • Representational validity of language • Reflexivity untheorized	Shared criteria: • Transferability • Adequacy • Resonance • Authenticity • Accountability • Fruitfulness • Trustworthiness • Soundness • Concerns how results can be argued to relate to people's meaningful experience
Constructionism / constructivism (C.)	A loose assemble, a big umbrella	• Micro-scope vs. macro-scope • Objective vs. interpretive	• Classical C: relativist stance • C in broad sense: ranging from realism to relativism	• Classical C: instrumental utility undercut; language constructs reality; reflexivity required • C in broad sense: ranging from realist to relativist epistemology	• Classical C: concerns how the researcher is implicated in the constructed reality • C in broad sense: can share those of interpretivism or post-positivism

Table 2 Comparison of two examples.

	Research question	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	
				Approach	How to assure research quality
Study 1	What are the young adults' views of anorexia nervosa treatment and discharge?	Not specified	Not specified	Interpretive phenomenology	• Inter-analysts validation • Audit-trail member • Checking • Research diary
Study 2	How applicable of social constructionist principles when utilized in social work fieldwork supervision?	Emphasize the social aspect of reality	• Viewing knowledge as a product of social discourse • Recognizing the role of language	Social constructionism	• Triangulation by researchers • Triangulation by data source • Member checking • Peer checking • Negative evidence • Alternative explanations • Accounting for the limitation • The influence of researcher's dual roles was not specified.

To assure trustworthiness of the study, the researchers shared random parts of interview transcripts with colleagues of qualitative research background, and compared the analyses. They conducted an audit-trail from original coding to clustering the super-themes. They also applied "member check" with three of the participants. Moreover, they kept a diary through the research process to track the evolution of ideas and maintain a 'reflexive stance'. It is recognized that typical measures have been taken up to promote the rigor of the study, yet the claimed "reflexive stance" has not been specified.

In the end of the study report, the authors suggested large-scale quantitative studies to investigate whether the results about significance of peer relationships in general adolescent unit settings and the endorsement of "normality" can be generalized. Such accounts implied a pursuit of instrumental utility.

An example of constructionist research

Example 2: Application of social constructionist principles in field practice teaching in a Chinese context (39).

Informed by the postmodern worldview, especially the constructive metatheory, this study was aimed to examine the applicability of social constructionist principles in fieldwork supervision of social work students in a Chinese context. The principles applied included "cultivation of skeptical attitudes to knowledge", "understanding of the assumptions of any form of understanding", "strengthening of critical thinking power", "understanding of the importance of reflexivity in human beings", "cultivation of the awareness of value and historical and cultural relativity", "appreciation of the collaborative venture between supervisor and supervisees", "development of the awareness of the strengths of clients" and "promotion of the tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity in the learning process" (39). Qualitative data were collected in the forms of tapes, observation and notes via individual and group supervision, in-depth interviews after the completion of the placement, and various written materials such as pre- and post-placement journals, weekly diaries and letters. Data analysis showed positive changes of the students in terms of the fieldwork project goals.

In the study report, the authors clearly emphasized their ontological stance that the reality is socially constructed rather than stable. They attached the importance to language as playing a crucial role in the creation of reality. In terms of the epistemological position about the nature of knowledge and knowing, they maintained that knowledge is a product of social discourse influenced by the power relations. They also acknowledged that it is through the everyday interaction in the process of social life that understanding of others can be accomplished. Thus, self-reflection, critical thinking and consciousness of value and assumptions were highlighted in the evaluation.

Although the authors adopted a constructionist perspective to conduct fieldwork supervision and evaluate the outcomes, they did not hold the extreme view of social construction-

ism with regard to the criteria used to assess research quality. Instead, they were sensitive to the impact of bias and ideological pre-assumption on data analysis and interpretation. The strategies utilized to decrease such impact included: (i) triangulation by researchers, (ii) triangulation by data source, (iii) member checking, (iv) peer checking, (v) accounting for negative evidence, (vi) considering alternative explanations for the findings, and (vii) acknowledging the limitation of the study. All of these measures strengthened the authenticity of the findings. However, how the roles of the first author as a supervisor and also as an evaluator (researcher) influenced the evaluation results were not identified. In other words, whether the interfacing boundary of his roles might benefit such a constructionist oriented study is unknown.

Finally, the authors critically reflected on the Chinese cultural expectation that demands students' respect for the teacher and recognized that it was such a culture that shaped the interaction between the teacher and the student. Hence, they called for an open, collaborative and supportive environment for the application of social constructionist principles into social work education in the Chinese context. In this way, they drew our attention to the constructionist epistemological emphasis on cultural relativity again.

In summary, the two examples show that although the researcher's stances can be implied from their specific approaches adopted and their accounts on the research focuses, it is still significant to clearly provide statements about their ontological and epistemological positions. It is in this way that the readers can judge how rigorous the study is. In addition, it is also important to account for explicitly what the researcher has done to assure the quality of the interpretivist or constructionist research.

Conclusions

So far, we have provided clarification of interpretivism and constructionism/constructivism, demonstrated the similarities and differences between interpretivism and constructionism in terms of their histories and branches, ontological and epistemological stances, and illustrated the accountability criteria used in research practices. We further exemplify our ideas by two empirical studies on adolescence.

In short, owing to similar historical roots, interpretivism and constructionism are often used interchangeably. Whereas interpretivism can be viewed as a relatively mature orientation that contains various traditions such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy and dramatism, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology and ethnography, constructionism is a looser assemble that can be generally divided into macroscopes and micro-scopes, or objective forms and interpretive forms. Being applied by all types of analysts, across diverse disciplines and in different manners (40), the term constructionism has meant both everything and nothing at the same time (9). In our opinion, constructionism in the broad sense can be seen as a continuum ranging from realist to relativist stances. Most of them are similar to the positions informed by interpretivism, except the "pure" relativist stance. Such

"pure" relativist position is constructionism in the narrow sense, which refers to a discursive approach of theory and research, also called radical constructionism or discursive qualitative research.

Although the terms interpretivism and constructionism easily lead to confusion and misunderstanding through numerous application manners, it is important to clearly identify what type of knowledge and knowing process we are going to create, and to correctly choose methodology matching with the epistemological stance. Thus, one practical implication is that researchers should clarify their epistemological and methodological attributes when they conduct interpretivist or constructionist adolescent research.

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