In my view, Ernst von Glasersfeld presents radical constructivism\(^1\) for social scientists in a coherent package, starting with pattern formation in the visual field and extending it to sociological constructs such as others, communication, groups, or society. The archenemy in von Glasersfeld’s case runs, as always, under the flag of naïve realism, but the overall design for radical constructivism von Glasersfeld style establishes no recognizable links to the empirical research in the social sciences. A sociologist may be a naïve realist or she may be a radical constructivist, but he and she will operate in an identical fashion when exploring their social universes around them. Whether society is an “ontological given” or a “construct” or whether a theory of societal differentiation is true, corroborated or viable is situated far away from the principles of designing questionnaires, of conducting interviews in empirical social research, of interpreting survey data sets or of developing factor analyses and regression models.\(^2\) As long as social scientists operate with the available set of methods and research designs, they remain unrestricted and unguided by radical constructivism, as characterized by von Glasersfeld. Only when social scientists turn to sociological concepts such as community or society is at stake, does the dialogue between radical constructivism and other epistemologies or theories of knowledge set in. Outside this narrow realm of epistemological problems, radical constructivism remains silent.\(^3\)

In my commentary I will make the point that radical constructivism von Glasersfeld style unnecessarily plays only a passive or an inactive role. Quite obviously, I want to demonstrate that there is life for radical constructivism outside its seemingly irrelevant function in empirical social research and that it is possible to develop radical constructivism in designs with tangible consequences and effects for the cognitive routines in the social sciences. In short, it is conceivable, despite “Who Conceives of Society?”, that radical constructivism matters.

**Trivial and non-trivial relations between radical constructivism and empirical research**

Initially I would like to introduce a distinction between two types of radical constructivism for the social worlds,\(^4\) which can be presented by the dichotomy of trivial versus non-trivial designs, as depicted in Fig. 1.

In its trivial form, radical constructivism plays the role of a background epistemology that does not alter or affect the well-established routines and operations of social science and the day to day activities of social science research. In its trivial design, radical constructivism in the social arena does not matter. Non-trivial designs of radical constructivism, however, also lead to different groups of practices and routines altogether and change the shapes of research designs and the sequence of normal research operations mildly or even wildly. Likewise, radical constructivism, due to advances in the social sciences, is destined for adaptation and accommodation as well.

**Non-trivial configurations of radical constructivism: weak and strong ties**

Following a well-known distinction in social network theory, weak or strong social ties have been defined in terms of the “amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy … and the reciprocal services” (Granovetter 1973, p. 1361). Similarly, in cognitive networks, ties between empirical methods and research designs\(^5\) on the one hand and a theory of knowledge or an epistemology on the other hand can be introduced with reference to the amount of testing special elements of the theory of knowledge, the closeness of characteristic features or the mutual long-term effects.\(^6\) Strong ties assume that building blocks from a theory of knowledge can be transformed into research and test designs, weak ties exhibit mainly similarity relations between the operational research repertoire and an underlying theory of knowledge and no ties are reserved for the case of no discernible or tangible relations between a theory of knowledge and empirical research methods, designs and practices.

The remarks so far, as well as from now on, do not contain a criticism of Ernst von Glasersfeld’s target article. Rather, the overall intention is that radical constructivism, aside from offering an interesting normative theory of knowledge, can and should be extended and advanced along two major forms, namely along weak ties and strong ties to empirical research in the social sciences and beyond.

The strong forms assume strong ties between a set of theoretical elements of radical constructivism as an empirical theory of cognition and new methods or research designs that are able to influence the viability status of these theoretical components in a positive or a negative manner. It goes without saying that the strong paths of non-trivial designs are, like the Popperian truth, “hard to come by.” Currently, it is difficult to specify strong ties between radical constructivism and the social sciences, the cognitive sciences or evolutionary biology.

In its weak forms, basic building blocks of radical constructivism lead to a set of essential features that, for any empirically-oriented scientific discipline, are necessary and...
sufficient for limiting current research routines (negative heuristic), for specifying a group of admissible procedures (positive heuristic), for breaking new paths for research designs (innovative heuristic) and for self-adaptation and self-accommodation by radical constructivism itself, depending on the cognitive evolution of specific empirical research areas.

As already pointed out, von Glasersfeld’s “Who Conceives of Society?” reserves too modest a role for radical constructivism. In my judgment, the availability or the lack of ties that are at least weak will become crucial for the viability and the sustainability of radical constructivism in the years and decades ahead.

Notes

1. It must be noted that there are subtle differences between radical constructivism Ernst von Glasersfeld style, second-order cybernetics as developed by Heinz von Foerster (see, for example, Müller & Müller 2007, Müller 2007a, or Müller 2007b) or conversation theory as propagated by Gordon Pask. Thus, von Glasersfeld represents one of the current variants of radical constructivism.

2. It goes without saying that the argument is not dependent on quantitative methods and research designs. It applies with equal force to qualitative methods or qualitative research designs as well. On qualitative methods and designs, see, for example, Cresswell (2007).

3. It must be noted that von Glasersfeld makes a sharp distinction between “social constructionism” and radical constructivism in social domains.

4. Methods can be conceived as components of research designs so that each research design is composed of at least one particular method. For available handbooks of methods see, for example, Bortz & Döring (2002).

5. In social network theory, ties are assumed to be strong, weak or absent where absent ties are reserved either to “nooding” relationships or to the complete absence of any contacts (Granovetter 1973, p. 1361). In cognitive networks, the absence of ties is used for a relationship where an underlying epistemology provides no restrictions or rules for empirical research.

6. In a follow-up article under the title ‘Methodologizing Radical Constructivism’, a series of articles and books on constructivist foundations which started with von Foerster and Müller (2003), Müller & Müller (2007), Glanville & Müller (2007), Müller (2007a) & Müller (2007b) will be continued with a focus on the construction of a genuine research methodology for radical constructivism with weak ties and strong ties.