

Constructivism, Zen Buddhism and the Individual Patterns of Communication Use in the Age of the Plural Self

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AP1) We are living in an age of complexity, uncertainty and multiple identities in which the media seem to create an incredible amount of meaningless noise which the individual has to select and transform into meaningful, sensed communication, how might a constructivist approach facilitate the individuals in this kind of selection?

LR1). I think the sheer magnitude of the problem (unending complexity, uncertainty, and meaningless noise of the media) already defines the individual's solution. That is, apart from retreat into a hermit's cave — literally or figuratively--- the only means available to cope is some sort of constructivist selection process. And for better or worse, consciously or not, I think everyone exposed to first- and perhaps second-world media saturation already does this: they select out of the media blitz whatever has immediate or potential meaning for them. Those films, types of music, TV shows, bits of news and advertising, that FIT THEIR CONSTRUCTION OF THEMSELVES. Namely, something like their Jungian archetype.

But then, the question arises: to what extent is our archetypal consciousness of self shaped and/or modified by our exposure to the media during childhood and adolescence?

(It could be, however, that the more intense the media noise & variety, the more people must be driven towards a self-oriented constructivist selection. Perhaps following Marx and Engels, one might claim that the worse the media blitz gets, the better, because it forces realization of the necessity for such selectivity..)

It also seems to me that a Darwinian natural selection metaphor is appropriate here: in the ever expanding media jungle, only the cognitively “fittest” can survive; preserve an authentic consciousness of self, rather than a culturally imposed, media driven “false consciousness” as discussed by Marcuse and other Frankfurt School writers.

AP2) In which way would media noise and everyday life noise be selected by the individual to create his/her life and story? After all, several scholars (Georg Simmel and Niklas Luhmann, first of all) stated that neither individual stories nor history exist, what we daily cope with are self-referential narratives emerged from self-referential interpretations... how do you see this?

LR 2). How does the individual select material from the media to create his/her life and story, the ongoing everyday self-narrative? I would argue for something like a trial and error process in the context of another metaphor. Rather than a jungle, consider the media to be an ever-expanding supermarket where we go shopping through newspapers, magazines, books TV shows, etc., searching for things that are tasty if not nourishing. (If we must “eat to live” so we must also feed on information.) And just as we learn by trial and error what foods agree with us, and how to balance our desire for items providing pleasurable taste sensations with more prosaic staple items, we may learn to select the media items/products that are pleasurable but also agree with our self narratives. But of course, not everyone does, and of course, some have self narratives based primarily on what the Yoga Sutra calls the “veils of ignorance:” greed, desire, conformity, etc., This is why pornography is said to be the most popular thing on the internet..

AP3) at least from Varela’s writings of the Mid 1980ies, constructivism and Zen Buddhism seemed to be profoundly interwoven for example to describe the body-mind link and the human-being-nature relationship. How do you consider this mutual contamination between constructivism and Zen Buddhism to understand the paradigms, theories, strategies and practices of individual patterns of communication use and of audience analysis?

LR3). Buddhism and constructivism both emphasize the social-emotional construction of “reality.” But they differ because the Zen tradition of Buddhism provides a body-mind practice, meditation, whereby one may attain critical self-awareness of the processes involved in the construction of reality. Insofar as one gains such awareness (“enlightenment” or wisdom) about how one’s own mind functions, one inevitably learns how the minds of others function. A convenient analogy is to a computer operating system: to understand Windows in your own computer, is to understand it in everyone’s computer. In general, the effect of this is to clarify patterns of communication and audience reactions. The meaningful core of discourses and dialogues (assuming there is any) begins to stand out clearly against the background noise that accompanies most communication. And often enough communication may be all just noise. One of the old Zen master’s solutions for this was to was to bring people out of their noise and illusions by hitting them with a stick! This was not merely an expression of anger, but served to halt the individual’s meaningless or deluded stream of consciousness.

AP4) The main trend of media analysis to focus more and more on the individuals both epistemologically (see Luhmann's concept of psychic system, for example) and technically (see the one –to-one marketing, for example) privileges individual centered and theoretical paradigms to understand individual hermeneutics thus constructionism, cognitive neurosciences in general and constructivism emerged as more and more powerful media analysis paradigms. How do you see the link among them? What do have , for example, constructivism and constructionism in common an how do they differ one from the other?

LR4). As I understand it, the distinction between constructivism and constructionism is essentially a distinction between ontology and epistemology. Constructivism is an ontological position asserting that our experiences of reality are always mediated by cognitive operations or constructs rooted in or derived from our exposure to mass media. Thus, our ideas/schemas about reality, I.E., the world around us, as well as ourselves, emerge from the media “soup” we inhabit. Constructionism, on the other hand is an epistemological position referring to efforts to understand the workings of our cognitive operations. Maybe another way to put it is that the former concerns the origins of the subject matter of cognitive operations, whereas the latter concerns the nature of cognitive operations. Reduced to over simplicity: the distinction seems to be between information and information processing.

The paradox suggested by Luhman, is that the information in the media is itself a product of information processing by those who produce the media. I think the paradox begins to fade away, however, when we raise the ontological stakes by considering that we are OF the world, rather than IN the world. If we are OF the world, as Buddhism and other spiritual philosophies maintain, then the media information we humans create and process, and then reprocess and recreate, etc., is perhaps best understood to be just another source of human energy like the air, food and water we consume. The quality and quantity of what we consume, assimilate, and excrete varies from one individual and/or culture, to another, and depends upon our level of critical self-awareness.

AP5) The individual in the present age is less and less a passive recipient of a mass dogmatic message a sit was, for example, according to the behavioristic approach implied by the early 20th century campaigns. Nowadays , the individual has many more opportunities to be active, to take chances and risks and to decide. Thus ,what doyou think the contribution of constructivism be to develop effective and functional procedures ,praxis and methods for judgement and decisionmaking facilitating the individual to manage his/her self plurality defining his/her unitas multiplex?

LR5). Insofar as one or another variety of constructivism is increasingly influencing the world views of artists, educators, scientists, and other creators and distributors of the culture base in modern/postmodern societies, it is expanding the horizons of how people think about themselves, those around them, and the world in general. A useful analogy is to the way psychoanalytic theory expanded our understanding of the human psyche. But the theory alone was not enough; it required the development of a psychosocial technology: psychoanalytic therapy. Similarly, we may require development of a constructivist technology in order to realize the potential for personal creativity (self actualization; existential freedom) that is latent in constructivism.

AP6) What is ,in your opinion, the role of ideology in today's political communication strategies and how constructivism can help to reveal the rhetorics of understanding behind ideology in the different fields of human experience (for example in scientific research)?

LR6). This question about ideology raises another question for me: what is the difference between a culture value and an ideology? I think the answer is that a culture value, such as individualism or collectivism, becomes an ideology when it is tied to a specific goal, or promissory note.

Individualism becomes an ideology when it is linked to free enterprise capitalism; collectivism when it linked to a planned socialist economy.

In the U.S., the most conspicuous role of ideology in political communication strategies has been as a means of getting people to vote against their own best interests. And in this connection the culture value of "individualism" (sometimes called "self contained individualism, or "individual freedom") has been very prominent. Thus, any effort to limit the availability of guns to the general public has always been blocked or curtailed by political rhetoric emphasizing individual freedom. And the Clinton administration plans for a national health insurance system was blocked by similar appeals to the ideology of individualism. However, something like a constructivist critique of this ideology has also been effective. Successful adoption of civil rights laws were at least in part based on deconstruction of individualism, I.e., political rhetoric arguing that individualism demands that all citizens should have equal opportunities to advance themselves.

There have been many analyses of "science as ideology" based on implicit or explicit constructivist grounds. The myth of scientific objectivity has by now largely been abandoned, along with the idea that theory and research can lead to discovery of the laws of nature, and that scientific "progress" must inevitably improve the human condition. Most philosophers of science and many practitioners as well now acknowledge that science is simply another culture "product" or creation, and subject to the same subjective biases, uses and misuses, as other cultural creations. The social sciences are particularly problematic, insofar as they rely heavily on probability statistics based on the idea of randomness. Point being that randomness is a culture construct, an idea that is by no means universally accepted. There are no "fair coins" in nature, and aggregate statistical data cannot predict the behavior of individuals... even though we often act as if it can .

AP7) in the postmodern scenario, the individual conscience and the plurality of self have to cope with the self referential sensemaking process from the noisy environment of history as we already focused in question 2, but certain historical constructions are usually hard to cope with for example the Nazi Lager and the Communist Gulags ,how do you think media describe these events and how individuals interpret them?

LR7). Most historians are familiar with the famous remark of Henry Ford: "history is bunk." And with the line that "history is always written by the winners." That is, history is for the most part a socially constructed culture product based on bodies of evidence selected, developed and interpreted by the historian/author. As such, the field is especially vulnerable to constructivist critiques. One need look no further than to the arguments among historians, or to the fact that

historians are always busy re-writing history. In the U.S., we are still getting “new” histories of the American Revolution and the Civil war. (Note also the wonderful remark by Gore Vidal: “All I know about history I learned at the movies.”)

None of this means that history should be ignored or is useless. Rather, that one should appreciate history for what it is: on the one hand, as a creative culture product, and on the other, as a force that shapes or alters culture, including the consciousness of historians. Profoundly horrific events such as the Nazi death camps and the Soviet Gulags are exemplary: they have entered the psyche of the modern world as definitive of absolute evil, and, among artists and intellectuals and all those who consume their work, have forced reconsideration of the nature of Human Nature. The death camps and gulags generated new concepts, such as “survivor,” and sinister phrases, such as

“just following orders,” that have become fixtures of modern consciousness.

Note also how the recent destruction of the World Trade Center (WTC) buildings is in process of entering history and giving birth to new culture categories or concepts: global terrorism, “the war on terrorism,” and not least, the “suicide bomber” against whom most conventional defenses are useless. The intense media representation of the WTC event has already altered language (at least in the U.S.), where “9/11” has become a household word, and the consciousness of most Americans, where patriotism & flag waving now have a newly honored place alongside anxiety about further terrorist attacks.

Biographies

LEON RAPPOPORT is professor of Psychology at Kansas State University and Director of the graduate program in personality- social psychology. Since completing his doctorate at the University of Colorado in 1963, he has published extensively on a variety of topics such as attitude change, interpersonal conflict, judgment and decision making, psychohistory, and more recently, food cognition. His book about the latter, *How We Eat: Appetite, Anxiety and the Psychology of Food*, will appear in Spring '03. Other noteworthy books include *Personality Development: The Chronology of Experience* (1972), and, with historian George Kren, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (1980, 2nd ed. 1984). Further information available on the google internet engine.

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