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Identifying the Ideological Social Construct: What are its Implications for Sociology?

Connor William Evans Moreland

In contemporary western discourse the concept of the social fact has gradually been diluted in favour of what many activists refer to as the 'social construct'. However, this approach to constructivism is not truly sociological, and is based on discourse rather than analysis. This has led to a rise in 'pop' sociology. The first half of this article will explore what I have deemed the 'ideological social construct', its origins in western discourse and its relation to contemporary identity politics. The second half will focus on possible reconstructive methods for the harm that the ideological social construct has done to social science methodology.

Emile Durkheim defines social facts as such:

They consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him.¹

It is important to first of all distinguish the ideological social construct from the sociological and philosophical concept of social constructivism. The key distinction lies within the motivations of these two schools of social constructivist thought. While social constructivism serves as a philosophical tool that is used to question the apparently innate nature of social behaviour, and is largely neutral, the same cannot be said for the ideological social construct.

The ideological social construct is instead primarily motivated with ending what its proponents see as social ills. Instead of employing the social construct as a means of historical and psychological analysis to determine the ideological origins of social behaviour, the ideological social construct seeks to diagnose social ills in a somewhat medicinal manner, and then refer to such ills as being a social construct. In the context

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¹ E. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (London, 1982), 50.

of the ideological social constructivist, this would heavily imply that the construct is 'not real' (a common misunderstanding of the social construct²) and therefore easily discarded.

This approach is favoured by many contemporary journalists and self-styled social justice activists as it allows for the creation of a narrative based around moral injustices, such as oppression and other forms of harmful social control. Thus, ideological social constructivist discourse is a largely activism based concept.

However, this approach makes the fundamental mistake of ignoring the sociological concept of the social fact.³ A social fact can be described as an aspect of our lives, while not the result of biology or natural instinct, is still able to exert control over us due to the pressures of societal influence.⁴ The social fact is crucial in that it allows us to view social phenomena within a wider, structural context, rather an abstract view of oppression by a more privileged group in society. For Emile Durkheim social facts 'consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in through the individual consciousness'.⁵

Such an approach is useful in that it allows for a more neutral and overall more rigorous approach to social science. Importantly, such an approach also allows us to examine ourselves, and the possibility that much of our own discourses may be based on ideological narrative rather than a strict adherence to sociological principles. In contrast, the ideological social construct is concerned above all else with justifying its own necessity through social activism, meaning that it has little opportunity to examine the bias in its own methodology.

An example of the ideological social construct being employed to justify a worldview can be found in the viral videos of popular internet sex educator Laci Green. Green identifies the social aspects of female virginity (the association of female virginity with purity) as a social construct and as something that is, along with sex, primarily

² C. S. Vance, *Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality* (London, 1989), 16.

³ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*

harmful.⁶ As such, virginity as a social construct is viewed fundamentally as being something that needs to be eliminated in order to encourage a more positive and healthy view of sexuality.

Although it would be correct for Green to view virginity as a social construct, the analytical implications of social constructivism, at least when approached sociologically, are in reality far more complex than Green's moralist assumptions would imply. Such an example shows how the complexities of social constructivism as a philosophical concept can be diluted in order to serve a progressive stance, often at the expense of further critical analysis of the topic in question - in this case, the social implications of virginity. This becomes largely problematic for a truly sociological understanding of virginity and human sexuality.

To go into further detail, Green explores social standards of virginity purely within the contexts of the contemporary, third wave, sex positive feminist analysis of sexuality⁷, and as such, her mind is largely already made up, and her argument very much begs the question. That is, the 'solution' to the socially problematic aspects of virginity has already been founded. If we approach such social issues as being an obstacle to our goals first and then a sociological study second, then social constructivism as a form of philosophical analysis becomes diluted, to be replaced by ideological discourse.

Under this simplified form of social analysis that has become popular, a moral high ground is taken prior to the development of any new research. There is no new exploration of the cultural anthropology of virginity, its history in relation to any contemporary sociological findings, or of any post-colonial research concerning sexuality. All of the social analysis needed for Green's understanding of sexuality comes from a preconceived view of virginity as harmful; and thus, any social research performed afterwards, including the use of accepted 'hard' methodologies such as statistics will invariably carry this contemporary usage of the social construct as a tool for discrediting elements of social life that are viewed as harmful.

⁶ 'LET'S LOSE "VIRGINITY"', L. Green. Available:

<<http://lacigreen.tumblr.com/post/53391165491/lets-lose-virginity-my-new-vid-includes>> [Accessed 13.02.15].

⁷ Ibid.

Such arguments can essentially be boiled down to the reasoning that if something can be defined as a social construct then it ceases to exist on any 'real' level, and as such it can be freely dismissed from any further sociological or anthropological discussion or analysis.⁸ This unfortunately transforms the analytical tool of the social construct into a purely ideological method, one that can be employed as a means to shut down any further debate or to discourage any new theories from emerging.

This form of discourse differs from academic sociology in that it is primarily an online social movement, rather than a researched based one. However, although this article makes the distinction between 'pop' sociology and academia, it is important to note that due to the increasing influence of the internet, and the activism based around it, sentimental discourse runs the risk of becoming a dominant influence in how mainstream society views social science, and how individuals employ pseudo-sociology in their everyday lives. If we were to perform a complete and well-rounded sociology of virginity, the moral fundamentalism inherent in such views can give us very little in terms of understanding the social behaviour and social expectations associated with the concept of virginity. Instead, it is essential to detach any form of moral sentiment⁹ from sociology, as this can cloud our judgement and create a moral narrative that takes precedence over our research.

Such an approach to social constructivism proves problematic for the social sciences for a number of reasons. Arguably the most challenging would be ideological social constructivism's approach towards sociological methodology. As discussed before, a social constructivist discourse rooted in the desire to 'fix' social problems runs on logic that is largely circular, and often starts with its own conclusions already founded. Issues that are viewed as being socially troublesome, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, are viewed through an essentialist spin on contemporary western discourses on the nature of social justice. This means that any sociological data gathered through the ideological social constructivist model is largely pre-determined, existing to prove its own point, which in itself is decided by a postmodern discourse concerned with the protection of individual identities.

In order to properly critique the ideological social construct it is important to understand its origins, both as an ideological tool and in its effect on individual and

⁸ Vance, *Social Construction Theory*, 16.

⁹ H. S. Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?' (1967) 14 *Social Problems* 246.

social discourse. One such explanation for the ideological social construct's origin can be found within sociologist Val Ginnes's work on the increasing importance of individualisation in modern social and family life.¹⁰

Acknowledging hypermodernity and its application to contemporary identity politics is important if we are to understand the changes in personal identity and its effects upon the concept of the social construct. Ginnes views the contemporary family as being an example of how individualisation has become key to our daily social interactions.¹¹ Ginnes sees the contemporary family as being one that embraces new forms of identity, with homosexual, single and other historically unconventional families now being embraced rather than shunned. This shows that the family is now more concerned with being an individual and largely personalised institution rather than adhering to any clearly defined social conventions.

A similar phenomenon can be seen within the continuous growth of social media. The rise in popularity of micro blogging sites such as *Tumblr* has allowed for the growth of several new online communities based around themes such as social justice, sexual orientation, and identity, as well as fandoms of all sorts. With the globalisation of communication at its highest through online media, individualisation has now arguably reached a new level of importance in many people's social lives. This is perhaps best reflected in the desire to form online communities which has resulted in the emergence of several new social identities.

Such an example can be seen in the rise of alternative sexual identities such as Demisexual¹² and Asexual.¹³ Such groups have found solace in online communities. Thus, the internet activism orchestrated by these groups has largely been concerned with defending their right to be acknowledged and accepted as having a genuine sexual identity and as a community.

¹⁰ V. Ginnes. 'Family and Intimate Relationships: A Review of the Sociological Research' (2003) *Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group* 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹² 'Let Them Eat Cake: On Being Demisexual', C. Liebowitz. Available:

<<http://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/let-them-eat-cake-on-being-demisexual/>> [Accessed 13.02.15].

¹³ M. Carrigan. 'There's more to life than sex? Difference and commonality within the asexual community' (2011) 14:4 *Sexualities* 462.

As the ideological social construct is mostly used to defend disadvantaged groups and to promote social justice, it can be said that these new sexual identities are more attached to a form of sociology that affirms their right to exist above all else. This justifies the acceptance by these groups of the ideological social construct as a tool, as it allows them to eliminate harmful social practices that diminish their identity politics. Thus, the individual identity can go on, provided that the social expectations that diminish their identities are discredited through use of the ideological social construct.

RECONSTRUCTING TRADITIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGIES: IS IT A POSSIBLE IDEAL?

This is not to say that social scientists should disregard social constructivism as an analytical tool completely. Doing so would unfairly diminish a large amount of valuable social theory and analysis for no good reason. Instead, it can be argued that the methodology of the social construct should be reconstructed to prevent its contemporary misuse. The key point of this should not be to discredit social constructivism as a form of sociological study, but instead work to effectively separate it from ideological discourse.

One possible, but difficult approach to creating an ideal sociological methodology would be to reevaluate the sociological school of functionalism, and possibly attempt to reconstruct its overtly positivist methods while still being careful not to fall into the methodological traps associated with ideological social constructivism. Functionalism,¹⁴ in its most simple definition, views social behaviour, as well as its analysis and study, as being based around the performance of specific 'functions' in society, regardless of their perceived moral content. For example, crime is functional as it allows for the continuing existence of social institutions such as the police force and the justice system.

This somewhat reactionary approach may have some unexpected benefits for the reconstruction of sociological methodology. For example, traditional functionalism initially seems like a feasible solution to address the biases found within the ideological social construct as it, above all else, acknowledges the need of individuals to locate themselves within a wider societal system. Individuals are influenced by other forces within those systems. Acknowledging the effects that external influences have on the

¹⁴ A. Giddens & P W. Sutton, *Sociology* (Cambridge, 2013), 18-21.

lives of individuals, a part of a greater system, would, in many ways, allow us to view society in terms of power structures, rather than as a list of coercive social influences that need to be restrained or reformed.

However, although it may be tempting to look to past methodologies as a somewhat reactionary stance against postmodern trends, it must also be considered that functionalism itself, like the social construct, should not be taken without a pinch of salt. Take, for instance, feminist sociologists who noted that the traditionally accepted functionalist view of the nuclear family as a form of social organism, with both the male breadwinner and female house worker acting in cohesion, was methodologically dubious and misleading. Their main criticisms were largely directed at the nature of functionalism in itself. Claiming that functionalism was inherently biased and far too accepting of the status quo, feminists argued that the research of functionalists focused too much on the family as a definitive system that was inherently peaceful, and thus ignored conflicting factors in the home such as domestic abuse.¹⁵ Feminist sociologists were thus able to deconstruct the ideological basis that the home was a fundamentally safe and 'functional' place for the nuclear family through proper critical analysis. Furthermore, Feminist sociologists were then, as a result of such critical analysis, able to link their findings to societal influence upon gendered behaviour and familial structure.

This criticism of traditional functionalism serves as an excellent example of how sociologists can perform methodically sound social research without falling into the pitfalls of abstract empiricism and ideology promoting, while at the same time bringing awareness to a social injustice that can be appropriately linked to the wider social hierarchies of sex, gender and family. One factor in particular that makes the above example not just sociologically sound, but scientifically sound would be the focus on building what can be described as a 'sociological narrative' that emphasises the often neglected need to consider context when performing research related to the social sciences. In the aforementioned Laci Green viral video on the social construction of virginity, Green attempts to link the 'creation' of virginity to ancient, Abrahamic societies where men were in charge and then examines virginity primarily as a concept created for the purpose of controlling female sexuality.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ginnes, 'Family and Intimate Relationships: A Review of the Sociological Research', 6.

¹⁶ Green, 'LET'S LOSE "VIRGINITY"':

Religion and theology can definitely be said to have played a large part in defining the social roles and expectations of women throughout history, and no proper social scientist or gender studies scholar could argue against the clear double standard placed on female sexuality and virginity. Yet the use of history for sociological purposes is in reality a far more complex affair.

If social scientists are to employ history to strengthen their argument then we must consider the importance of building a 'sociological narrative.' That is, a historical analysis that is willing to consider all historical changes, rather than the ones that suit our own discourse, in order to build a truly sociological approach to history. It is not enough to simply identify trends in history and apply them to our own discourses. Instead, the application of history should be strictly relevant to the context of our own research. To take a case in point, if we are to perform a social study of virginity, then our concern should be our contemporary social environment. Said study would ideally focus on the relation of individual sexuality to societal expectations of sexuality, and how these societal expectations are able to influence the individual, through acceptance of societal expectations or their rejection. How society views or treats these individuals who have either accepted or rejected society's sexual mores can then be identified, which in turn makes for appropriate social research on the nature of human sexuality as a social institution.

History is obviously very important for understanding the context of any contemporary society. However, social scientists must be willing to accommodate all relevant social, political, and economic changes when analysing history, as opposed to merely cherry picking decontextualized social norms (in Green's case, the role of women in Abrahamic society) without any consideration to the more recent social changes in female sexuality, such as the sexual revolution or the influences of second and third wave feminism.

This form of historical research can be compared to what sociologist C. Wright Mills identifies as 'Abstracted Empiricism.'¹⁷ Abstracted empiricism refers to abstract, unrelated data or research that claims to be sociological, but in reality only gives us a specified form of a particular social event, with no real sociological narrative that allows us to appropriately connect historical or social phenomena with our current

¹⁷ C. W Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, 1959), 50.

social existence. This effectively sums up how ideological social constructivist discourse appropriates history for its own use.

The sociological narrative is important as its application can prevent social theorists from falling into this trap. If instead of resorting to abstract empiricism to pick out historical events that suit our causes, and then running with that single event, we instead acknowledge history as being in a state of fluidity. In this context, historic fluidity is understood as viewing history as functioning on a path rather than a series of unrelated key events. For example, instead of trying to link virginity's origins directly to ancient history we should view virginity in its contemporary cultural status, and then slowly work backwards, taking into account such things such as the sexual revolution and how economic changes in the twentieth-century have changed societal expectations of the family, and thus female sexuality. This would create a truly sociological narrative, in which a clear path of societal expectations regarding sexuality can be seen.

However, this is not to suggest a wholly positivist view of sociology. It goes without saying that the mentioned model of historical sociology can in itself only be applied lightly. The need for post-positivist subjective study remains important to contemporary sociological thinking. A post-positivist approach would strengthen the argument against ideological social constructivist discourse. As mentioned before, constructivist discourse has the potential to render 'hard' science data somewhat toothless, with the importance of maintaining the discourse coming before, and thus shaping what data is chosen for the research. This emphasises the need to distinguish philosophical social constructivism from ideological discourse. Social data, when analysed in reference to social constructivism, allows us to question the naturalness of social actions with a somewhat objective view. Ideological discourse assumes that social reality can just be forgotten in favour of social justice.

The earlier criticism of functionalism for being too generous to the status quo is comparable to the ideological social construct discussed earlier. Despite being radically different in terms of ideology — traditional functionalism arguably justifies a conservative mind set and the ideological social construct is deployed as a postmodern justification for social justice related causes — both serve an ideological function before a methodological or purely scientific one.

As discussed before, this has become problematic for social science methodology for a number of reasons. If we decide our own outcomes in sociology (that whatever

potentially harmful or otherwise disconcerting social phenomena is to be dismissed as a 'social construct' that we need to 'fix') before we begin to even consider the appropriateness of our methodology and critical analysis, then a social theorist/scientist cannot possibly expect an outcome other than the one that they have already decided. Such an outcome would in itself have been formed as the result of postmodern discourses and the continuing influence of individualisation and identity politics through social media.

If social discourse sees itself as being something of a 'societal medicine' in which social constructivist discourse is viewed as a method of diagnosis for perceived social ills, rather than as a philosophical method of analysing human action, then the more activist sociologists run the serious risk of limiting their research methods in order to suit a preconceived ideology that is taken at face value.

However, while advocating for a more objective and unbiased form of sociology seems at first a simple solution to a methodological problem, the actual implementation may have some hurdles to pass. Likewise, it is important to acknowledge that this issue of bias within the social sciences has been brought up before. In Howard Saul Becker's essay 'Whose Side Are We On?' Becker notes that the very nature of the methodology and research techniques that are used within the social sciences may themselves be inherently biased. Becker uses an example of a mental health institution to illustrate this.

Becker's example is as follows. If we were to perform a sociological study on the lives of mental patients at a particular institution from the perspective of the patients rather than the staff or administrative personal, then we would be accused of having a bias in favour of the patients. This would seem to imply that our research was done solely for the benefit of the patients, and that by ignoring the viewpoints and experiences of the staff, we are only getting one side of the story.¹⁸

Becker notes that if we do attempt to balance our research by becoming involved with the staff, then sociologists run the risk of entering a cycle of accusations, in which each side accuses the research of being biased.¹⁹ This means that regardless of how we

¹⁸ Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?', 246-247.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

perform our research, any social or political group can accuse sociologists of unfair representation or bias.

Since much of sociology is devoted to exploring power relations and the effects that said power relations have in reproducing social and economic inequalities, this can prove to be quite problematic for qualitative social researchers as it means that their work may run the risk of being dismissed entirely due to its structure. For instance, advocates of free market capitalism and libertarianism might be sceptical of sociological data that may imply a socialist approach to the economy could be beneficial. Likewise, criminologists who are critical of the current justice system may be put under pressure from social conservatives.

However, Becker, unlike the ideological social constructivist, makes a key point in telling sociologists to avoid sentimentality.²⁰ Arguably this simple notion could be the key to the ideological social construct's downfall. As the examples that I have given throughout this article have primarily dealt with issues relating to personal identity, such as obscure sexual identities and body positivity, it becomes apparent that the activism related to such groups is mostly based on what they perceive to be the diminishing of their social integrity ('erasing' is the popular term of reference in social justice circles), rather than any definitive economic or political inequality. Hence, social constructivism becomes more about the protection of individual identity rather than the analysis of individual identity.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article I have explored the origins, negative effects, and possible solutions to what I have deemed the 'ideological social construct.' To conclude, it is not enough to advocate for a reactionary 'back to basics' approach in the social sciences, since many of the traditional sociological methods have been largely criticised as being biased and misleading in themselves. Either that or they have been deconstructed or have otherwise become obsolete in regards to contemporary societal structures. Instead, sociologists should arguably deconstruct the deconstruction. That is, to take a more critical stance towards the popular discourse of ideological social constructivism. Social scientists cannot and should not be so readily accepting of whatever new methods have become popular amongst contemporary social justice activists without

²⁰ Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?', 246-7

first analysing them sociologically. Overall, sociologists must be willing to differentiate between the proper use of social constructivism, and the discourse of the ideological social construct.

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