

Social Constructionism and Beyond in Housing Research

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Paper for ISA Housing Conference
Glasgow
September 2009

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Introduction

Since Jim Kemeny's call in 1992 for a more theoretically informed housing research, there has been a substantial body of work claiming social constructionism as its theoretical foundation. Indeed, Kemeny himself used social constructionism in his research on comparative national housing policy. The aim of this chapter is to review the social constructionist approach in housing research and to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Despite its generally worthwhile contribution to research on housing, the weaknesses of the approach have become increasingly apparent. These range from an abstract difficulty of dealing with a "material world" to the divorce that has been created with policy makers. Therefore, the chapter will examine attempts to build on or to move beyond the tradition of social constructionism. In particular the possibility of using it as a base for inter-disciplinary research will be explored. The chapter is written from the standpoint of someone who is an exponent of the social constructionist approach and some of the work being examined is my own. However, I will argue that social constructionism by itself is a limited paradigm within which to work but one that lends itself to adaptation and extension.

The chapter begins with a brief description of the origins and central tenets of social constructionism. It is argued that it is not just one approach but has different referents and emphases from symbolic interactionism to discourse analysis. The way that social constructionism has been used in housing research is then examined. Most research has fallen into 3 categories which will be described; comparative national housing policy; the construction of social problems; and discourse analysis. The conclusion to this section will focus on research outside these categories that has used social constructionism as a building block and tried to develop from it. This leads in the next section to a focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the social constructionist approach. Four areas will be examined here. The first is the embodied nature of humans and the impact this has on meaning that is important in understanding the relationship between people and their home. The second related issue is the "problem" of dealing with a "material world", which impacts on social constructionist housing research in understanding the relationship between people and the material fabric of a house. A third problem is the relativism of social constructionism that has been the focus of many critics of the overall paradigm. In the wider literature this has led to divisions into *strong* and *weak* constructionism. In housing research the relativism has led in a practical sense to a perception that social constructionists are always critical of policy but have little to help in a policy making process wedded to the concept of "objective knowledge". Relativism is one of the factors that makes it difficult to incorporate social constructionism into interdisciplinary research. Most research on housing is based on a positivist approach either because of its roots in policy sponsored work or in economic or psychological analysis. A fourth problem is the perceived lack of a structural element to constructionism and its neglect of concepts such as power. Constructionist housing research has been useful in identifying and interpreting policy discourses, but has added little to the understanding of why one discourse has dominated others.

The chapter will then examine the potential for amending or adding to constructionism in illuminating housing questions. The section will examine social constructionist research that has strained at or breached perceived conceptual or disciplinary boundaries and also research from other traditions that seems to offer a way forward for social constructionism. In particular the focus will be on research in psychology and economics that offers potential for useful incorporation and collaboration.

In conclusion the chapter offers an assessment of the contribution to housing research made by the social constructionist paradigm and offers thoughts on how it can be fruitfully developed and applied in the future.

Social Constructionism

Most sociological paradigms are an amalgamation of different strands of work that have different emphases, although they may share the same fundamental assumptions. Social constructionism is perhaps an extreme example of this. Much housing research has uncritically accepted an approach that has many roots and different traditions without making clear on which branch it is based. A recent Handbook offering a comprehensive overview of social theory (Ritzer and Smart, 2000) does not allocate one of its 39 chapters to social constructionism. However, there are chapters on symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and post-modernism that cover authors that are regularly quoted by social constructionist housing researchers. Most housing research has started from the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) who, in the Handbook are discussed under phenomenology, despite themselves acknowledging their debt to George Mead (1934) who is discussed in the Handbook under symbolic interactionism. Of course this is only one way of arranging a wide dispersion of conceptual approaches and other editors may have chosen another way. Nevertheless, the main point here is that some housing researchers have tended to accept and adopt uncritically a dispersed body of work that they have misleadingly expressed and used as a coherent and unified whole.

However, there is considerable agreement on the basic tenets of the approach adopted by most housing researchers which accords with the three premises identified by Blumer for Symbolic Interactionism. These are;

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them ... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he (or she) encounters.

(Blumer 1969 p.2 quoted in Sandstrom, Martin and Fine, 2000 p. 218)

Sandstrom, Martin and Fine (2000) identify 6 implicit assumptions of the approach which expand on Blumer's premises. These are that, first, people are unique in their use of symbols to generate meaning. The major system of symbols is language which enables the generation and communication of meaning to occur through social interaction.

Therefore much research in this tradition focuses on the use and meanings of language as it mediates in the social construction of the “reality” of the way that people see the world. Second there is the belief that, although people are born with a biological make-up, they become human and develop a sense of self through social interaction. These socialisation processes are a major focus of research. Third, people are self-reflexive beings that shape their own behaviour despite the influence of a variety of social factors that may constrain them. Therefore, people are not viewed as dupes of structural forces beyond their control, but neither are they completely free agents. Fourth, people are purposive in their behaviour and determine what meaning to give to a situation and how to act through taking into account the unfolding intentions, actions and expressions of others. Therefore, processes of negotiation and interaction are crucial in understanding behaviour. Fifth, human society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction. The emphasis on interaction means that the approach is different from the psychological belief that society exists primarily in people’s heads or some sociologists’ view that society exists independently of individuals and has its own dynamic. Finally, the major aim of social research is to understand the worlds of meaning that people generate through interaction in order to understand how social actors define, construct and act towards the “realities” that constitute their everyday worlds.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) offer a similar view of the fundamental underpinnings. The fundamental tenet is that social life is constructed by people through interaction. It is through interaction that individuals define themselves and the world they inhabit and so it is through interaction that the nature of the individual becomes apparent to themselves and to others. Much emphasis in social constructionism is on face to face interactions where an individual’s subjectivity becomes available to themselves and to others through what they say and their body language. A key element in this interaction is the use of language which is defined as a system of vocal signs. Berger and Luckmann argue that language is important because it enables interaction to be detached from the subjective “here and now,” of face to face interaction to become objectively available. Language allows interaction about individuals or objects which are not present and enables a vast accumulation of experiences and meanings to be available in the “here and now”.

Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of bringing back these symbols and presenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and the commonsense apprehension of this reality. I live in a world of signs and symbols every day.

(Berger and Luckmann, 1967, pp 40-41).

Language is capable of building up zones of meaning that serve as a stock of knowledge that individuals use in everyday life and which can be transmitted from generation to generation. These systems of meaning or discourse represent or describe the nature of the world or reality and become taken for granted. They tend to be seen as having an independent, objective reality which is above the subjectivity of individuals. This is partly because they are transmitted from generation to generation through socialisation

and so people perceive that they are the reality of the world into which they are born. They become reified, that is seen as being other than human products, although social constructionist argue that they are merely the product of and are only sustained by human interaction. These discourses play an active part in people's construction of their worlds. Meaning is produced, reproduced, altered and transformed through language and discourse. Social objects are constantly constructed, negotiated and altered by individuals in their attempts to make sense of happenings in the world. In this way language and knowledge are not copies of reality, but constitute reality, each language constructing specific aspects of reality in its own way. The focus is on the linguistic and social construction of reality, on interpretation and negotiation of the meaning of the lived world.

Discourses are built up into "sub-universes of meaning" which define the taken for granted reality and include institutionalised codes of conduct which define and construct appropriate behaviour. With the establishment of sub-universes of meaning a variety of perspectives on the total society emerges, each viewing the latter from the angle of one sub-universe. Each perspective will be related to the concrete social interests of the group that holds it, although it will not necessarily be a mechanical reflection of those interests as it is possible for knowledge to attain a great deal of detachment from the biographical and social interests of the knower. The nature of social order in the society will depend on the ability of people to be able to sustain a particular version of reality as being the objective truth. This depends on the sub-universe of meaning being legitimated through being available to people and being plausible. Therefore it will not merely contain a description of the world, but also explanations and justifications of why things are as they are and why people should act in a certain way.

Social constructionist researchers in housing have also drawn on strands of other traditions. For example, in phenomenology the work of Schutz (1970) in championing a "subjective sociology" where there are no objective facts and the world consists exclusively of interpreted behaviour in which the task of the sociologist is to investigate the "lifeworld" of our ordinary, everyday understandings. In ethnomethodology the work of Garfinkel (1967) in illuminating the way that people manage their everyday lives in settings such as the home. Also the work of Strauss (1978) who used the term "negotiated order" to describe and explain the power relations between professionals and patients in hospital settings.

As well as these subjectivist traditions social constructionism has been influenced by the work of Foucault (1972) with his focus on the construction of knowledge and the role it plays in the regulation of humans and populations and the assignment of normalised identities and subjectivities. He was centrally concerned with the exercise of power, which he viewed as multiple and relational. In his work there is no single source of power, but it is pervasive, present in all forms of social interaction, and is exercised in a multiplicity of forms. This formulation of power adds a crucial and missing dimension to social constructionist work in which the concept is rarely discussed. Also, it has reinforced the focus on discourse and language in the construction of knowledge and the enforcement of power.

More recent influences have been of “post-modern” writers such as Bauman with his argument for the dissipation of objectivity. “The post-modern perspective reveals the world as composed of an infinite number of meaning generating agencies, all relatively self-sustained and autonomous, all subject to their own respective logics and armed with their own facilities of truth validation” (Bauman, 1992 p 35). The compatibility of social constructionism with some post-modern theorists has increased its popularity over recent years and has allowed the incorporation of some concepts and ideas, most notably those of Giddens (1989).

The main point here is that social constructionism is not a clear unified tradition of thought with an agreed research modus operandi. In contrast it is a dispersed field that draws on different traditions and in which there are many differences of approach. What is generally shared can be summarised as; a disagreement with approaches that assume the objective status of knowledge; a focus on the construction of meaning through social interaction; and the importance of language and discourse in the carrying of meaning. Housing research has tended not to engage with the theoretical debates about method and focus. Rather research has either been based on the general shared assumptions, or the analysis has been based on one particular author or approach. This will be discussed further in a later section.

Social Constructionist Housing Research

Although there are many strands in social constructionism, housing research has largely been confined to four areas. The most popular has been what has been termed the “social construction of social problems”. This follows a long tradition of social constructionist research that derived from labelling theory and was given an impetus by Spector and Kitsuse (1977). (For a review see Kemeny, 2004). The emphasis has been on trying to understand different definitions of social problems such as homelessness by examining policy narratives. These problems are perceived not to have “objective” foundations, but are “constructed on shifting sands of public rhetoric, coalition building, interest group lobbying and political expediency” (Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi, 2004 p.5). An example of the approach is Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi’s (1999) description of the minimalist and maximalist discourses of homelessness policy in the UK. However, the quotation could describe a “political science approach” to policymaking, but most social constructionist research in housing has not examined in detail the actions of individuals and agencies in the policy making process. Rather it has focused on the content of policy discourses through an examination of policy documents. Therefore, social problems research has often consisted largely of discourse analysis (for a review of discourse analysis in housing see Hastings, 2000). This form of analysis has been applied in a number of fields such as urban renewal, housing management and tenure. The strength of the approach is in its questioning of existing ways of thinking in policy. One can think of this as opening the eyes of policy makers to question existing assumptions of policy. In social constructionist terminology it is making explicit the reification of certain ways of seeing the world, the viewing of these ways as objective facts. The popularity of this type of research is one of the reasons why social constructionism has often been perceived as being unhelpful to policy makers. Who takes kindly to their assumptions

being questioned and criticised, without often any constructive thoughts about how to do things differently?

The focus on discourse is one that is shared with other perspectives. For example, critical realists would accept the importance of discourse in framing policy and discourse analysis can be undertaken with many different theoretical approaches. So an important question is what is different about social constructionist discourse analysis? This is a question to which we will return as it is difficult to discern any difference in much housing research and social constructionist researchers have “incorporated” critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and the approach of Foucault (1972) with his emphasis on the mechanisms of governmentality through discourse.

Kemeny criticises much housing research in the social problems tradition as being too focused on discourse and not enough on the power relations that underpin its creation. Following Spector and Kitsuse (1977) Kemeny argues that social problems are better understood in terms of process rather than as static conditions. This formulation places emphasis on the claims making process, that is the different definitions (or claims) made by different groups and the process by which pressure groups seek to impose their definition on public discourse and ultimately the policy making process above those of others. This formulation harks back to the interactionist tradition of social constructionism. Kemeny calls for more housing research that examines the way that housing policies are constructed in terms of the institutional arrangements that are put in place to deal with particular definitions of housing problems and the practices through which they are implemented. He looks for more studies of “doing” housing policy making and understanding these as processes and achievements of interaction. The possible links with political science approaches to policy making and governance are easy to see, but have seldom been grasped. Social constructionism can bring to the table the focus on subjectivity and the importance of discourse. Traditional political science approaches can bring ways of conceiving of the networks or patterns of interaction around policy making and governance.

The second tradition of social constructionist housing research has focused on interaction, but is much less developed than the social problems tradition. For example, the work on the social construction of housing management (Clapham, Franklin and Sauger, 2000, Darcy and Manzi, 2004) has taken an explicitly interactionist stance. This field of research is highlighted because of its difference from any other form of social constructionist housing research. The research studies in this field have shared the usual focus on discourse as expressed in policy documents and written procedures. However they have moved further and examined the social interaction between housing officers and tenants. Of course this type of research has a long pedigree in other fields such as the doctor/ patient relationship, but is unique in housing terms. First, the research focus on the social interaction that shapes meaning is unique in housing research terms, perhaps surprisingly given the focus on social constructionism on this. Second, what are being socially constructed here are a relationship and an occupational role. This is different from the social problems tradition. It is not a social problem that is being constructed but a small part of social reality as constructed through interaction between individuals in

different positions in social space. In this way the analysis is uniquely social constructionist in a way that other research as epitomized in discourse analysis may not be.

A third area of social constructionist housing research is in international comparative research. This can be seen as a variation on the social problems tradition outlined earlier. The emphasis is on how and why social problems are defined differently in different countries. Kemeny in his work has examined the social construction of tenures and their relationship to general political cultures. This approach has led to a questioning of theories of national housing policy that have emphasised the convergence of policy and instead posited a thesis of continuing divergence (Kemeny and Lowe, 1998). Kemeny has used the concept of culture to argue that countries retain an individual housing structure that accords with political structure and in particular the form of welfare policy pursued. This approach builds on the ideas of Esping-Andersen (1990) who identified what he saw as the three worlds of welfare. Much research has sought to place housing within this framework and to map the relationship between housing and other elements of the welfare state (see chapter ? for a fuller discussion). There has also been a discussion of the factors contributing to the dominance of owner occupation in some countries.

Haworth, Manzi and Kemeny (2004) claim that a social constructionist approach to international comparative housing research can combat the ethnocentrism inherent in much research of this kind. The strength of the social constructionist approach has been the questioning of taken for granted assumptions about housing institutions and problem definitions. For example, research has shown the different meanings attached to owner occupation in different countries (Mandic and Clapham, 1996). Social constructionism has also led to the questioning of structuralist conceptions of change in housing systems, and to the emphasis on political choice and cultural norms in creating and sustaining housing institutions. However, there has not been a reconciliation between the social constructionist approach emphasising agency and the structuralist emphasis. Therefore there has not been any integrationist model (although see Clapham, 2007 for a discussion of the discourse of globalisation).

Also, the symbolic interactionist strand of social constructionism places emphasis on uncovering the lifeworlds of individuals and groups and describing the world as they see and experience it. When applied to international comparative research the emphasis would be on uncovering the way that housing experiences were perceived by those experiencing them in the countries concerned in the tradition of ethnographic studies of different societies. Comparative housing research has not been developed in this direction, with most social constructionist analyses focusing on the national level of social problem construction.

The fourth category of social constructionist research has been in developing a holistic view of the housing field. Most social constructionist housing research has been directed at particular research topics rather than attempting to describe a social constructionist view of the housing field and its relationship to other fields. The only attempt here has been by the present author in the pathways approach (Clapham, 2005). However,

although this approach was based on social constructionism, it did draw on concepts from outside such as the Giddens concept of structuration. This raises the question of whether social constructionism has been developed enough to provide a way forward in housing analysis or whether further work is needed if the approach can be used to give a coherent and comprehensive view of the housing field.

Social Constructionism – Some Problems

There are many general criticisms of social constructionism reflecting the many other sociological approaches. Four important issues will be mentioned briefly here because they help to define and understand the approach. However all will be considered in more detail later as they impact on the actuality and potential of housing research.

The first general criticism of social constructionism is its relativism. King (2004) repeats the common criticism of authors such as Nozick (2001) that there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the approach. If all discourse is socially constructed and there is no such thing as objective truth, then social constructionism itself is only one discourse among many and cannot claim superiority over any other approach. It is difficult to disagree with the criticism, but most social constructionists would not make claims of superiority, but would accept that theirs was just one way of looking at the world that had no special claims above any other. Much social constructionist research is concerned with describing peoples' "life worlds" and contrasting them with other peoples' realities. It is concerned with why certain discourses or versions of reality become accepted and others not without imposing its own reality. However, if social constructionism was to stop at this point its value would be limited. Is it possible to generalise from findings in any way or to provide clues to future actions and events? The problem of relativity is at the heart of the perceived inadequacy of social constructionism in offering anything for the policy making process.

A second general criticism is the assumption described in the discussion of symbolic interactionism that humans only achieve their humanity through social interaction. King (2004) argues that social constructionism sees individual subjects as "empty vessels filled up through discourse" (p.43). However, recent literature has stressed the embodied nature of human action (see for example Shilling, 2003) and there has emerged a social constructionist sociology of the body. In research on the meaning of home there has been an understanding of the importance of emotions in influencing the relationship between people and their physical environment. However, there has not emerged a persuasive synthesis of the different factors of body, mind and discourse. How do our physical bodies and minds influence our subjective meanings? Within some topics in the housing field this lack could be very important. For example, people may have a strong emotional relationship with home. People's relationship to the physical fabric of the house is mediated through their physical characteristics – it is embodied. The obvious issue is the meaning and use of housing by older or physically disabled people but the general point is valid for all. Without an understanding of the influence of embodiment on meaning, social constructionism can offer only partial explanations.

The criticism of social constructionism can be widened out to make a third general point that the “material world” is viewed only as a passive conductor of meaning. Social constructionism does not deny the existence of a material world, but argues that our access to it is mediated through language and discourse. Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi (2004) quote Collin (1997 pp.2-3) “our perception of the material world is affected by the way we *think* or *talk* about it, by our *consensus* about its nature, by the way we *explain* it to each other, and by the *concepts* we use to grasp it”. This is in contrast to some versions of actor-network theory that imbue material objects with agency conceptually on a par with human action (for a review in housing see Gabriel and Jacobs 2008). This debate is a crucial one for housing studies because of its impact on the theorisation of the relationship between an individual and their house. Much of the literature on the meaning of home has treated the built structure as an empty vessel into which meaning is poured. Does the built form influence the meaning, and if so how and to what extent?

The fourth general criticism concerns the relationship between the individual and society. Social constructionist writers have differed in their emphasis on individual agency and societal structures. Travers (2004) emphasises the difference between Schutz and Berger and Luckmann. Schutz (1973) places stress on the pre-existence of a social world that we are born into and which will survive us. He is interested in how we make sense of this world and view it as an objective reality. In contrast Travers argues that Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that society can be changed without too much difficulty. It is perhaps indicative that Berger and Luckmann do not discuss the nature of power. Later influential writers such as Foucault (1972) emphasise the way that discourses are framed within power relations and are integral to them. The agency/structure debate has been one of the key ones in recent sociology. However, it is unclear how social constructionism relates to this debate.

Beyond Social Constructionism

The criticisms of social constructionism are important to ensure its future as an acceptable framework for the analysis of housing issues. As we have argued earlier most social constructionist research in housing has been either partial, in the sense that it has just focused on particular issues (such as the social problems strand) or has sought to incorporate other theories and concepts (such as some discourse analysis and the pathways framework). As a result social constructionism has not been incorporated into the mainstream of housing research.

Before proceeding it is worthwhile taking a slight digression into another debate. In his appeal to housing researchers to move beyond the empirical and positivist approach of much work, Kemeny argued for the application of social theory to housing. His view was that there should not be housing theory because housing was not a field that should be separated from a wider analysis of the social world. The assumption here was that housing could be adequately analysed using theoretical concepts and approaches from the general social science disciplines. Social constructionism is such an approach. However, others, for example King (2009) have argued that the experience of housing was unique enough to require its own set of concepts and approaches which, he argued should be drawn from the experience of consuming and using housing. I have argued elsewhere for

a mixed approach which starts from the relationship between an individual and their house, but broadens out from this base (Clapham, 2009). The basic approach should be taken from the general social sciences, but there may be a need for specific concepts to understand housing or general concepts may need to be amended or adapted to fit this particular application. Clearly social constructionism could be such a general approach. The questions then concern its value in furthering the understanding of housing and the value of general concepts to the specific application to housing. Also, it has been argued earlier that social constructionism has needed supplementation with concepts from other approaches when applied to housing questions. The key questions here relate to the appropriate concepts to incorporate, but also whether the incorporation is justifiable in terms of complementarity. In other words, are the additional concepts compatible with the tenets of social constructionism or built on other foundations that are opposed to them? Any amalgamation of concepts needs to be justified and not be just a mish-mash of incompatible ideas.

King (2009) has suggested a theoretical approach to housing that starts from the use of a dwelling and expands from that base. Social constructionism has much value as a base for such a theoretical exercise because of its focus on subjective meaning and much valuable research has been undertaken on the meaning and use of dwellings. However two of the major criticisms of social constructionism need to be overcome if it is to be useful as a base. The first is the embodied nature of the meaning and use of housing.

The assumption of social constructionism that people are made through social interaction is an easy one to question, but a difficult one to build upon. What the assumption may lack in realism, it makes up for in consistency. Any attempt to add on to this an idea of embodiment needs to confront the logical inconsistency involved and answer difficult questions about the relationship between body and meaning. *Ways forward in behavioural economics/ theory of the body/ emotional making of housing markets.*

The second major problematic area is the relationship between people and material objects such as houses. It was argued earlier that social constructionism has tended to deal with material objects as existing solely in terms of the meaning that is projected onto them by people. They are signs usually interpreted through the language we use to describe them. Social constructionists do not deny that objects have a material existence, but argue that, to understand human action, we only need to be concerned with the meanings that the objects have, because it is this which influences people.

This justification has been increasingly seen as inadequate and it is easy to see that housing is a field where this inadequacy is important, because of the relationship that people have with the built structure of their houses as well as with the built form of the neighbourhood and material possessions within the house. There are a number of traditions of research on the relationship between people and their environment. Perhaps the most developed is what has been termed people-environment studies based around the discipline of psychology (see chapter ?). However, this approach has shared the social constructionist focus on meaning and identity and has paid little attention to the physical attributes of a house or material possessions. One way forward is offered by the concept

of “affordances” coined by Gibson (1986). The basic concept is that the physical structure of houses does not just have symbolic meanings, but also allows or hinders different uses. The physical structure has a material existence that can facilitate or hinder particular uses. Therefore, different houses may offer different mobility possibilities for disabled people. The concept of affordances is a good starting point for a dual analysis of meaning and use, but it has not yet been developed to put some flesh on the basic idea. It is also not clear what the relationship is between the use and meaning dimensions. What is the relative impact of the two and how do they influence each other?

Another more recent approach to the people/environment interface is provided by Actor-Network theory (see chapter ?). Writers in this tradition have stressed the need to decentre the human subject as the nucleus of social life and have called for greater recognition of non-human actors (such as animals, technology and material artefacts). The emphasis is on the temporary and fluid assemblage of things or networks that bring together human and non-human actors. Rather than the social constructionist focus on discourse, AN theorists seek to illuminate the “socio-technical” construction work that is involved in making some truth claims more durable in particular contexts than others (Gabriel and Jacobs, 2008 p. 529).

Latour (1996 quoted in Gabriel and Jacobs, 2008 p.530) identifies the three ways in which material objects have been considered in social science. These are as “invisible and faithful tools” of human subjects; the fixed material terrain on which human activity is staged; and as projection screens for human meaning. All of these assume objects to be passive recipients of human action and meaning. ANT emphasises the agency potential of networks consisting of both objects and humans. Gabriel and Jacobs (2008) argue that ANT has been criticised for its notion of symmetry in the equal treatment of the agency of humans and objects. However, this criticism, if valid, can be easily overcome. Equality of treatment as an *a priori* assumption open to challenge through empirical enquiry would seem to offer a way of keeping an open mind to all possible relationships. It must also be noted that agency is vested in a network or a relationship rather than in material objects per se.

This formulation seems to capture the essence of the relationship between people and their houses. Houses are not just passive tools of use or conveyors of meaning, but in their built form influence use (through their affordances) and influence meaning through their design and appearance. Focus on the two-way relationship between people and their houses is the key to understanding the nature of the dwelling experience. Therefore, what remains for housing studies is to study the different forms that this relationship can take. This focus of research has been a very unfashionable one in the last 40 years or so. In the 1960s there was research jointly undertaken by architects and social scientists into the impact of particular design features in houses, but this seems to have ceased as architects became more interested in aesthetics as the criteria of good design and social scientists became mired in debates about environmental determinism and focused more on structural levels of analysis. The need now is for a return to the former tradition, but armed with the insights that AN theory has given us.

Structure and agency

It was argued earlier that social constructionism has been criticised for a lack of connection with concepts of power. Clearly the approach does not owe any debt to structural theories and can be argued to emphasise human agency. However, there have been attempts to engage with power using this framework. For example, the work of Strauss on negotiated order stresses the differential ability of different groups to have their definition of reality accepted. The “social problems” approach outlined earlier focuses on the struggles around different definitions of any problem. Comparative housing research in this tradition has placed emphasis on the political factors that have shaped the definition of housing issues in different countries. Social constructionist writers have used the writings of Foucault to ground their discussions of the power around the construction and use of discourses. Others have made use of the structuration theory of Giddens and the power approach of Clegg to explain the differential ability of different people to “set the agenda”. This work shows that the gap in the original formulation of the approach can easily be filled. Social constructionism does not fit easily with theories that stress the structural forces of change. However, it can be integrated with theories that see power invested in human agency and the differential ability of different groups to exercise it.

Positivism and relativism

It was argued earlier that social constructionism has been criticised by adherents of other approaches for its relativism. Economists and psychologists have collaborated in fields such as behavioural economics but social constructionism has been isolated from such inclusion because of its perceived relativism, in contrast to their positivist orientations. The lack of integration has hindered housing studies and in particular hindered the application to housing policy. Therefore, the key question posed by Clapham (2009) is whether social constructionism can be adapted to share insights with positivist approaches. Social constructionism takes as its basic premise the social construction of reality through social interaction. It alerts the researcher to the different perceptions of reality that may be held by individuals or groups. However, a key element of social constructionism is that knowledge of the world often becomes reified or objectified in that people view the world as they see it as an objective “fact”. It is only by doing this that people can manage their everyday lives by accepting its reality. In many or most situations there is general agreement over what is reality between the different actors. Of course social constructionism would have a lot to say about how the dominant conception of reality was constructed and the discourses that underpinned it. It would also be concerned with the power structures that led to one particular version of reality being accepted rather than another. However, within a particular “reality” it may be possible to forge a common conception of how actors would behave. Of course social constructionists would stress the limited extent of the “reality” over both time and space which would limit the generality of the conclusions that could be drawn. It would be interesting (and extremely challenging) to work through the conditions under which an agreed position of what may be termed “limited positivism” or “fixed constructionism” could be derived. Social constructionists would have to accept that social institutions could become reified in certain situations where it could be accurate to

talk about social facts. The key factor would be to ascertain the boundaries in time and space of such situations.

Housing Policy

One of the often stated drawbacks of social constructionism is its perceived inability to contribute to the policy making process. Undoubtedly the nature of social constructionist analysis that has sought to question the accepted definitions of problems can be viewed as unhelpful by policy makers who may see this as critical without offering an alternative. The aim of research has been to understand why things are as they are rather than to offer advice on how to change things. The relativism of social constructionism may be perceived as unhelpful as it does not deliver “an answer” as much positivist research offers to do. It is unlikely that social constructionism can add much to a policy making process if the people involved are wedded to a positivist orientation. In this case social constructionism may be perceived as not delivering “real knowledge” in the form of facts or figures or evidence. However, if a relativist paradigm was accepted in policy circles then social constructionist knowledge could be perceived as useful. For example, much research is focused on uncovering the way that certain groups of people perceive themselves and their world. This form of research could be perceived as important in allowing politicians to judge the acceptability of policies or to tailor policy interventions so they have the required impact on perceptions or action. Clapham (2005) has argued that policy interventions may fail if implementers do not share the aims of the policy makers, or if those receiving policy intervention do not perceive the situation as intended and do not deliver the required action. An example of the former may be homelessness officers who interpret intentionality provisions in a different way than intended by the policy makers. An example of the latter may be homeless people perceiving a particular intervention as unhelpful and refusing to be subject to it.

The argument here is that the perceived difficulties of social constructionism in contributing to policy debates is not inherent in the approach, but is related to the lack of fit between relativist researchers and positivist policy makers.

Conclusion

The chapter has sought to draw out the strengths and weaknesses of a social constructionist approach to housing studies. It has been argued that social constructionism has delivered many insights into housing phenomena, particularly in the fields of policy definitions and in international comparisons of housing policies and outcomes. However, there are limitations to the scope of research undertaken and this relates in part to the limitations of the social constructionist tradition. The tradition can be criticized as being broadly based and encompassing a wide number of individual paradigms of research. However, this breadth could be a virtue given the need to incorporate other traditions and concepts if the scope of research is to be broadened. This chapter has reviewed a number of areas where development is needed and possible. Some of these are more challenging than others. It has been argued that theories of power can be easily incorporated and the contribution to policy making can be achieved with an appropriate policy paradigm. More difficult issues are the relationship with the material world of the dwelling which could undermine the fundamental tenets of

constructionism and where new concepts are needed to ensure progress. Perhaps the most daunting challenge is the possible interface with positivist disciplines such as economics and psychology. However it is in this area that the potential benefits are the greatest.

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