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What is This?

Social Construction Research and Theory Building

Sharon Turnbull

The problem and the solution. This chapter presents theory building from a social constructionist perspective. It asks what constitutes theory for a social constructionist and compares the assumptions made within this paradigm with those embedded in quantitative research. The chapter then offers an eight-step approach to theory building, at the same time as illustrating this approach with an example taken from the author's own research. Finally, the chapter offers a discussion of the legitimacy and a critique of this approach.

The past few years have seen a growing interest in qualitative research paradigms and methods in human resource development (HRD) research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1997; Silverman, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Symon & Cassell, 1997). A number of reasons have been postulated for this surge of interest. Henwood and Pidgeon (1995), for example, have suggested that an overemphasis on theory testing has led to an underemphasis on the building of new theory and suggested that it is now time to redress the balance. Others have expressed disappointment that although much research within the dominant quantitative paradigm can claim methodological rigor, such research generally does not lead to fresh insight, is often considered irrelevant by practitioners working in the field, and appears to have done no more than reinforce the dominant discourses of our profession (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 38).

Qualitative research, arguably, has the potential to add the richness and significance of individual experience in the theory-building research process. In contrast, many quantitative researchers have tended to play down the complexity of organizational life in their enthusiasm for seeking reductionist causal relationships (Symon & Cassell, 1997, p. 1). This resistance to ambiguity and inadequate acknowledgment of the structural, social, and power issues that exist in organizations have led many HRD scholars to turn to qualitative research. Research generated through qualitative methodologies is increasingly being valued by HRD scholars and practitioners in their quest to enhance performance, learning, integrity, and spirituality in organizations.

This chapter sets out to explore the role of social constructionist research in theory building by capturing some of the challenges and preoccupations that confront scholars working in the qualitative tradition. Although this tradition encompasses a number of schools of thought, which I will outline below, I acknowledge a debt to Berger and Luckman (1966) and Gergen (1999), whose versions of the philosophy of social constructionism have strongly influenced my own work.

What Is Theory?

Theory is one of many modern contested terms. (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 37)

The arguments surrounding theory have long turned on whether or not it is something separate from or embedded in the real world. Social constructionist researchers use theory to interpret the social world in which no absolute truth is deemed to exist but, instead, only socially constructed realities that in themselves may develop and change, influenced by context and time.

Alvesson and Deetz (2000) suggested that theory can be construed as "a way of seeing and thinking." They talked about theories-in-use:

All creatures develop ways of dealing with practical tasks and problems in their worlds. In a sense they all have theories; they have plans, they make observations, they have an idea of how these observations fit together, and a set of activities that follow. . . . Few theories are failures with regard to specific situations; all theories ultimately fail if applied far enough outside of the specific conditions for which they were developed. Theories thus differ more in the size of their domain and the realistic nature of the parameters than in correctness. (p. 39)

Qualitative researchers are more interested in depth than breadth. They are interested in the following three functions: directing attention, organizing experience, and enabling useful responses (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 41). This is a departure from the criteria of validity, reliability, and generalizability, while making few claims about the theory's ability to illuminate or direct action.

To suggest that all qualitative research follows the same assumptions and hence the same assumptions about theory would clearly be a mistake. Qualitative researchers represent a wide range of philosophical positions. Grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 1997; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is arguably closest to the quantitative paradigm, adopting the familiar language of hypothesis, testing, and verification normally associated with the positivist tradition and following a rigorous set of procedures to develop theory from data through a primarily inductive process.

Corbin and Strauss (1997), however, diverged from quantitative researchers by refuting the belief that theories are about uncovering preexisting truth, suggesting instead that "theories are interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted or researched by researchers" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 171) and that "as conditions change at any level of the conditional matrix, this affects the validity of theories—that is their relation-

ship to contemporary social reality" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 171). For these scholars, then, theory "consists of plausible relationships proposed among *concepts* and *sets of concepts*" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 168).

Poststructuralists, on the other hand, such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Barthes, focus on the deconstruction of the so-called truths of science, social order, and the human self, effectively taking up the antitheoretical position, and would therefore not accept theory building as a construct that is meaningful from their inquiry position.

Between these two extremes falls the *constructivist paradigm*, a term often used to capture a range of associated approaches, all of which emphasize the social construction of meaning and "reality." Within this paradigm, we find ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), and social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1999).

Briefly, social constructionists are interested in developing theory that is derived inductively from the "real world" to enhance understanding of how actors intersubjectively create, understand, and reproduce social situations.

What Constitutes Theory for the Social Constructionist?

The classic work on social constructionism is by Berger and Luckman (1966), who challenged much existing thought on the nature of reality and truth. They claimed, "A sociology of knowledge will have to deal not only with the empirical variety of knowledge in human societies, but also the processes by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially established as 'reality' " (p. 15). They went on, "The sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for knowledge in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of that knowledge" (p. 15).

These claims lead us to problems for theory building. The question arises, If knowledge is constructed situationally through social interaction within communities or organizations, how do we know whether the theory that we are generating is "valid," and by what standards should we be judging validity? Berger and Luckman accepted that the question of validity is an important one but one that does not lead to any easy answers.

One reason why establishing validity in the sense meant by quantitative researchers is not straightforward is that social constructionists acknowledge that meaning and interpretations are created and understood at multiple levels in any research. The researcher, the participants, and the audiences of the account of the study all contribute to the meaning that is generated and understood from the research and to the subsequent adoption of this meaning into the body of knowledge or theory available as a result. Berger and Luckman (1966) illustrated this challenge:

> How can I be sure, say, of my sociological analysis of American middle class *mores* in view of the fact that the categories I use for this analysis are conditioned by historically relative forms of thought, and that I myself and everything that I think is determined by my genes, and by my ingrown hostility to my fellow men, and that, to cap it all, I am myself a member of the American middle class. (p. 25)

So, for a social constructionist researcher, the preoccupation is not for uncovering a truth or reality but with understanding the sense that people make of the social world in their everyday lives. For Berger and Luckman (1966), it is this everyday "commonsense" knowledge that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society or organization could exist.

Assumptions Made by Social Constructionist Researchers?

There are two core assumptions made by social constructionist researchers. They are embedded in the meaning of theory building and authenticity.

The Meaning of Theory Building

Social constructionist theorists acknowledge and seek to understand the intimate relationship between the researcher and the researched, the situational constraints that shape inquiry, and the value-laden nature of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Research from this paradigm is concerned with seeking explanations about how social experience is created and given meaning.

Whereas traditional researchers working in the logical-empirical paradigm (often referred to as quantitative researchers) stress the need to remain neutral and to remove personal biases or political motives from the research process, constructionists suggest that all research is necessarily value laden and that it is preferable for the researcher to acknowledge her or his assumptions and beliefs through a process of reflexivity. If the researcher has emancipatory objectives for her or his research, for example, she or he should seek to surface these values during the process.

Quantitative researchers seek causal explanations in their inquiry endeavors to find generalizable theories. Social constructionists see the cause and effect argument as being in itself a social construction (Gergen, 1999, p. 91). Consequently, of more significance to a social constructionist is stressing the specific, the situational, and the particular and extrapolating these insights to seek transferability of ideas toward a redefinition of existing theoretical frameworks.

This paradigm challenges our understanding of what constitutes theory. The traditional conception of theory building refutes the idea that the partic-

ular can be interesting or important in its own right and bases its assumptions on the view that through the possession of theory, we can over time achieve intellectual and practical mastery over the social world (Schwandt, 1997). However, for constructionist researchers the increased powers of perception and understanding, as well as the desire to bring about change generated through interpretive forms of qualitative research, can be an end in itself, as well as contributing to the more general aim of generating transferable[1] and useful theory.

Authenticity

Constructionists seek authenticity or genuineness through the use of the direct accounts of those being researched and by remaining as close to the program data as possible, making clear where their own voices are being heard. Qualitative accounts can often be illuminating in conveying findings through narrative, as they are able to reach their audience at a number of levels.

Constructionist research seeks to add to knowledge through the specific case chosen to research. The constructionist recognizes, however, that the resulting account of the situation will be a narrative that reflects and portrays not only the voices of those being researched but also the voice, experience, and background of the researcher. The constructionist seeks to find a rich interpretation of a messy situation. This interpretive account will, it is hoped, generate both understanding and knowledge about the case. Ideas may also emerge that open and alter assumptions that can be carried forward to other cases displaying some similar characteristics in similar contexts.

In qualitative research, the conceptual development of theory is entirely contingent on field research and the insights that this generates. It seeks to understand the different interpretations, understandings, and discourses that are at play in a given case or situation:

> Whatever the nature of the world, there is no single array of words, graphs, or pictures that is uniquely suited to its portrayal. Further, each construction has both potentials and limits, both scientifically and in terms of societal values. Thus, in its efforts to abandon all voices save one, there is an enormous suppression of potential. And when it is the investigator's voice that will finally reign supreme, the voices of all those under study are silenced. (Gergen, 1999, p. 93)

Practices of Inquiry in Social Constructionist Research

Social constructionist researchers seek to capture the individual's point of view through detailed interviewing and observation. They also seek to examine the constraints of the everyday social world, directing their atten-

tion to the specifics of particular cases. They believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable, and they are concerned with discourse and the way language shapes the way we see the world.

Gergen (1999) proposed three types of discourse: structure, rhetoric, and process. Discourse as structure, he suggested, is the stable set of conventions that shape our lives. This is embedded in the metaphors and narratives that we live by. Examples may be the way we describe the emotions as located in the "gut" or the "heart" or Western images of the "self" with an inner autonomous world located inside the body, which relates to other "selves" whom we often portray as though characters in a story. Discourse as rhetoric refers to the conventions and structures that are used to frame the world, achieve certain effects, and build "favored realities." This, said Gergen, is the language of persuasion. An example of this from my own research might be uncovering the language of war liberally dispersed throughout company change programs, metaphorically soliciting the managers to become warriors in this campaign. Discourse as process is the "ongoing flow of social interchange: the conversations, negotiations, arguments and other processes by which we are constituted" (p. 64). In this type of discourse, "realities" are fluid and constantly being constructed and reconstructed through dialogue and conversation. An example might be the evolving construction of organizational cultures and subcultures that form through the relationships and exchanges within their past and present memberships.

Research into each of these forms will require a different methodological approach, ranging from metaphorical analysis to analyzing narratives, stories, documentary and textual analysis, and rhetorics. One dominant form of methodology adopted by many social constructionists is ethnography. Ethnographers seek to study organizations and communities following the anthropological tradition, observing communities from the inside as participants as well as observers (Hammersley, 1990; Watson, 1994). Data are collected through stories, first-person accounts, life histories, critical incident technique, conversation analysis, and various biographical and autobiographical accounts.

Space in this chapter precludes more detailed discussion of the methodologies available to the qualitative researcher. There are a number of rich texts already devoted to this aim, for example, Symon and Cassell (1997), Silverman (1997), and Denzin and Lincoln (1994).

Social Constructionist Research

There is no one "right way" to conduct a qualitative research project that holds theory building as one of its aims. However, new scholars often ask for guidance on a process to follow. Qualitative research is essentially an itera-

tive process, in which fieldwork, data collection, data analysis, production of an account, and theorizing may take place simultaneously or through a cyclical process in which the researcher may complete these stages a number of times in her or his quest for the advancement of understanding or "knowledge."

The process is rarely either linear or sequential. In reality, this is an iterative process in which the researcher moves between the steps. However, to make the theory-building research process explicit, I have outlined it in Figure 1 below.

The process outlined above is based on Janesick's (1998) chapter in Denzin and Lincoln titled "The Dance of Qualitative Research Design." For the purpose of this chapter, I have adapted and built on her "warming up" and "cooling down" dance metaphor to produce some steps to describe a theory-building research process from within a social constructionist paradigm. The steps suggest a linear approach, but in reality, it should be noted that I often move between these stages to refine my thinking and revisit my analysis.

For each stage, I have given some guidance and then followed this with a brief illustration of how I undertook this stage of the process for my own research project.[2]

1. Start With a Question and Select a Social Setting in Which to Conduct the Study

The order in which these decisions are taken will vary according to what is driving you as a researcher, but it is common to start with a preoccupation or question and then to seek out a site in which to study or find out more about your chosen topic. The driver for the topic is likely to be determined by the researcher's motives, which, if they are rooted in social constructionism, will be interpretive and explanatory but may also seek to advance critical theory and emancipatory objectives. Qualitative researchers usually start with a concern or question, entering the field as early as possible in the research process to allow their data to drive the shape of their theory building. Having decided on a research question, the next decision is to choose where to study this. A decision on this is often shaped by practicalities and networks of contacts.

> My interest was to understand the impact of corporate change programs and managerial fads and fashions on "middle managers." To build theory, I sought a single case study in which I could study the nature of the responses of a group of managers to a large-scale change program. I sought to understand the varying nature of the responses to the program, as well as the implications of these for the individuals and the organization as a whole. I was looking for an organization that would allow me to become a participant observer during a major change program, as well as to interview a number of the participants.

1. Start with a question and select a social setting in which to conduct the study.
2. Decide what will be studied, under what circumstances, and over what period of time.
3. Gain access and entry to the site.
4. Select appropriate research strategy.
5. Using inductive analysis, adopt a system of coding of field notes and documents.
6. Look for the meaning and perspectives of the participants in the study.
7. Develop working models to explain the phenomena in the study.
8. Present findings in narrative form supported by evidence from the statements and behaviors recorded in interviews and notes; provide an interpretive commentary framing the key findings in the study.

FIGURE 1:   The Process of Social Constructionist Research

2. Decide What Will Be Studied, Under What Circumstances, and Over What Period of Time

It is tempting to try to include too much, as a qualitative study can easily grow beyond all recognition. Bound your study by place and by research question. If in doubt, reduce the size and scope of the study to achieve the richness of data and understanding you are seeking. Big numbers are not needed or even desirable in social constructionist research. It is advisable to stick to a single case initially. You can always broaden your scope later.

The time period you set for your research is likely to be constrained by factors such as funding or your doctoral program. The start and end of the project are likely to feel artificial and unlikely to coincide with organizational events to mark this timing. Do not be deterred by this. Set your time parameters and try to adhere to them. If the situation changes, you may have the basis for a further study.

> I heard through a colleague that a large engineering company and client of my school was launching a multimillion pound change program that was designed to change values and culture to improve performance. This fit my criteria for a research site very well.
>
> I decided to study a single "culture change program" in depth and to narrow my study to a group of 56 managers from different parts of the organization. The duration of the program was 12 months, which meant that my data collection was completed over a period of 18 months. My research would take place during the program modules and, through interviews, at the workplaces of my interviewees.

3. Gain Access and Entry to the Site

Having decided on a field of interest, access to an appropriate setting in which to conduct the research must be secured. This is not always easy, so it is important to consider what you might be able to offer a host in return for access. One

option is an offer to the host to share in your research findings in some way. Depending on your research, you may be able to find a way to indicate the benefits to your client in receiving your report. Be careful in your negotiations, however, to ensure that your scholarly freedom is not constrained by any commitment you make to your host.

> In exchange for a report on the progress of the change process, and of the behavior and values of the managers during the program, the company agreed to give me access to as many managers as I needed to interview, as well as allowing me to participate in the program itself.

4. Select Appropriate Research Strategy

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggested that qualitative research strategies are rarely used in their pure forms. They have described the process of qualitative research as "bricolage" and the researcher as "bricoleur,"[3] as he or she often draws on a combination of strategies, methods, and materials. The choice of methodologies is context specific and dependent on the question posed by the research. Be practical as well as ambitious. If ethnography is prohibitive due to the time it demands at the client's site, consider ethnographic approaches within more limited contexts or choose interviews, focus groups, or textual analyses that are practical yet may still meet your requirements in terms of the nature of the question you are asking.

> I decided to interview each of the managers twice in depth, at the start of the program and toward the end of the 12-month program, to identify any changes in beliefs, values, and behavior that were taking place. I also attended each of the five modules of the program as a participant observer to capture their live and situated responses to the program. A full ethnography was not feasible as I was working full-time in addition to this research. In addition, I undertook textual analysis of the company documentation that accompanied the program, including the chairman's videos, and conducted a discourse analysis of the language of the program.

5. Using Inductive Analysis, Adopt a System of Coding of Field Notes and Documents

The process of coding has been well documented by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as a fundamental aspect of their grounded theory research approach. Dey (1993) saw the process of data analysis as a sequential process (see Figure 2). Ideally, however, he suggested that this process would be better represented by a spiral than a straight line as it is an iterative process. This sequence is summarized below.

Describing and classifying. Once the researcher has gained an overview of the data she or he has collected (describing), the next step is to begin to classify this. Creating categories (or coding) is a "conceptual and empirical challenge"

FIGURE 2:   Dey's Process for Coding Data

(Dey, 1993). Dey (1993) went on, "Categories which seem fine in theory are no good if they do not fit the data. Categories which do fit the data are no good if they cannot relate to the wider conceptual context" (p. 97). He suggested that categories should have an internal aspect; that is, they must be meaningful in relation to the data and an external aspect—they must be meaningful in relation to other categories. The identification of these categories is an interpretive process; they emerge from the data through an interpretive process of identifying recurring ideas and themes.

Connecting. These categories (Dey, 1993), the recurring themes identified by the researcher through this interpretive process, are organized on a hierarchical basis, with each major theme (or category) containing subthemes and further subthemes emerging from each of the subthemes. This then creates a hierarchy from which lateral connections can now be made. These will be cut and moved as the story begins to unfold and connections and linkages begin to be made across the categories.

This operation can be done using a computer-based data analysis package, or manually using color-coding systems. Either way, this is an extremely important aspect of theory-building research from the qualitative paradigm and should always be undertaken rigorously (in other words, using a systematic and detailed approach) and transparently (in a way that is open to and will stand up to the scrutiny of others). Dey's final step, the "account," will be discussed in Step 8 below.

> In the example given above, the coding was complex and multilevel. Each transcript was coded, and various themes emerged across the interviews. The top-level themes related, for example, to the culture, leadership style, rewards, and recognition of the old culture; the behaviors of senior management; reactions to the program itself; emotions felt and displayed; relationships in the workplace; sense of self and identity; religious attachment; and so forth. Within each of these themes, a number of subthemes emerged, and so on. Many quotations aligned with more than one theme, and each theme was supported and illustrated by the words of a number of the managers. The analysis of the transcriptions was time consuming but exciting and fruitful. These were cross-referenced with my field notes in which I had kept a log of situational impressions of the contexts and settings in which the interviews took place.

6. Look for the Meaning and Perspectives of the Participants in the Study

Having coded the transcripts, the work is not yet done. The important step that follows is an iterative period of immersion in the data to allow the meaning

and perspectives of the participants to become evident and speak from the data. This is often undertaken with colleagues to allow for alternative explanations of the data to emerge, recognizing that each researcher will inevitably bring a single perspective to the data. At this stage, it might also be checked with the participants to find out whether the meaning attributed to the data by the researcher makes sense to those who contributed their views. Triangulation with other parallel studies may take place at any stage in the process. This means comparing the specific findings of the new study with those of any previous similar study to look for similarities and differences. However, often researchers choose not to engage with other studies until their own coding and immersion in the data have been progressed substantially. The implication of studying other available studies too early is the likelihood of these influencing what you see in your own data, rather than allowing those you have studied to speak for themselves.

> Some very clear themes were now emerging regarding the managers' relationships with their organization and colleagues, their reactions to the frequent change programs that they had encountered, and their sense of self-identity. A number of dominant discourses about the nature of organizations, work, and management were also found to be embedded in the fundamental beliefs of these managers. Studies of other change programs confirmed and supported some of the findings of this study.

7. Develop Working "Models" to Explain the Phenomena in the Study

As discussed earlier, not all qualitative research has theory building as its aim. However, those studies that do have theory building as an objective (as understood within the social constructionist paradigm) should at this stage in the process be ready to posit some tentative explanations or "models" to summarize the research undertaken. It is important to note that the knowledge sought by social constructionist research focuses on deepening our understanding of the social construction of reality within specific contexts, as well as understanding the social structures that create and constrain the meaning we put on our experiences. Therefore, any model developed at this stage is deemed to relate specifically to the case study and is generally developed for purposes of representation and for deepening understanding, preferring the more tentative possibility of looking for potential transferability into other situations to more concrete assumptions of generalizability.

> In the process of analyzing this research, it became evident that a number of response types had emerged. These I categorized as critical thinkers, untouched professionals, evangelists, open cynics, skeptics, and actors. These categories, and the clarity with which they emerged, had neither been expected nor sought. Nevertheless, they are illustrated below as a framework for clustering and understanding the wide variety of individual responses to the program as they manifested themselves to the researcher. This typology was not, however, used to provide a central framework for the remainder of the research, as it was felt that to do so would have been reductionist and might have limited the richness of the research findings. Nevertheless, it did become useful again in identifying the shifts in responses of the managers. Figure 3 illustrates

this typology, which plots the response types along the two dimensions of critical/uncritical and committed/uncommitted.

Critical thinkers: They were a small group of highly committed, yet constantly questioning individuals. They had confidence to speak freely and to behave in a manner that was congruent with their own beliefs and were unafraid to express emotion when they genuinely felt it. Their discussions were handled with an intellectual curiosity often lacking in the wider population.

Untouched professionals: They were relatively committed to the company, although by virtue of a professional qualification or expertise, their involvement with Aeroco was of a more calculative than moral nature, and they therefore tended to display unemotional detachment.

Evangelists: They were a small group, but they exhibited a devotion to Aeroco and "Worldclass" bordering on religious fervor, clearly drawing a sense of self-identity from the program.

Open cynics: They were again a small group. They were often long serving and had sometimes experienced disappointment in their careers, leaving them bitter or resentful. These open cynics tended to be rebellious at the modules.

Skeptics: They were a very large group. They were committed to their jobs and to their local site management but were often openly skeptical of the program when among their peer group and often with their subordinates.

Actors: Again, they were quite a large group. Whereas the skeptics tended to "play the game" some of the time, the difference with this group is that they did this all of the time. They tended to be very insecure, distrusting of others, and uncritical in their thinking, preferring the route of resigned behavioral compliance while at work.

Space in this chapter does not permit a full discussion of these ideal types.[4] However, it is important to emphasize at this point that these were fluid and not discrete groups. Managers tended to move up and down the continua of critical/uncritical and committed/uncommitted and were influenced by numerous sociological and psychological factors, some of which had become apparent from the coding and interpretation exercise outlined above.

8. Present Findings in Narrative Form Supported by Evidence From the Statements and Behaviors Recorded in Interviews and Notes; Provide an Interpretive Commentary Framing the Key Findings in the Study

The presentation of the data is a crucial aspect of good qualitative research because the researcher will not have the support of quantitative data to legitimize her or his findings. This means that she or he must be rigorous in writing her or his account.

It is likely that the account will take the form of a narrative or story with a setting, characters, and a plot. In qualitative research, these equate to the social context in which the data have been gathered, the actors who have been studied, and the social action in which they have been involved.
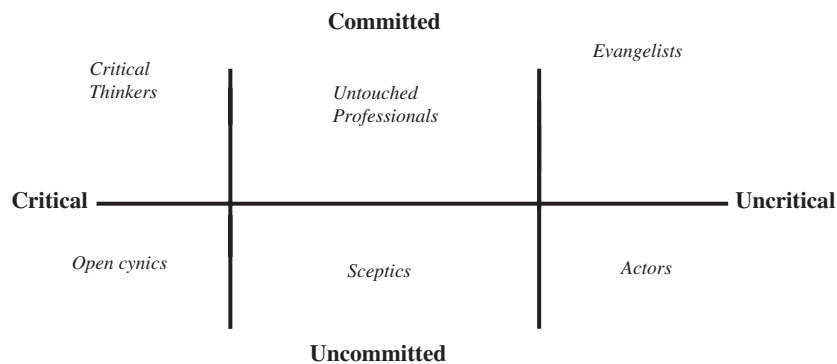
Committed

Evangelists

*Critical
Thinkers*

*Untouched
Professionals*

Critical ──────────────────────────────────── **Uncritical**

Open cynics

Sceptics

Actors

Uncommitted

FIGURE 3:   Typology of Individual Managers' Responses to the Aeroco Program

The stories we tell from our research will reflect the paradigm from which we conducted our research. The researcher should remain visible and self-declared during the process of telling the story so that the reader understands when the researcher's own voice is represented and when she or he is putting forward the voices of others.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) raised four important issues for the researcher to consider when moving from the field to the text. These are sense making, representation, legitimation, and desire. In the process of sense making, we need to consider how we make decisions about what will be included and written about. Representation involves the presentation of the writer and the connection of the writer to the reader, as it is in the connection between the two that meaning is created from the text. Legitimation is connected to the epistemological beliefs about the nature of the authority of the research and raises questions about the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the emergent theory. Desire is Denzin's final category, and this refers to the desire of the researcher to communicate to her or his audience not only the discovery findings of the research but the connected journey of discovery that has accompanied the inquiry. Desire and purpose are inextricably linked, and the communication style should be written with this purpose in mind.

> The research summarized above was written as a doctoral thesis, and later a strand of the theory that emerged was written as a paper for *Human Resource Development International*. The writing was undoubtedly an important part of the journey of explanation. As the account took shape, I became aware of my voice in the text and began to explore my selection of representational form, choice of data, style of writing, and desire to communicate my discoveries. The paradox of constructing a model to "explain" the responses of the managers to their predicament was not lost to me, but I needed the model to legitimize and convince my readership of the serious nature

of what I had found. Although the research was not explicitly emancipatory in approach or methodology, my own preoccupation with justice and freedom led me to examine these concepts very closely in the case study, and I began to consider the implications of the major investment made by this company in a program that produced neither the unified response desired by the company nor the significant culture change that had been anticipated. I also became fascinated by the impact it was having on some members of the organization who described going through highly emotional conversion processes to bring their own beliefs in line with those of the organization. These feelings had not, it appeared, previously been documented elsewhere, and I was confident that "new theory" was now emerging.

Using Social Constructionist Research for Theory Building

There is a fundamental role for social constructionist research within the larger and more disciplined view of theory-building research in applied disciplines. The connection can be understood by using the five phases of the general method of theory-building research in applied disciplines (Lynham, 2002) as a framework. The five phases include conceptual development, operationalization, confirmation or disconfirmation, application, and continuous refinement and development.

Figure 4 visualizes the roles that social constructionist research can play in context of the general method of theory-building research in applied disciplines. Clearly, the application phase is the essential contextual starting point for the use of social constructionist research when used for the purpose of conceptualizing new theory. The process of social constructionist research can feed directly into the conceptualization phase. The research process can also to some degree feed into the operationalization phase of theory building but is not necessary given the social constructionist tolerance for ambiguity. By its own predispositions and limitations, social constructionist research can only partially play a role in the operationalization phase of theory building and cannot play a role in the continuous refinement and development or the confirmation and disconfirmation phase as set forth in the general method of theory-building research in applied disciplines (Lynham, 2002), except to provide detailed qualitative case-specific data that may be deemed transferable to other settings.

Legitimacy and Critique of Theory Building Using Social Constructionist Research

Issues surrounding the legitimacy of social constructionist approaches to theory building continue to provoke debate. One of the main criticisms of the paradigm lies in its rejection of objectivity and truth as being anything other than social constructs and, consequently, in its attachment to a definition of theory that rejects causal links in favor of explanation and illumina-
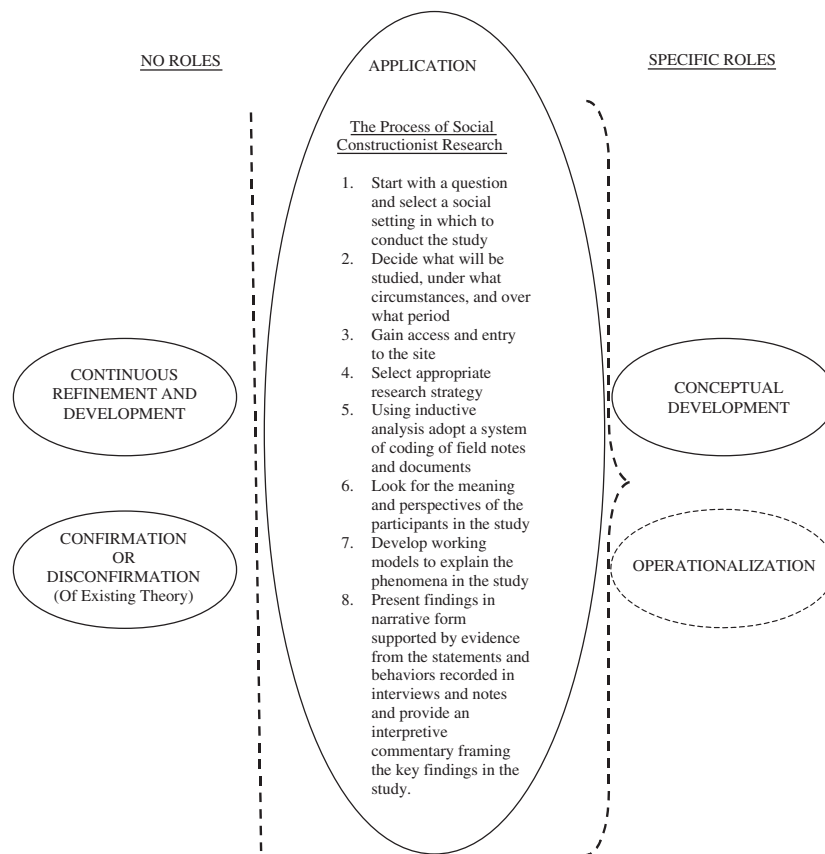
NO ROLES

APPLICATION

SPECIFIC ROLES

The Process of Social
Constructionist Research

1. Start with a question
   and select a social
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2. Decide what will be
   studied, under what
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   what period
3. Gain access and entry
   to the site
4. Select appropriate
   research strategy
5. Using inductive
   analysis adopt a system
   of coding of field notes
   and documents
6. Look for the meaning
   and perspectives of the
   participants in the study
7. Develop working
   models to explain the
   phenomena in the study
8. Present findings in
   narrative form
   supported by evidence
   from the statements and
   behaviors recorded in
   interviews and notes
   and provide an
   interpretive
   commentary framing
   the key findings in the
   study.

CONTINUOUS
REFINEMENT AND
DEVELOPMENT

CONFIRMATION
OR
DISCONFIRMATION
(Of Existing Theory)

CONCEPTUAL
DEVELOPMENT

OPERATIONALIZATION

**FIGURE 4:   The Role of Social Constructionist Research in Context of the General Method of
Theory-Building Research in Applied Disciplines**

tion. Social constructionist theory building is derived from cases that are
grounded in situated experience and practice and are inductively derived.
Although such theories are potentially transferable and applicable beyond
the cases from which they emerge, social constructionists, however, point to
the complexity and variability of social relations to argue against any
attempts to claim causality, generalizability, or repeatability in their
theories.

In response to this critique, social constructionists defend this form of
theory building as more closely representing the lived experience of those
whom they study than quantitative research, which, they argue, tends toward
reductionism. In avoiding simple explanations, the qualitative researcher

can aim for a much richer portrayal of the situations under study and more fairly represent their beliefs, values, and emotions, as well as paying attention to the specific context of the study.

In social constructionist research, we aim for understanding and reconstruction of reality, not for proof, which now becomes a meaningless term when considered from a social constructionist perspective. Hammersley suggested that "an account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, p. 288).

Stake supported this assertion, suggesting that "the purpose of case research is not to represent the world but to represent the case. . . . The utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in the extension of experience" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b, p. 104).

He suggested that most naturalistic, ethnographic researchers will provide enough richness in their commentaries to enable comparisons to be made or that they might point out the comparisons themselves. Knowledge or theory accumulates in a relative sense through the formation of ever more informed and sophisticated construction.

However, Lincoln and Denzin (1998, p. 414) believe that the claims inherent in this statement are as problematic as the claims made by those claiming validity using the old criteria. They suggested that a text can claim validity from the constructivist paradigm if "it is sufficiently grounded, triangulated, based on naturalistic indicators, carefully fitted to a theory and (its concepts), comprehensive in scope, credible in terms of member checks, logical and truthful in terms of its reflection of the phenomenon in question" (p. 414).

Guba and Lincoln (1998, p. 213) have proposed a number of criteria for judging the goodness or quality of qualitative inquiry. They are trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—replacing positivism's internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Finally, the authenticity of the inquiry is judged according to the declared purposes of the research, whether these are to advance knowledge, education, or for emancipatory ideals.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) further suggested that good qualitative research should be "rich in points," by which they meant interpretively rich. They cited studies by Jackall (1988), Mintzberg (1973), and Kunda (1992) as being rich in points and examples of "good" theory building within the qualitative paradigm. To these examples of good qualitative theory building, I would add Casey (1995) and Watson (1994) as further illustrations worthy of attention by HRD scholars. All of the above examples meet Guba and Lincoln's criteria of being trustworthy, credible, transferable, and confirmable.

One of the intentions of this chapter was to open up the possibilities available through constructionist research for scholars of HRD and other applied disciplines. I hope that in discussing the process of this form of theory-building research I have also conveyed some of the richness and excitement implicit in undertaking this form of inquiry. There is no doubt that qualitative research is still on trial by the HRD establishment. It is important that we follow the examples of the scholars cited above to ensure that rigor is not compromised by those of us who undertake it:

> Sloppiness, the expression of opinion not grounded in argumentation, arbitrary use of empirical material, reluctance to engage in dialogue with the literature, and careful consideration of alternative interpretations before deciding which one to favor, are all certainly not to be tolerated. Formalisation, procedure and technique may, however, be replaced by interpretive and theoretical awareness and sensitivity as means of achieving "qualitative rigour," and thus avoids problems of relativism and arbitrariness. (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 69)

In so doing, it is to be hoped that both quantitative and qualitative forms of theory building in the HRD field might learn to respect and appreciate each other's differences.

Notes

1. It is important to note here that constructionists differentiate between transferability and generalizability. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

2. The reader should be aware that this account is of course a construction of events, and the case is represented as accurately as my memory has allowed. My field notes have been useful in this respect!

3. This is a "Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 3).

4. For a more detailed discussion, see Turnbull (1999).

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