

Social constructionism

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Constructivism: in mathematics

Constructionalism: constructions are made by humans,
but no special interest to social or historical aspects

All say: Things are not how they appear to be

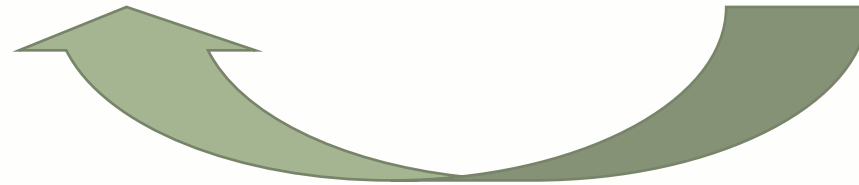
The difference

"Scientific realism"

- Reality is out there and waits us to investigate it
- *Nature and reality* are the causes that explain the outcomes of scientific enquiry

"Social constructionism"

- Reality is constructed by a variety of norm-governed socially sanctioned cognitive activities
- *The activity of scientists and their human and non-human allies* is the cause that explain the outcomes of scientific enquiry



Criticizes the view that science would be an innocent and neutral truth-seeker and truth-finder

Social construction of scientific knowledge, claims, concepts (local, trivial)
Social construction of everything/ scientific entities (global, radical)

Laboratory life
(Latour and Woolgar 1979):
Hypothesis is turned into a fact by social negotiation

"Science wars", "human nature wars", and the fear for relativism:

What if things are not how they appear? Are all truths equal? Does anything go? What was in the history?

Main thesis

”Some objects are caused or controlled by social or cultural factors rather than natural factors ”

The necessary clause for social construction thesis:

(0) In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted and seems to be inevitable.

The usual commitment:

(1) **X need not have existed or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; X is not inevitable.**

And often we go to further levels of commitment:

(2) X is quite bad as it is.

(3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.

”C socially constructs X”

If everyone knows that X is the contingent result of social arrangements and historical events, there is no need to say it would be socially constructed.

Ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective entities are *social facts* [John Searle 1995].

You can try it! E.g:

- Coins, notes, contracts are a part of the social reality. “The social construction of the bank of Finland” – do-oh. (**object** of economy)
- “The social construction of economy” – Wow! I thought it is a natural kind! (**idea** of economy)

”C socially constructs X ”

- Agents of construction

- Impersonal

- Cultures, conventions, institutions

- E.g. culture/paradigm → background theories → perception

*“What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see”
(Thomas Kuhn)*

(Dubious ontologies can well be explained e.g. by emergence theory)

- Personal

- Persons or groups

- Contingent choices (e.g. role of scientists and in scientific process: theory selection, experiment evaluation)
 - Interests and power relations (e.g. human classifications and maintaining privilege)

”C socially constructs X”

- Causal construction

- C causally constructs X iff C **causes** X to exist or to persist, or C controls the kind-typical properties of X

- Our social and linguistic activities cause the existence of “tables” and “watches”

- Constitutive construction

- C constitutively constructs X iff C's **conceptual or social activity** is metaphysically necessary for x to be a certain sort/kind of X

- 'A cocktail party' or 'a war' need conceptual and social recognition, and a sharing of intentional states

- Merely stating “this is a cocktail party/war” (without the social recognition and shared intentional states) does not cause these

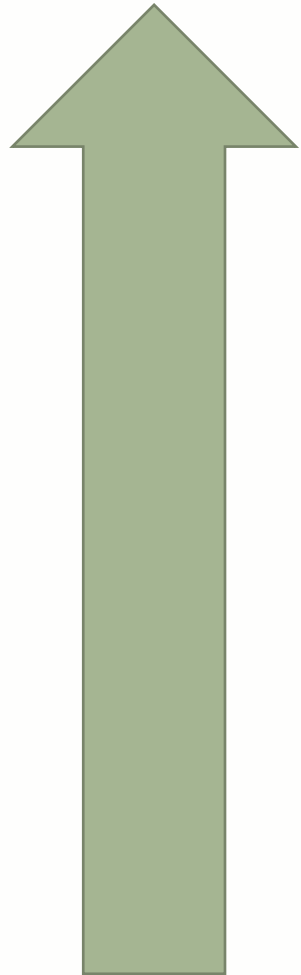
”C socially constructs **X**”

What is socially constructed?

- ”Objects”
 - Humans, conditions (childhood), practices (hiking, cleaning), behaviours (nervous), material objects (buildings, tables, watches)
- Ideas, kinds
 - Beliefs, conceptions, views, notions, theories, metaphors
- *Elevator words*
 - *Truth, reality, knowledge, fact*
 - *Often defined in circles and appear with adjectives 'objective', 'factual', 'ideological'*

Degrees of constructionism – relation to X

- (1) X is not inevitable
- (2) X is bad
- (3) We'd be better off without X



Revolutionary (1), (2), activist (3)

Rebellious (1), (2), actively (3)

Reformist (1), **(2)**

We can't get rid of X but we could change parts of X

Unmasking (1), **(2)**, (3?)

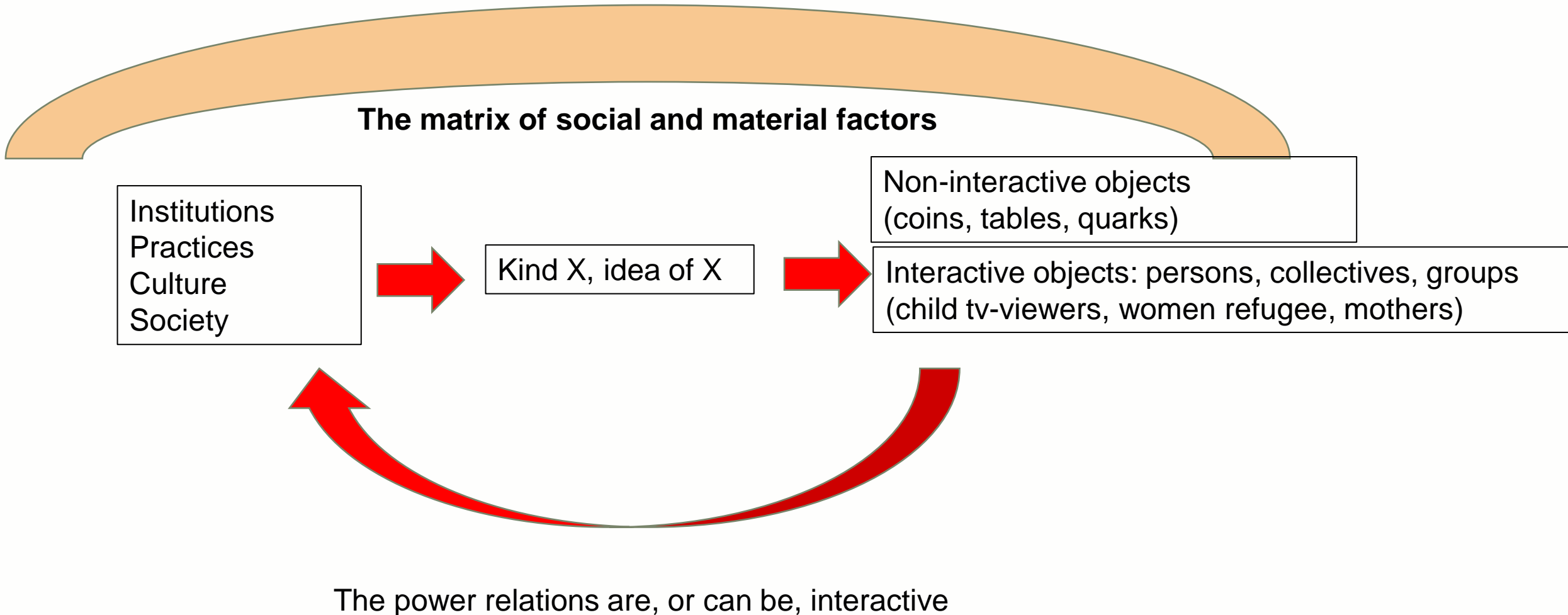
Aiming to weaken the practical influence of X by unmasking its over-theoretical functions

Ironical (1, maybe ironically 2 or 3)

Recognizes social construction, but also recognizes we can't escape it

Historical (1)

Looping effects



Example of social kinds and interactions: The child television viewer

- Assuming that there is such kind X: A child television viewer
 - The child is not constructed, but the *kind* became a societal problem
 - Saturated with violence, tutored to be a consumer, induced away from healthy exercise and culture – the idea/kind became a target of research
 - Parental guidance, conferences
- A child becomes a member of the kind X (a child television viewer)
 - not *this* child who watches television
 - Communication happens with X
 - The child recognizes the kind X, to which she now understands that she belongs
 - Adapts, exaggerates, resists, rejects
 - Reconstructing the kind

Example of social kinds and interactions: Women refugee

- The matrix of social and material factors
 - Institutions, activists, newspapers, lawyers, courts, immigration processes
 - Material infrastructure with social meanings: borders, passports, uniforms, service desks at airport, immigration detention centers
- What we think of women refugees affect material infrastructure
 - They are not violent, so no guns and muscles needed, but lots of paper
- Looping effect
 - Aiming to “fit” a kind has also legal effects. One learns what parts of the idea one must strengthen → the idea affects the person in question.

Scientific knowledge and technology

Social constructionism ← → *Naturalistic, linear progress*

Technology as a sociotechnical system

Interactions between artifacts, social practices and relationships, systems of knowledge, institutions

The development of scientific knowledge and technological objects is never only about developing facts, but about understanding the societies that call upon, develop, dispute, accept, validate, use and refute those facts

Historical, social, political and cultural context in which technology and science are developed

Technology as an artifact

Which human needs is a research program supposed to address?

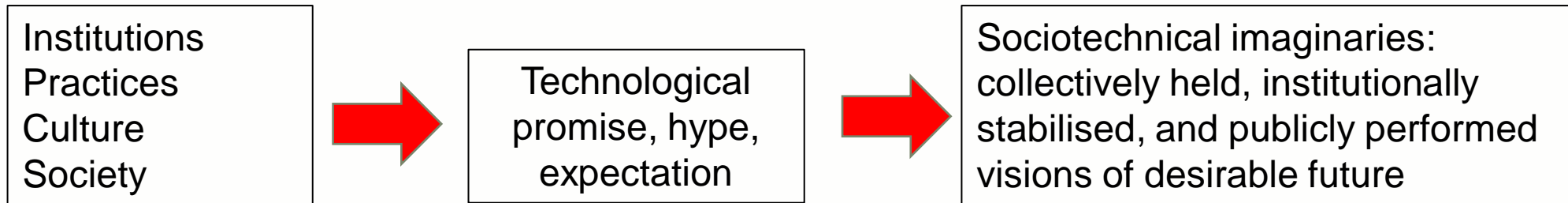
Does it offer a convincing solution compared to other solutions to address that need?

Is this specific research program a good use resources, why, and to whose benefit?

What values and choices have brought the technology into existence?

Looping effects

The matrix of social and material factors



Anticipatory imagination can transform technological visions into probable facts
Serves to legitimate, accept, the examined future
Unless the loop is unmasked and overturned?

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