

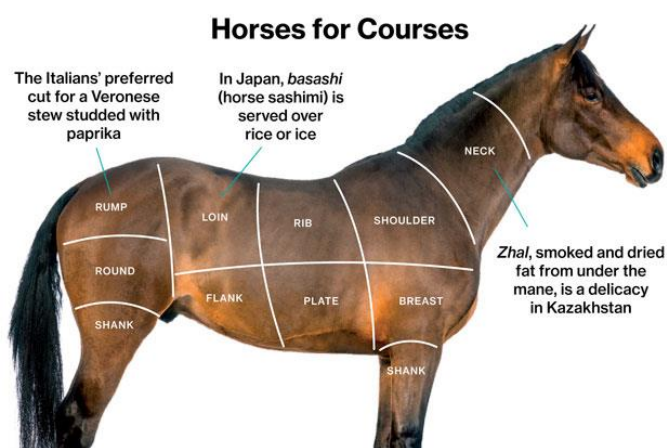
# Practising Purposefully

## SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

# Social Constructionism

### What is it?

Social constructionists believe that the world (reality) is constructed through people, specifically, social interactions. We use language to socially interact and therefore the stories we tell construct what we know to be 'reality'. We negotiate between each other what is acceptable and what is not (i.e. social constructionism of 'crime'), what categories we segregate life into (e.g. think social GRACES; childhood/adulthood; even what constitutes as 'fashion') and what social institutions are required for society to function (e.g. money, governments, law etc.).

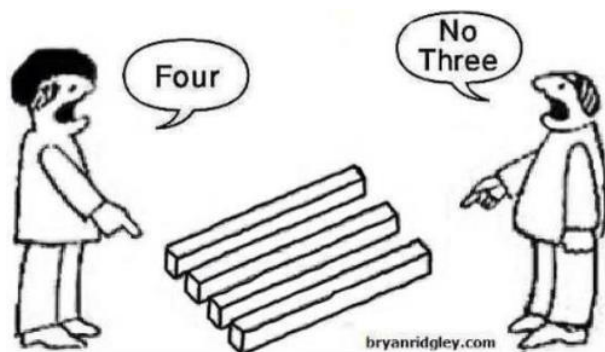


Because reality is constructed through language, it is generally assumed that there is no objective truth about the world, just an 'agreement' which is constantly being challenged, debated and adjusted. Take for example, opinions and judgements around the consumption of meat, vegetarianism, veganism, environmental 'meat' issues and what sorts of meat we should and shouldn't eat from cows, horses, pigs and even dogs.

Speaking is not neutral or passive – **every time we speak we bring forth a reality** in the descriptions and words we use and the agreement (or not) from others about the description we have made. E.g. to talk about gender is to validate this as a concept and our thoughts about 'gender' come forth i.e. male / female. However, sometimes we forget that other concepts are just as valid (e.g. gender-neutral, pan-gender etc.) *What is logic is not always what is real.*

**All language is culturally based.** There are words in the UK which don't exist in other cultures and likewise, some words which cannot be translated into English. Think about what constitutes swear words in different cultures; the hidden cultural meanings behind certain phrases (e.g. use of Cockney-rhyming slang) and words which mean different things in different cultures (e.g. the word 'pants' in UK vs USA)

Social Constructionists warn us to take notice of those **taken for granted 'truths'** about the world. Those ideas which are considered to be 'common sense'. They urge us to continually question the way we see the world and how these truths are 'delivered' to us i.e. via education, TV shows, work roles, the government etc. These 'truths' can anchor us into positions of 'I am right, and you are wrong' when in fact we are both right, from our own perspectives. We must question our biases and respect other people's views. We need to be curious as to how the other person's reality has been constructed and led them to hold a certain perspective.



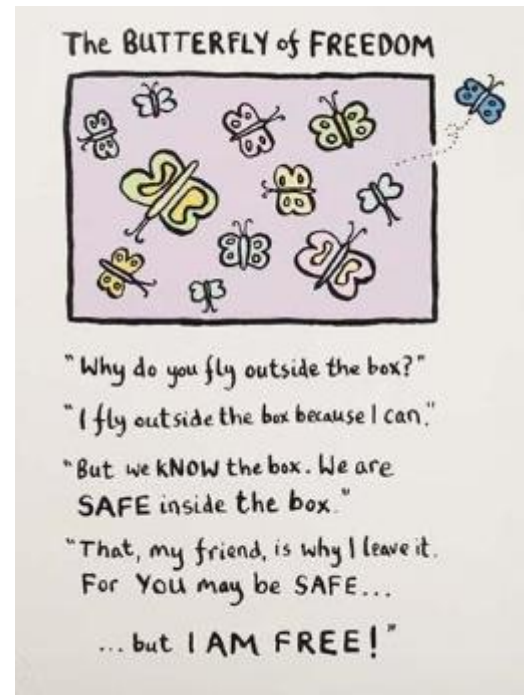
## Context matters too

Context is also important as a word used in one context may mean something completely different in another context e.g. “Yes, I’m sure you do!” – Is the person agreeing with me or being sarcastic? It may depend on your relationship with the person, history of previous encounters together, the context in which it was said, their body language etc. Thus we have to negotiate the meaning depending on the speaker, listener and the interpretation of the context.

## ‘Problems’ as a social construct:

Problems in Western Society are usually seen through the medical model i.e. it is the person’s ‘fault’ they have a problem, so if someone has a heart attack, people are quick to blame the person’s diet or lifestyle; if someone has depression it could be from the hormone imbalance, a drug problem would be linked to the person’s poor coping skills etc. Many cultures take the stance that people are responsible for their own problems – thus creating shame and blame for the person involved.

Problems are created through language (i.e. labelling) and ideas of right and wrong ways of living/being. These problems then become supported by cultural practices around them. Because these form taken for granted ‘knowledge’ they go unquestioned and are subconsciously present in people’s beliefs, thoughts and actions. *E.g. all travellers are thieves; all teenage mums just want a council house; homeless people are there through their own bad decisions.*



By Edward Monkton

Society is constructed into norms and values of how people *should* behave, what they *should* be doing in their lives. Anything outside of the norms could be seen as a ‘problem’ or the individual being deviant.

## Links with Systemic Theory:

Strongly evident in approaches such as Narrative theory and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) where there is a focus on language (instead of ‘systems’) as a way to create change within families.

## How change occurs

Change occurs through a change of language whether this be about beliefs, morals, feelings, attitudes etc. Language is always changing and therefore meanings are flexible too. Consider the use of the word ‘gay’ which once meant ‘happy and carefree’ but over time changed to provide a description of someone who is homosexual.

Highlighting the social construct of one’s ‘problem’ could free the person to view the problem differently. They may realise that they are living their lives how others expect them to behave; they have subscribed to dominant narratives and have internalised these as ‘real’.

As a practitioner, always try and understand why someone has come to believe the way they do about their problems. What are the building blocks behind the problem? What maintains it? Try and find stories which exist outside of the dominant narratives. Where do they see ‘power’ as situated to themselves, their lives, the problem, the solution to the problem?

Be mindful about your own bias, dominant narratives and use of language – particularly around labelling and pathologising people’s problems. Be aware of power of your role. Whose ideas are being privileged? Are you focusing on meaning or ‘facts’ (truths)?