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## SOCIAL ASPECT OF HUMAN BEING

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### Cultural-Anthropological Basis of Strong Constructivism in Social Cognition

**Purpose.** This article is aimed at identifying the cultural-anthropological limits of the applicability of strong constructivism in social cognition. **Theoretical basis.** The study of epistemic cultures, carried out by the modern German philosopher of science Karin Knorr Cetina, gave reasons to rethink the role of cultural anthropology as a methodological basis of strong constructivism not only for scientific cognition, but also for educational practices, and perhaps also for some other social practices. An important role in identifying less successful versions of strong constructivism was played by the concept of fictionalism of the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturán and Francisco Varela, and the German sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann. **Originality.** Strong constructivism has broad prospects for use within cultural anthropology as an identification of the cultural foundations of human nature. Local research and educational practices are defined as a model for the formation of those social characteristics of their participants, which they themselves change through self-improvement. Strong constructivists involve the individual empirical experience of researchers, and also correct the inherited rules of scientific research as elements of research procedures and practices, thanks to which they achieve the creation of a common epistemic culture and the elimination of myths about the isolation of scientific cognition from the world. **Conclusions.** False ways of interpreting strong constructivism as fictionalism and as realism have been revealed. Fictionalism, as a methodology focused on the study of the contents of consciousness, loses the empirical experience of the world. Philosophical realism as positivism in the philosophy of science reduces the significance of scientific discoveries to confirmation of the laws of nature. Karin Knorr Cetina's proposal to consider constructivism "on its own terms" appears not as a moderate compromise between these extremes, but as the only possible way to adequately reconcile the work of nature and the conscious activity of man. Such coordination takes place primarily in the creation of local epistemic cultures as a collective activity of researchers.

*Keywords:* cultural anthropology; strong constructivism; fictionalism; realism; epistemic cultures; local epistemic practices

### Introduction

Constructivism, as a rule, is interpreted as somewhat opposite to realism – allegedly, constructivists replace reality with theoretical models created by them. Either the constructivists replace the facts with their fantasies, or they replace the reality with the facts created by them – it sounds, at first glance, almost the same, but in fact the difference is quite significant. It deepens all the more to the extent that critics of constructivism are forced to admit that constructivists create their facts not on the basis of their fantasies, but thanks to the preparation of reality itself. Indeed, who can claim to have experienced reality in its purest form, without the admixture of the optics of the subject of cognition? But constructivists often add the influence of the cognition tools to the influence of the subject of cognition.

When it comes to constructivism in science and the philosophy of science, then it becomes clear that the scientific toolkit of cognition often acts as the main factor in the creation of facts: this toolkit should ideally eliminate all those coincidences that can distort the knowledge of

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some qualities of reality – and coincidences are generated by a person, and accidents generated by the world around a person.

Many myths have arisen around constructivism – both those that denigrate constructivism without sufficient grounds, and those that overestimate constructivism and give it excessive importance. Only a truly philosophical and scientific substantiation of constructivism can help to reveal these myths, to point out the groundlessness of attempts to pass these myths off as a philosophical or scientific methodology. For each field of scientific knowledge, this task must be solved somewhat specifically, namely, in accordance with the epistemic and cultural context created by these natural, social, humanitarian, technical, etc. sciences. In this article, we will focus on social cognition as a specific area of application of constructivism.

The methodology of this study will be determined by the following classical theories: the existential-boundary concept of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1932) regarding the open nature of the human essence, the concept of fictionalism by the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger (1922), as well as the theory of epistemic cultures of the German philosopher of science Karin Knorr Cetina (1993). Important philosophical and anthropological clarifications of the degree of possible influence of a person and his or her knowledge on the reality of his or her existence from the point of view of constructivism were also carried out by Ukrainian researchers (Boichenko, Shevchenko, & Pituley, 2019; Danylova, 2022; Khmil & Popovych, 2019; Molokova, 2014; Shevchenko & Fialko, 2022). However, the problem of the cultural and anthropological foundations of strong constructivism was not specifically considered.

### Purpose

More indicative is the position of strong constructivism, which seeks to apply the principles of constructivism to its object more consistently and on a larger, maximum possible scale.

Therefore, the *purpose* of this article is to identify the cultural-anthropological limits of the applicability of strong constructivism in social cognition.

### Statement of basic materials

#### *Versions of strong constructivism: fictionalism*

Since constructivism is a theoretical position that gives great power to the mind and asserts its wide possibilities in cognition, and perhaps in existence, it is most often supported by representatives of ethics (Bagnoli, 2021), phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), but most of all by representatives of the philosophy of science (Latour, 2003; Monton & Mohler, 2021). Indeed, science appears as a powerful tool for transforming the world. Science itself is seen as the creator of a new world – more advanced and more complex, more rational and functional, that is, systematically constructed in accordance with a perfect strategic plan.

This idea of the almost limitless power of science sometimes creates the illusion that the world of science should replace the world of untouched nature. Such ideas have both their ardent supporters and their fierce critics. But in one way or another, they are based on a certain prejudice against scientific knowledge as it is supposed to look like from the point of view of constructivism: "Constructivists maintain that scientific knowledge is made by scientists and not determined by the world" (Downes, 1998). However, Karin Knorr Cetina (1993, pp. 555-556) argues that this idea of constructivism is deeply flawed, although it is mistaken even by some constructivists themselves.

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If constructivism in the philosophy of science and in science itself were to create objects independent of the natural world or even a whole alternative world to nature, then it would have to move to the position of the philosophy of fictionalism. Such a classical position is represented by the philosophy of "as if" ("als ob" in German) of the Austrian neo-Kantian Hans Vaihinger. According to him, this philosophy

...is positivism in that it is based with all decisiveness and openness solely on the given, on the empirical contents of sensation, and consciously and definitely does not doubt everything (it is therefore not skepticism either), but directly denies everything that may be assumed to be "real" on the basis of alleged intellectual or ethical needs; but the "philosophy of as if" is, on the other hand, idealism in that it recognizes and adopts the "ideas" that arise from those intellectual and ethical needs as useful, valuable fictions of humanity, without whose "acceptance" human thought, feeling and action would wither; in this sense it is a "phenomenology" of idea-forming, fictitious consciousness. (Vaihinger, 1922, p. xx)

Vaihinger defines his philosophy as "idealistic positivism": that is, ideas are the most reliable empirical reality for him, but the way they are present in our consciousness is fictionalism, that is, existence in the "as if" mode. According to Vaihinger, this mode is the only reliable and foolproof one – much more reliable than the naive "realism" of the natural sciences. In modern language, this mode could be called simulative, and some would call it fake, and the "as if" philosophy itself could be called a philosophy of post-truth, in which everything is possible, or rather, nothing is impossible. To some extent, this mode also resembles Jean Baudrillard's (1988) hyperreality. Most of the contemporary supporters of fictionalism are among the representatives of analytical philosophy – for example, Áron Dombrovski (2017), or the journal "Organon F", which noted that fictionalism "approaches the realistic ontologies as useful fictions, meaning that they both deliver their explanations of phenomena and are stripped of their burdensome realistic load", in which connection "fictionalist methodology is applied to various fields like philosophy of modalities, philosophy of mathematics and other sciences, philosophy of fiction, semantics and philosophy of language, to name just a few" (Vacek, 2018, p. 139).

However, strong constructivism cannot be a strong rejection of reality, let alone a strong negation of it. In this case, it would go beyond the epistemology of science and become the epistemology of fantasy and mysticism. Even Vaihinger speaks of positivism, with the only specification that the subject of this positivism is ideas. Positivism always asserts the primacy of reality independent of humans, no matter whether we are talking about physical or ideal objects.

Therefore, fictionalism rather emphasises the inexhaustible creative potential of strong constructivism, its ability to participate in the creation of existence, but does not assert an ontology alternative to the world.

Fictionalism, as a version of strong constructivism, appears as an idealistic constructivism, in relation to which it can be argued that its subject is at least limited to the sphere of ideal contents of human consciousness. Therefore, the whole nature, and therefore all human interaction with nature, fall out of its sphere of reach, which no longer allows it to be qualified as truly "strong".

*Versions of strong constructivism: realism*

On the other hand, constructivism cannot be reduced to the opposite camp in the philosophy of science – the proponents of realism. Knorr Cetina confidently and convincingly criticises attempts to return to the weaknesses of realism as conventional realism or conventional positivism, which combine a naive belief in the self-evidence of empirical data with attempts to compensate for the inevitable problems of such naivety with casual agreements between scientists:

These new approaches replace the view that observation and experiment play the dominant role in the specification of scientific facts by the view that these processes involve collective negotiations, interests and infusion of experimental outcomes with contingent features of situations. (Knorr Cetina, 1993, p. 556)

In fact, here Knorr Cetina argues that realism is not really realism at all, but passes off as reality the random individual experience and collective prejudices of scientists who study reality.

And yet this cannot refute realism as such: cases of its incorrect interpretation cannot be evidence of its own normative incorrectness – *abusus non tolit usum*. If we accept from the standpoint of realism that it is not individual empirical observations and agreements of scientists that create scientific facts, then the assumption is that these facts are constructed by the course of events, which is what it is in itself. The creator of evolution is evolution. It is not God, not some mystical World Mind or World Will, but nature itself that is making constructive efforts. A certain version of this approach seems to be defended by the Chilean creators of the concept of autopoiesis, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987), in particular, in their work "The Tree of Knowledge". These ideas about society are further developed by the German sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann (1988).

However, in relation to society, this constructivist approach cannot be qualified as pure realism – rather, this realism should include, in addition to the processes of self-organisation of nature, specific forms of self-organisation of society through social systems. Yet, realism seems to be unable to capture this specificity, but instead reduces it to natural laws or imitates their recognition by constructing schemes for reducing nature to individual empirical experience and the conventions of scientists regarding their ideas about nature.

Therefore, realism, as a version of strong constructivism, is forced to explain human behaviour only as a manifestation of the laws of nature or to imitate such an explanation. Both the first and the second can hardly be a sign of "strong".

*Versions of strong constructivism: on its own terms*

In our opinion, the most adequate version of strong constructivism is the one that takes into account both the presence of consciousness and the presence of the natural principle in man, and possibly, following this model, other human properties in their mutual complement. Such an approach is possible only if these properties are considered as something that a person is able to use and transform, to construct from them and on their basis something new, something that does not fit into any stable human characteristics.

Karin Knorr Cetina's approach of strong constructivism as the embodiment of certain epistemic cultures provides just such a specific opportunity. These cultures appear as the contextual social contribution that scientists in their academic interaction add to the existing individual empirical experiences of each of them in particular and to the rules of scientific research they have inherited: "...constructivism brings into view social processes, as opposed to the methodological and individual processes with which received views of science were concerned" (Knorr Cetina, 1993, p. 556). Indeed, mutual expertise can already reject a significant part of false individual assumptions and dogmatic collective prejudices. If we take into account the fact that such expertise has several stages and at each stage it can be or is already collective, it becomes clear why this type of social interaction actually stitches together not only individual experiences and scientific norms, but also ensures their higher adequacy with respect to the realities of nature and consciousness at the same time.

To this end, constructivism in science "stressed... features which one could roughly associate with a notion of social practice – features that are inherently linked to social situations (contingency, indexicality, opportunism, emergent outcomes)" (Knorr Cetina, 1993, p. 556). To simplify the main idea of this strong constructivist thesis, it is that the world is how we are socially embedded in it as its researchers: "specific ontologies flow from cultural practices and hence must be seen as secondary, not primary" (Knorr Cetina, 1993, p. 558).

As Karin Knorr Cetina (1993) formulates the position of strong constructivism, "strong constructivism is constructivism on its own terms" (p. 559), i.e. not on the basis of realism of nature or phenomenology of consciousness, but on the basis of social practices of scientists themselves. "But what if we merely assume that a science, in picturing the world from within the closed circuitry of its own reconstructions, simply reacts to failures to make things work by changing its procedures until they work?" (Knorr Cetina, 1993, p. 560). Thus, it is the scientific procedures of world research, not natural processes or combinations of consciousness contents, that form the core of strong constructivism.

*Epistemic cultures in science and education*

The most interesting thing is how Karin Knorr Cetina's ideas about epistemic cultures work in practice – that is, how the ideas of cultural anthropological methodological justification of strong constructivism are put into practice. "Context or, in a broad sense, "culture" is inside the epistemic, and the sociology of knowledge, or perhaps we should rather say the study of knowledge, must also concern itself with the cultural structure of scientific methodology" (Knorr Cetina, 1991, p. 107). As we can see, Knorr Cetina sees the "episteme", i.e. scientific knowledge, rather as a set of procedures and practices, a certain culture – epistemic culture.

But if in science it is quite possible to create one's own picture of the world by scientific means and to know the world through it, is it possible to create something similar to epistemic

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cultures outside of science, for example, at least in such a field as education, which is close to science? That is, in particular, is it possible to apply a strong constructivist approach to education?

As numerous studies by representatives of completely different traditions – even non-European ones – show, this is more than possible.

Indeed, even universal scientific knowledge (which Knorr Cetina somewhat undermines in her works) receives different interpretations in different national, religious, and civilisational contexts, especially in the pragmatic dimension. Education is such a dimension, where the teacher creates a world of knowledge for his or her students, in which he or she appears in their eyes as a legislator.

Perhaps this is why constructivism is widely used in educational theories in India (Jahan & Alam, 2022; Najjar, Aslam, Yousuf, & Bhat, 2023; Roy & Saha, 2021), Pakistan (Saleem, Kausar, & Deeba, 2021), Vietnam (H.-N. Do, B. N. Do, & Nguyen, 2023), Serbia (Milutinović, 2015), and Poland (Perkowska-Klejman & Górkka-Strzałkowska, 2023). Often, then, constructivism takes the form of social constructivism – but in contemporary education, social constructivism means something different than Peter Berger and Thomas Lukman once believed, and some political philosophers still believe today (Williams, 2024). While Berger and Luhmann held the position of social phenomenology and were close to Vaihinger's fictionalism, and in political philosophy, British professor Andrew Williams shows a desire for a radical restructuring of the political space, contemporary educational theorists are much more moderate in their theoretical ambitions, but much more ambitious in the practical reconstruction of the educational environment: they do not write anything about the "symbolic universe", but create and promote the creation of local educational oecumene.

### Originality

Cultural anthropology as a methodology has been identified as one of the most successful sciences that use the methodology of strong constructivism: this is primarily a practical success, but it also has its theoretical implications. The field of education and science, and especially the situations of local research and educational practices, reveal those social characteristics that critically depend on the constructivist efforts of the participants in these practices. The myth of the substitution of reality by strong constructivists is criticised on the basis of finding out how the latter involve the individual empirical experience of researchers, as well as the inherited rules of scientific research, in the procedures and practices based on which they create a local epistemic culture.

### Conclusions

Strong constructivism cannot be fictionalism, because then it would remain only a methodology for studying the contents of consciousness. Also, strong constructivism cannot be philosophical realism and its positivist versions in the philosophy of science, since then the creative activity of scientists would be only the discovery of ready-made laws of nature, and the only true constructivist would be nature in its evolution. Karin Knorr Cetina's proposal to consider constructivism on its own terms, i.e., as one that uses social tools to reconcile the work of nature and conscious activity, appears to be more balanced. This reconciliation takes place through the collective activity of researchers, or similar activities of educators, in which local epistemic cultures are formed.

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## Культурно-антропологічне підґрунтя сильного конструктивізму в соціальному пізнанні

**Мета.** Ця стаття спрямована на виявлення культурно-антропологічних меж застосовності сильного конструктивізму в соціальному пізнанні. **Теоретичний базис.** Дослідження епістемних культур, виконане сучасною німецькою філософією науки Карін Кнорр Цетіною, дало підстави переосмислити роль культурної антропології як методологічної основи сильного конструктивізму не лише для наукового пізнання, але й для освітніх практик, а, можливо, також і для деяких інших соціальних практик. Важливу роль для виявлення менш вдалих версій сильного конструктивізму відіграла концепція фікціонізму німецького філософа Ганса Вайхінгера, чилійських біологів Умберто Матурана і Франциско Варела та німецького соціолога й філософа Нікласа Лумана. **Наукова новизна.** Сильний конструктивізм має широкі перспективи для використання в рамках культурної антропології як виявлення культурних засад людської природи. Локальні дослідницькі та освітні практики визначено як взірці для формування тих соціальних характеристик їх учасників, які змінюють вони самі шляхом самовдосконалення. Сильні конструктивісти залучають індивідуальний емпіричний досвід дослідників, а також корегують успадковані правила наукових досліджень як елементи дослідницьких процедур і практик, завдяки чому досягають творення спільної епістемної культури й усунення міфів про ізольованість наукового пізнання від світу. **Висновки.** Виявлено хибні шляхи витлумачення сильного конструктивізму як фікціонізму і як реалізму. Фікціонізм як методологія, зосереджена на дослідженні змістів свідомості, втрачає емпіричний досвід світу. Філософський реалізм як позитивізм у філософії науки редукує значущість наукових відкриттів до підтвердження законів природи. Пропозиція Карін Кнорр Цетіни розглядати конструктивізм "on its own terms" постає не як поміркований компроміс між цими крайнощами, а як єдино можливий спосіб адекватно узгодити роботу природи і свідому діяльність людини. Таке узгодження відбувається передусім у творенні локальних епістемних культур як колективної діяльності дослідників.

SOCIAL ASPECT OF HUMAN BEING

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*Ключові слова:* культурна антропологія; сильний конструктивізм; фікціонізм; реалізм; епістемні культури; локальні епістемні практики

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