Network Identities and Communication: Social Constructivism and Social Constructionism Compared

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications (methodological, theoretical and managerial) of social constructionism within a network context, especially through comparison with the related constructivist ideas previously applied in network contexts. The paper presents research from one network that demonstrates the application of constructionist ideas to research and highlights the managerial relevance of the philosophy.

Network identities and communication: social constructivism and social constructionism compared.

This paper explores the unique contribution that social constructionism makes to the understanding of industrial networks. The exploration is approached at both theoretic and applied levels. Social constructionist theory is compared to a closely related theory, social constructivism, since constructivism currently informs at least one strand of network research. Some brief sections of the author's research are presented to demonstrate an application of social constructionist theory within a network context. The research demonstrates the type of insight that can be generated through this style of research and how the network can be understood within a constructionist framework.

The objectives of the paper are twofold. Firstly, the paper intends to define a social constructionist understanding of the network through comparison with the closest extant understanding, and to explain that difference. The second objective is to demonstrate the unique contribution that social constructionism makes towards the research of networks and the understanding the management task in networks.

The paper commences on familiar territory by tracing the emergent stream of social constructivist theory with regard to networks. Some key concepts in the constructivist approach are identified and in particular the importance of communication within the constructivist conceptualisation of a network is identified. The paper then turns to a comparison of social constructivist and social constructionist theory. The difference the two is explained in terms of their contrary conceptualisation of language. It is argued that social constructionism problematises language so that language is not seen as a transparent and efficient communicator of meaning. These different beliefs about the effectiveness of communication means that the management task is differently conceptualised under social constructionist and social constructivist philosophies. The paper then looks at extracts from the author's research to illustrate the influence of social constructionist theory upon the understanding of the researched network. In reviewing the research, the managerial implications of social constructionism are highlighted.

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Social Constructivism in Organisational Theory - the Enacted Environment

Weick (1969, 1995) provides a social constructivist explanation of organisation by developing the idea of the enacted environment. Weick's theory rejects a central tenet of traditional organisational theory, namely that the organisation acts within an external and given (though possibly only partially understood) environment (Smircich and Stubbart 1985). Weick (1969) proposes instead that the organisation 'enacts' its environment through processes of attending and bracketing. The organisation's attention is necessarily limited so that only some aspects of the environment rather than the environment in its entirety are attended to. Those aspects attended to are then bracketed or classified according to an informal schema developed within the organisation's prior experience. Through enactment the organisation makes sense (Weick 1995) and interprets the environment. Organisational strategy is formulated within this enactment, rather than being formulated according to a fully perceived and objectively understood environment.

Two key issues arise in this brief summary of enactment theory. Firstly, enactment theory sees subjective understanding as the basis of organisational action and argues for the importance of subjectivity in management. Secondly, the organisation is the enacting and sense-making unit, so that the organisation is viewed as one entity with a shared subjectivity and shared interpretation of the environment.

2.1 The interacted environment in network theory

The idea of environmental enactment has been adopted and adapted by some theorists looking at inter-organisational networks. This review examines the revised concept of enactment, looking briefly and exclusively at those contributions to network theory that draw explicitly upon the work of Weick.

The challenge to the traditionally accepted dichotomy or distinct boundary between firm and environment is central to network theory. This boundary is blurred since each organisation interacts within networks and hence actively participates in areas traditionally held to be external to its boundary. In emphasising the close relationships amongst interacting firms some aspects of the environment (other firms) are partially internalised within the firm, whilst some aspects of the firm are partially externalised in networks, that is, in interaction with other firms. Network theory then asserts the inseparability of the firm from the environment. This assertion makes it necessary to adapt the idea of environmental enactment when constructivist theory is incorporated to a network context, since the organisation can no longer seen as a separate or distinct sense-making unit.

Environmental enactment by the organisation is replaced by 'interactment' within the network. In keeping with enactment theory, interactment stresses the importance of the subjective understanding of the environment in organisational action (Mattson 1988). Interactment occurs through the same processes as enactment, that is, through attending to aspects of the environment and bracketing those according to past experience. Hankansson and Snehota (1997a) thus talk of the coding and framing processes through which network members interpret and understand their environment. Interactment however, in keeping with the network theory critique of the isolated firm, sees these
processes as occurring within units that cross firm boundaries. Network theorists thus extend the view of the environment as being subjectively understood and acted upon by the organisation to seeing that environment as subjectively understood and acted upon by closely connected firms. Hence, the emphasis moves from the subjectivity of the firm to the inter-subjectivity of the network (Ford, Hakansson and Johanson 1997, Mattson 1988). The network is therefore an entity with a subjective understanding of the world that is largely shared, although full alignment is rarely if ever achieved (Ford, Hankansson and Johanson 1997), the network becomes one subjective unit. This sharing of subjectivity assumes that there is effective communication amongst network members.

The blurred boundary between firm and environment has a further implication when enactment theory is applied to network contexts. Each organisation is indistinct from the environment and hence the organisation is enacted along with the environment. The interactment of network members draws attention to the issue of identity in network theory.

Communication and identity therefore emerge as important issues when the constructivist theory of enactment is applied to network contexts. These issues are examined below since they will later be shown to also be important within social constructionist theory.

Identity in the Constructivist Network

According to Weick (1969) an understanding of self arises within enactment, and the idea of the creation of identity is takes on more importance as Weick (1995) develops the theme of sense making. To make sense of the environment involves making sense of the self and positioning the self in the environment. The making sense of self however becomes a different matter when the sense-making unit is inter-organisational. In that case, identity is embedded in a social world since comparison with others and relationships to others become more central to the formation of identity. Sense making is an enactment process (Weick 1979, 1969), in which organizational participants come to appreciate the potential for transacting with others by reshaping or clarifying the identity of their own organization... Psychologically, sense making derives from the need within individuals both to have a sense of identity of self in relation to others and to construct a common external factual order (Ring and Van de Ven 1994 pp 99-100).

Additionally, since identity is subjectively understood, under conditions of shared subjectivity then it is not the actor in isolation who interprets identity. Identity is interpreted within a social process. For Anderson, Hakansson and Johanson (1994) identity refers to how others see you and derives from your orientation to them and their understanding of your competences and power. Other network members come to understand you not only by their direct relationships with you (micro-relationships) but also from your activity in other relationships in the network (macro-relationships). 'Calibration' is proposed (Ford, Hankansson and Johanson 1997) as the process within which an increasing convergence in subjective assessments of identity is achieved. Calibration occurs through an ongoing and tacit series of questions and answers. "What can you do for me? How do you see me? What are you prepared to do for me compared for what you would do for others?" which variations are there in these 'whats' and...
questions that are suggested also draw attention to the relational character of identity since they suggest an ongoing refining of ideas regarding the relationships between network members. Calibration is then a process through which identity is negotiated as firms in the network incrementally influence each other’s understanding of themselves and others.

To the extent that identity is situated or embedded within the relationships of the network then identity parallels, and is the subjective aspect of, position, a concept familiar within network theory. The understanding of what any one member of the network is (identity) is defined in relation to other network members and arises within the sets of relationships comprising the network.

In keeping with the belief that network members act into an interacted rather than objective environment, the recognition of subjectivity in identity formation does not in any way undermine the important effects of identity. Identity is the basis of effectiveness in the network and the key to success for a company since it defines a member's possible behaviours and strategic possibilities (Hakansson and Snehota 1997). Although identity refers to a subjective understanding, its effects are 'real' and important for the organisation.

Communication in the Constructivist Network

Shared subjectivity is central to a social constructivist definition of 'organisation' which refers to:

the degree to which a set of people share many beliefs, values and assumptions that encourage them to make mutually-reinforcing interpretations of their own acts and the acts of others (Smircich and Stubbart 1985 p 732)

Thus, for connected firms to jointly 'organise' depends then upon their shared understanding and effective inter-organisational collaboration is "constrained by the need ... to feel that they share a congruent understanding on an inflexible world" (Ring and Van de Ven 1994 p 100). The idea of shared subjectivity depends fundamentally upon effective communication, by whatever means. Constructivist theory therefore rests upon a belief that meaning can be communicated between parties.

Effective communication within the network is a precondition for intersubjectivity, and thereby creates the possibility for shared norms and expectations. Ring and Van de Ven (1994) refer to "the meeting of minds" as

This sensemaking process also results in establishing psychological contracts among parties ... Congruent expectations may include areas such as common agreement on norms (Ring and Van de Ven 1994, p 100).

In this way, the communication implicit in the interactment view of the network goes some way towards seeing the possibility of a 'clan' (Ouchi 1980) form of network comprising "culturally homogeneous organisations ... (that) share a common set of values .. plus beliefs" (Ouchi and Price 1993). Communication makes possible an "organization 'culture' that transcends ownership and national borders" (Snow, Miles

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and Coleman 1982 p 18). Therefore, whilst many network theorists see such total sharing as unachievable in practice, the enactment theory draws upon an underlying idea of communication that sees 'network culture' as a logical, if in practice often imperfectly attained, result.

The Managerial Implications of Constructivist Network Theory

The managerial implications of social constructivist theory relate directly to the views of identity and of communication that have been discussed. In particular, implications arise from the idea of identity as the subjective and shared understanding of position, coupled with the recognition of the real effects that identity has upon strategic possibilities. In the light of its importance, identity becomes a focus of management attention. The process of calibration suggests the possibility of the intentional management of identity in the posing and answering of questions. The firm has some level of control over its own position relative to others (Matsson 1988) so that the creation and management of identity becomes a key aspect of management within a network. Identity management allows the firm to manoeuvre for a more favourable position in the network (Hakansson and Snehota 1997). Just as it has been argued that a joint understanding of identity depends upon the belief that communication is effective, it is this view of communication that makes identity management feasible.

The idea that identity management is a core management task within the network is in keeping with the management metaphors proposed by the constructivist organisational literature. These metaphors draw upon ideas of communication.

Management is an activity that centers upon communicating one's ideas to others. The essentially uni-directional nature of communication, from management, is contained in the suggestion that wise managers "take advantage of language metaphors and stories to convey their messages" (Smircich and Stubbart 1985 p 730) and the assertion, drawing on Peters and Waterman's work, that excellent companies have top management groups who can effectively communicate clear value propositions (Smircich and Stubbart 1985).

The discussion of management task is extended in a dramaturgical metaphor in which organisational members play 'roles' in 'dramas' (Hankansson and Snehota 1997 also link identity to role theory). In this case, managers:

should be aware of the impact these dramas can have and realise that they (the managers) exercise wide discretion in defining what the dramas are and when and how they will occur (Smircich and Stubbart 1985 p 730)

In this dramaturgical view, the management task is that of 'playwright rather than hero' (Smircich and Stubbart 1985 p 734) so that management involves the construction of others' roles and thereby the determination of their actions in the drama.

Theories rooted in social constructivist philosophy generate then a clear vision regarding what it is to manage. Management involves the communication of ideas to those who are managed and the manager can be seen as the playwright in that he


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constructs the roles played by others. This vision is in keeping with the emphasis network theory places upon the management of identity. To manage identities (of self and others) is a crucial management task if identity relates to strategic possibility. Whilst a network probably does not have one formally recognised manager, nevertheless a member can be said to 'manage' the network to the extent that they are able to influence the identity of themselves and others by gaining relatively strong influence within the interactment process of the network. To the extent that this is achieved then the network member may gain a higher level of control in the network and define more broadly their strategic possibilities. This interpretation of management activity arises within the constructivist philosophy and depends upon the possibility of effective communication amongst network members. This possibility is precluded by some understandings of the concept of language. The next section compares social constructivist and social constructionist philosophies and argues that their key difference lies in their different beliefs about language.

Social Constructivism and Constructionism Compared - the Role of Language

Weick (1969) draws upon Berger and Luckmann's (1967) text, 'The Social Construction of Reality' and thereby incorporates the 'social constructionist' thought of the 1960's. The subjectivist basis of this philosophy is clear since Berger and Luckmann (1967) propose that we live within the world as we understand or interpret it, hence within a constructed world rather than within an objectively sensed world. Berger and Luckmann (1967) envisage a process of construction in which we internalise aspects of the world, objectify these according to typificatory schemes based on our experience and, imposing that ordering upon the world, read the world as if fact. Weick (1969) adopts this process in his explanation of enactment.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1967) language is the means of categorisation and provides 'semantic fields' which mark possible ranges of meaning. Hence, an object, experience, feeling and so on is objectified within the dimensions available in language. Social constructivist organisational theorists adopt this view of language. The world is "an ambiguous field of experience" (Smircich and Stubbart 1985 p 720), words are pulled from different vocabularies to make sense of that experience (Weick 1995). In this way discrete labels are imposed on continuous subject matter, words approximate territory, they never map it perfectly, so that sense making is continuous (Weick 1995). Language then is envisaged as a symbolic system that is used to order a pre-linguistic experience.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) emphasise the importance of society over the individual in the construction of the world, so that the social group shares a construction. This importance of the social arises within the proposal that vocabularies are shared by a society and therefore the means of understanding experience are shared. Language is thus a shared symbolic system, or is common to the society. In this way, society, the individual and language are closely linked concepts. This link also underlies organisational social constructivist theory and creates the possibility of effective communication between members. Therefore, whilst language has not been extensively discussed in the organisational literature, Berger and Luckmann's (1967) vision of language as a shared symbolic system underlies the constructivist organisational literature and is implicit in the network theory that pulls upon Weick's ideas. This
stream of network theory therefore draws upon the social theory set out by Berger and Luckmann (1967) in the founding text of social constructionism.

Contemporary social constructionist theorists (see for example, Gergen 1994, Harre 1989, Shotter 1993) have developed the key propositions set out by Berger and Luckmann (1967) principally by incorporating recent linguistic theory. In particular they have explored discourse theory (e.g. Foucault), theories of language deconstruction (Derrida) and of multi-vocality (Bakhtin). The influence of each of these theories upon contemporary social constructionist understanding of language is briefly outlined.

Language is an aspect of discourse which "systematically forms the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1977 p 49). Discourse including language forms the world as that is experienced as true since it produces sets of possible statements "in discrete systems independent of the conscious speaker" (Burrell 1988 p223). People are then entrapped within discourse in that the only means of understanding the world is through discourse, and this fundamentally changes the way that the self is conceptualised. Within discourse the self is 'interpellated' to subject positions (Althusser 1971, Pecheux 1975), and in this they lose self-determination or their role as independent subjects. Actions and experiences are permitted by discourse according to the discoursal rights and obligations of a subject position (Fairclough 1989). Hence discourse theory challenges the idea of language as a symbolic system that represents and communicates pre-linguistic experience. Language is constructive of society and of the individual. These three concepts, which are tightly connected in early social constructionist theory, merge.

Deconstruction theory also refutes the idea of language as symbolic of the experienced world, but differs from discourse theory in asserting the fragility of language. For Derrida (e.g. 1978) language meaning is temporarily claimed within the relationships between words in their usage. Meaning arises especially through 'absence' (the meaning that is excluded from words and thereby defines its presence or meaning). Words are fragile, momentary carriers of meaning, in this they are inherently unstable and under constant 'erasure'. In this way language is constantly deconstructing as it is used. Language structure does not relate to the structure of essences, meaning lies in the text. Since the meaning of the text is unstable, experience is always ambivalent. This fragility, and the contestability of meaning, appears to contradict the power of language asserted in discourse theory. The contradiction is reconciled by incorporating the idea of multi-vocality or 'heteroglossia'.

Multi-vocality proposes that a word gains meanings from the contexts in which it "has lived its socially charged life" and that in usage a word is forced "to submit to one's own intentions and accents" (Bakhtin 1981 pp 183 and 184). Hence there are specific languages, for example of professional groups, and the same words are used differently in those discourse groups. Individuals participate in multiple discourse groups hence both the individual and the society are multi-vocal. There is a constant negotiation of meaning in language and this occurs at several levels. Each voice has its own themes and understandings, which are constructed and articulated in a language that it shares, sometimes uncomfortably with other voices.

Contemporary social constructionist commentators see language as placed (precariously) at the intersect of socio-ideological discourses within society and the individual. Each utterance is a meeting place of discourses and the multi-vocal
individual occupies subject positions in different discourses. Some discourses are stronger and more privileged than others are, so that some voices have greater claim to warrant than others do (Gergen 1989). Despite this, meaning is always contestable and contested and is not effectively communicated. Contemporary social constructionism has then incorporated different language theories to move considerably from the initial position adopted by Berger and Luckmann (1967). The individual is not seen as an independently experiencing subject (the essential, unitary and independent self) but is de-centered and occupies subject positions in discourses. Also the symbolic character of language and its transparency of meaning in relationship to external referents is rejected so that communication is problematic in view of the contested meanings of language. The movement in social constructionist thought through the assimilation of linguistic theories is depicted in Figure I. The social constructivist position, as this has been carried into organisational theory through ideas of enactment, is broadly in line with the early social constructionist ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1967).

![Diagram showing the influence of linguistic theories upon social constructionist thought](image)

Figure I: The influence of linguistic theories upon social constructionist thought, showing the individual (I), society (S) and language (L)

The network management implications of social constructivist theory are incompatible with current social constructionist theory. The use of the dramaturgic metaphor in which the manager constructs and directs the roles of others draws upon a role theory understanding of the self, which assumes an essential self able to assume roles or masks at will (Potter and Wetherall 1987). It also sees the manager as a centered self who is able to act upon the world and in this vision the actor is independent of that world. The communicative power of the manager that underpins social constructionism is also challenged by the recent theorising of language. Social constructionist theory sees the communication of identity, intersubjectivity and the communication of culture as problematic.

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This brief theoretic review indicates the challenge that social constructionist theory presents to social constructivist understandings of network interaction and management. The challenge arises out of the different beliefs about language within the two theories. The paper now turns to the application of social constructionist ideas in network research. It looks firstly at the influence of social constructionist thought upon research design and then presents some interpretations of the network that arise from a social constructionist research project. This presentation of research shows how the language theories that mark the difference between constructivist and constructionist theory can be applied in order to understand particular problems in network life and how those understandings have their own implications regarding what it is to manage (in) a network.

A Social Constructivist Exploration of a Network - the Focus of Inquiry

The research reported here is drawn from an extended study within a UK franchised distribution network for a prestige car marque. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of interaction in the network, interviews were conducted at multiple organisational levels both within the franchisor (manufacturer) and their franchisee (dealer) organisations. The aim of these interviews was to draw and develop narrative accounts of events within the network. The emphasis upon narrative derives from the belief that people organise the disparate aspects of their experience into an intelligible whole in stories. Narrative then sets out the world as it is understood by the narrator and places the narrator within the world (Murray 1989) or constructs the narrator's identity. This interpretation typically also establishes expectations for future events (Gergen 1994) and therefore narrative worlds are those into which the narrator will act in the future.

Whilst a research focus upon narrative is consistent with social constructionist ideas, constructivists may also see narratives as important. Weick (1995) recommends the use of narrative material (data) does not in itself differentiate between the two approaches. Difference occurs rather with regard to the forms of analysis applied to narrative material under the two sets of assumptions. This necessarily occurs because of the different beliefs about language in the two philosophies. Social constructivism sees language as symbolic of the external world and regards experience as pre-linguistic. In this way enactment "has a touch of realism in its emphasis on bracketing and punctuating" (Weick 1995 p 35) and the bracketing may be carried through and applied to narrative material by the researcher in an attempt to mirror that of the participants. Therefore, Ring and Van de Ven (1994) propose a narrative method that is in keeping with constructivist ideas when they recommend the use of critical incident technique along with content analysis to classify aspects of the narrated incident.

In contrast, social constructionism sees language as constructive of the world, so that, in order to study the world into and out of which narrators live, the focus of the inquiry is upon the precise use of language. This is achieved through 'discourse analysis' in which language is the topic of the research rather than "an indirect indicator of something else that is held to be more sociologically interesting" (Gilbert and Mulkay 1986 p 14).

The remainder of the paper shows how the analysis of language has been applied in the author's research. Two relatively brief excerpts from that research are used to
demonstrate the relevance of different aspects of social constructionism to the understanding of networks. The first demonstrates the construction of worlds in language and the embedded character of identity in those worlds. The analysis shows that identity is constructed in discourse, that actions are explained by the logic of constructed worlds, and that understandings of the world need not be shared by interacting network members. The second, briefer extract draws upon the idea of deconstruction in an analysis that shows that the meaning of words that are important to all members of the network may nevertheless be contested amongst network members.

Two Constructions of a Network Event

A comparative analysis of two stories (A and B) is presented here. Both stories are about the same incident. In this two alternative proposals are discussed in a network meeting. The proposals are intended to recoup some of the rising cost of the product that had been brought about by currency fluctuation. One possibility was to increase the price of the product to the consumers, the other was to introduce a temporary dealer levy upon sale. It will be shown that both narrators construct a world in which the story takes place, and that those worlds comprise three key elements: dealer, manufacturer and the environment. The force of these three elements differs across the two constructions of the world. In support of the developing analysis brief extracts have been lifted from the transcribed narratives, these are set in tabular form in order to facilitate easy comparison for the reader.

The two dealers themselves (that is, without interviewer prompt) introduce the stories of this incident during interviews. The two dealers tell their stories in order to make diametrically opposed ‘points’ about the way that decisions are typically made in the network. The two dealers see the general style of interaction between manufacturer and dealers very differently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative A</th>
<th>Narrative B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>when they have a decision that affects the dealer network they actually bring us all together and discuss it. ... they will take time to explain to the dealers why this is happening ... and get an agreement on it</td>
<td>they don’t consult them and discuss the problems that they are faced with, if they did do, you know, we could end up with a solution where we are all happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of the structure of the two narrative worlds, some differences arise out of the narrators’ attribution of agency for the key action (that is, the imposition of levy or the increase of price). Narrator B attributes the key action to the manufacturer. In narrative B this is an action that happens rather than an action performed by the manufacturer. Therefore, through the use of the passive or active tense in statements about the introduction of the levy the manufacturer is constructed as being more or less forceful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative A</th>
<th>Narrative B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rather than putting the prices up we agreed to have a levy put onto our margins</td>
<td>they announced a price increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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the alternative to the levy is to put the price up we most probably were stuck with a levy
A similar pattern emerges with regard to the force of the dealers in the constructed worlds. Dealers in narrative A are 'patients' (Fairclough 1989) since actions happen to them and they become the passive recipients of actions. This can be seen in the above comments where dealers 'have a levy put on to' their margins, and 'were stuck with a levy'. In narrative B the manufacturer's actions involve the dealer in a subsequent action (chipping in). Narrative B also depicts the dealers as very active in response to the proposals which is in marked contrast to the passivity of the dealers in narrative A. These dealers of narrative B challenge passivity (that which 'just happens') in statements loaded with images of frenzied activity.

Narrative B
it was a case of ... we put the cars up 6% ... you chip in £x000 per car now, if that had been left to just happen ...
if we hadn't of kicked up a fuss
it was only by a lot of people kicking up a lot of fuss
it were only by, you know, a lot of badgering by the dealer network
if it hadn't of been for the intervention of the dealer network we would have just wham bham there you go

The force of manufacturer and dealer differs across the two narratives. In each narrative the dealer and manufacturer have however an approximately equal force. To this extent, in the dealers' understanding of their worlds, power is not distributed between dealer and manufacturer in a zero sum manner. This is both counter-intuitive and challenges the assumptions underlying the bulk of channel power research, but can be explained by reference to the narrator's understanding of 'the environment'.

In narrative A there are external circumstances or forces that to a large extent dictate action. Narrator B believes that external circumstances can to some extent be managed by network members.

Narrative A
maybe they are at a situation where it may be an unpalatable decision that they have to make and maybe there isn't an alternative (manufacturer) have come up with certain, maybe unpalatable decisions that have to be made

Narrative B
I think there's a lot more wiser people running the (other brands) network, to soften the blow somewhat

The different distributions of force amongst the three possible actors (manufacturer, dealer and environment) are indicated in Figure 2. Just as the actors are constructed differently in the two worlds, so too are the relationships between them. In narrative A the strongest force is external or environmental and therefore the two sets of characters are anti-heroes in the face of that power. The relationship between the dealer and manufacturer is one in which protection is sought. In narrative B the manufacturer and dealer both have force to counter the environment and both therefore seek to assert control in the way they see as more beneficial. These characters are cast as hero and
villain. The metaphors used to describe their interaction draws upon images of violence as if in the battle between hero and villain.

The worlds of these two narratives (depicted in Figure II) therefore have their own logic in that the various elements of each world can be explained through reference to other

Narrative A
at least we are well informed and feel that we are maybe taken under their wing

Narrative B
the impression, and the taste it leaves in your mouth is that, it's always the dealer network who get kicked in the nuts big style

elements. The analysis therefore suggests that whilst the interaction described in both narratives largely takes place in one meeting, it nevertheless takes place with in the very different worlds constructed by participants. This interpretation runs counter to the view forwarded in the social constructivist literature by which network members come over time to share subjectivity through communication.

**Narrative A – a world of anti-heros**

at least they will take the time to explain to the dealers ... and even if it's unpalatable, get an agreement on it

**Narrative B – a world of heros and villains**

I sometimes think they dont consult the dealer network properly

![Figure II: The two narrative worlds of one incident](image)

The importance of this analysis depends upon establishing a link between the members’ views of the world and their actions within the network. This is predicted by constructionist theory that asserts that we act into and out of constructed worlds. A link is also suggested within these two narratives and endorsed in a manufacturer narrative. Both the dealer narrators talk of their own actions during the discussions. Narrator A presents his own actions in a confessional tone ('I must admit') whilst narrator B presents his actions with a tone of pride. Possibly narrator A is timid in communication and narrator B is assertive as their descriptions suggest. Certainly that would be consistent with their own constructions of self since narrator B becomes the network ‘super-hero’ whilst narrator A, as an anti-hero has no incentive to become assertive.

**Narrative A**
there was a quarter, I mean I must admit I was one of them, who said "put the price up", because to me that would give me a slightly bigger margin

**Narrative B**
if the dealer network as a whole, and us in particular because we are one of the largest, if we hadn't of kicked up a fuss

and then it was left to the likes of my managing director ... and the real managing directors of the big groups to start ringing the powers that be

The manufacturer provides evidence that there is this difference in communication style. In a narrative about a different network meeting in which a similar issue was discussed, the manufacturer contrasts the communications of two sets of dealers. In keeping with narrator B (quoted above) the manufacturer classifies the two groups of dealers according to the size of their operation.

The different styles of communication are captured when the manufacturer reports his private conversations with one group of big dealers and one group of small dealers prior to the open discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small Dealers</th>
<th>Big Dealers</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;well, we don't really think we should change because it's actually quite good the way it is now, and you know it makes everybody deal on an even playing field and it's fantastic and we really would appreciate it if you, you know, I don't know what the others are going to say but for us it's really important that it stays like this&quot;</td>
<td>then a couple of others say &quot;it's got to change, it's no good&quot; and its normally the big ones who are more for just blowing ears out everywhere and don't really care about the consequences.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The small dealers are timid in venturing their opinion and qualify that opinion "we don't really think we should change" and "it's actually quite good". Their speech picks up pace and confidence until they crescendo with the clear statement "it's really important that it stays like this". In contrast the bigger dealers are critical, assertive and direct in the statement of their opinion.

Similar statements about communication style occur once this narrative progresses to a description of interaction within an open meeting. In this case the discussion is largely monopolised by a group of big dealers who again are direct and confrontational in their speech. The small dealers do not speak in the meeting although they are opposed to the solution that is being forwarded by the vociferous big guys. Finally another big dealer states the counter opinion, again using direct and assertive speech.

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>and they never said a word, and I purposefully let it go on and they were all just sitting there like this, saying nothing but these three still didn't say a word</td>
<td>and there were about five of them, others, who were saying &quot;we should change it and we should just do it this way which gives the dealers the control instead of [manufacturer], it will be hunky dory, just trust us to do it ourselves&quot; and then you get one little voice down the bottom, which happened to be a big dealer, &quot;totally and utterly disagree&quot;</td>
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The manufacturer then, in a narrative about a separate incident nevertheless identifies speech styles that are in keeping with the two world constructions (one of the small guys involved in the above quoted conversation is narrator A). To this extent, there is evidence of different actions and those actions can be explained in terms of world construction. The social constructionist analysis therefore provides an explanation of this aspect of network interaction.

The social constructionist approach also, in this case, provides an analysis that has direct implications for management. For the manufacturer (traditionally seen as the channel leader in channel literature) the different communication styles pose a problem because of his wish that the network appear to operate on democratic or consensual lines. When some dealers state a greater claim to voice than other dealers then the appearance of democracy is lost within the interaction between dealers.

we need that balance, otherwise I stand at the front thinking that we should stay the way that it is, and I'm perceived to be going (manufacturer's) own way because we are avoiding what the dealers are saying cos the only thing that anybody is saying is "change" when everybody is really thinking 'stay as it is'

The manufacturer attributes the unequal claim to voice by the horizontal relationships between dealers. He explains the behaviour of each, and the different tone of their relationships with him by factors associated with the size of the dealerships (within the industry as well as in this network). The manufacturer’s description is in keeping with the protective metaphor that describes manufacturer dealer relationship for narrator A.

The manufacturer’s explanation is credible and the relative size of organisations can be seen as an important factor in the interaction of network identities. Nevertheless, this aspect had not been important for the dealer narrators in their accounts of the network incident. Therefore, the constructionist interpretation would admit that structural factors provide underlying explanations for different constructions of the world, without those structural factors registering within an actors understanding of the world. In this constructionism draws close to theories that identify false consciousness as an outcome of structure.

Small Dealers
they'll either say nothing because they feel intimidated ... the smaller dealers feel intimidated by the bigger dealers. they are more dependent on us, because we are bigger, so the relationship is more of a supportive relationship on our side ...

Big Dealers
When these people are heads of groups that are twice the size of ours when they come in they are not used to people saying no. they are not used to people offering other opinions, that's the way they do it ... they talk to you on a different level

It's almost "protect me" is the attitude
In the manufacturer's narrative an attempt is made to at least start to change the smaller dealers' actions. The manufacturer's parting comments to the dealers interpret their behaviour in terms of the network structure and reason within that interpretation.

"why didn't you say something, you know, I asked the question "any other opinions?" and you just sit there and say nothing, just you know, your voice is as important as anybody else in the room if you sell seventy or a hundred and fifty units a year and you sell thirty to forty units a year, it doesn't matter a jot, ... you are a principal of the business and we want your opinion, we would just invite those five to the meeting and ask them what they think, we want yours as well".

The advice that the manufacturer offers is consistent with the social constructivist theory in that it assumes a common vision of the network, a shared evaluation and a joint understanding of the world. This analysis would suggest an alternative course if the manufacturer wants to alter the actions of any dealer. Reasoning should rather take place in, and resonate with the constructed world of the dealer. In the speech given above the reasoning does not resonate with the dealers' world since no opinion is important and no voice matters in a world of anti-heroes.

This analysis, through focusing explicitly upon language and paying attention to the detail of language (for example, the tense of clauses) has shown two constructions of the network. This counters the constructivist view of shared subjectivity. The two constructions of the world have been associated with different actions and some support for this idea arises within the logic of those worlds and is endorsed by manufacturer comment. Each makes sense of the world and acts consistently within that version of sense, and therefore also acts predictably. It appears that there is little need for any network member to be aware of the world that their colleagues inhabit in order for interaction to take place. The worlds do not directly challenge each other as they would if, for example, the construction of different types of dealers was central to the understanding of the worlds. In this way they can work together despite differences, although it has been argued that these differences throw up problems in terms of network management. The analysis also suggests that the management task involves attempting to talk and reason within the worlds constructed by others rather than communicating suggestions, norms, values and so on that make sense within one's own world. This then fundamentally revises the definition of what constitutes 'management' in the network. The manager is not the playwright who communicates roles and plots to others though the manager may seek to influence plots and roles within the multiple dramas that are simultaneously acted out in any one episode.

Communication in the constructionist network – contested meanings

Whilst the analysis has argued that subjectivity is not necessarily communicated round the network it has not addressed the issue of whether communication is possible or whether language is problematised to the extent to make this impossible. This possibility draws upon deconstruction and multi-vocality theory and is addressed briefly here.

_in McLoughlin, Damien. and C. Horan (eds.), Proceedings of The 15th Annual IMP Conference, University College, Dublin 1999_
This analysis proposes that all members of the network use the same key words to understand some aspects of members’ identities. The meaning of those words however may differ across network members. In particular, all network members agree that the manufacturer ‘plans’, and that the dealers act upon ‘emotion’. However, each word simultaneously carries an evaluation (Potter and Wetherall 1987) and the evaluation and precise meaning of these terms differs across network members. Drawing upon deconstruction theory, the meaning of a word is defined in opposition to and therefore by that which it excludes (the presence is defined by the absence). The analysis also relates directly to Bakhtin’s ideas of multi-vocality developed by Shotter (1993) so that the assertion of meaning for any word occurs within a contest. It looks firstly at the manufacturer’s understanding of the terms and later at that of the dealers. In each case the analysis draws upon the voices of several interviewees.

In the first extract the manufacturer complains about dealer emotionality. Emotion is defined in opposition to professionalism and equated with subjectivity. Professionalism relates to the ability to plan, to objectivity and rationality. Emotion is something that swings, it therefore relates to not having a plan but instead being reactive to each stimulus (sensitive).

It's this, sensitivity to move, in terms of emotional swings which is very difficult to manage and if you ask me to give a reason for that, I would say it's because we don't have enough professional managers in the network, ... somebody who understands and can plan for their actions ... who don't react subjectively to issues, who consider objectively and rationally the real situation.

Further manufacturer comments endorse this meaning of emotion and associate the dealers with emotion. Comments specifically dissociate the manufacturer from emotion and demonstrate his role as the planner. The emotional actions of the dealers are presented as disruptive because they stand in the way of the manufacturer’s planning.

I hope that that was perceived as a professional and business agreement and not as an emotional kickback. We produce a plan with them and involve them in a proper planning process, rather than, what they normally do, which is really just budgeting ... it's difficult for us, when we are getting a lot of emotion being fed back at us, it's difficult for us to try and work out what the practical answers are.

The dealers also regard themselves as being emotional but they evaluate emotion positively as shown in the remaining comments provided by dealers. For the dealers, emotion is their main reason for being in the business. Investment is made because of fancy, and emotion is key to the dealers’ success. Emotion is equated with passion and love and is presented as something that endures and provides a deep constant force (compulsion) rather than something that operates through swings quick changing bouts of energy (impulsion). Hence emotion kept the dealers going through the recession. Despite the emotion that underlies their business, emotion is nevertheless defined in opposition to the business point of view, and a rational business argument (that profitability can be considered over the long term) in the last extract is attributed to emotion.

lots of business reasons, but also, which a lot of people find hard to understand a very personal almost and emotive reason
the MD loves the cars and breathes the cars ... it was his pride and joy, it was a beautiful dealership
as a big strong group you might fancy yourself investing two million in a great big gin palace
anyone who was only looking at it from a business point of view would have lost the franchise ... but he was passionate and believed and constantly said, "no we’ve had the good times, we’ve got to stick with them through the bad times and the good times will come back"

The dealers themselves claim that they do not plan. The mundane character of planning and its boring nature, summarised in the “etc etc”, is shown through comparison to the emotional and overflowing enthusiasm that drives the dealer through a period of expansion.

I was at that time communicating to the regional manager "we intend to have sell at this franchise, we sell this many cars, we want this many cars"
and he'd be saying "corporate image is how many ramps have you got in your workshop and selling capacity in your workshop etc etc"

Not only does the meaning of ‘emotion’ differ for manufacturer (impulsion) and dealer (compulsion), also the meaning of ‘planning’ differs. Planning is the alternative to action in the dealers’ vocabulary and the alternative to reaction in the manufacturer’s vocabulary.

Hence, network members may understand themselves and others by applying the same words, yet the meanings of those words differ across parties. In this way language is problematised and communication is difficult. Whereas network members are able to interact relatively effectively whilst inhabiting different worlds, as shown in the previous analysis, effective interaction is possibly more difficult where differences of opinion revolve around contested concepts. That was found to be the case in this extended research where the threatened dissolution of relationships were associated with the manufacturer’s inability to cope with dealers’ emotions, and dealers’ refusal to plan for the future. But that is another story.

Concluding Comments

The basis of social constructivist and social constructionist theories of the network have been compared and attributed especially to the different concepts of language that underpin the two philosophies. Extracts of research have been presented that show how the language theories that inform social constructionism and distinguish the two approaches can be incorporated within research in an industrial or retail network. The analysis that has been presented supports the idea that network members act within constructed worlds, and that these constructions are not necessarily shared by all network members. The analysis has also pointed to the problematic nature of communication in a multi-vocal and socially constructed network. The implications for management have been discussed through the paper but some concluding comments review the managerial metaphor. In the constructivist network the management task is
that of playwright, designing or writing the network roles and plots. In the
constructionist network roles and plots can not be written by a leader and communicated
to players. The would-be manager must understand the other members’ worlds in order
to be able to make suggestions or offer advice that coincides with the logic of those
worlds. The manager must also seek to understand the differences in meaning that are
masked by the use of common words. To the extent that a dramaturgical metaphor is
appropriate, the constructionist channel resembles Theatre of the Absurd with all the
individual understandings, disjunction and communicative failures of that genre.

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