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**EMPLOYING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM TO DECONSTRUCT HOW 'DISABLED LEARNERS' AND 'DELINQUENT STUDENTS' ARE MANAGED WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM:
COULD SOCIAL SCIENTISTS PLAY A MORAL ROLE?**

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Social Constructionism as a post-modern approach to understanding the ever-changing nature of our social world. Social constructionists accept the existence of biological reality, but they are critical of how socio-cultural knowledge is shared and disseminated through our 'common sense' notion of what is natural, inevitable and unproblematic. The language we use and the labels we adopt as part of our common sense, have all led to the creation of the subject-position of 'otherness' – People who are seen as having problems, and are themselves seen as problems to be managed. The realm of formal Education was chosen to illustrate this reality further, by unpacking and critically examining the labels 'disabled learners' and 'delinquent students', to show how our common sense have had material effects on the real lives of these 'others'. Disability and delinquency are not just given labels, they govern our perception and understanding of socio-physical reality. Through the mass media and popular culture, common sense perceptions of these labels have been perpetuated and reinforced until drastic measures are taken at policy level to manage learners who are disabled and those who are considered to be undisciplined and delinquent. This presents a challenge for social scientists in Malaysia, and other nation-states in the world. How could they play a moral role and challenge the dangers of common sense knowledge? Social scientists must ensure that every member of society is shown alternative projections of the world that could reflect and represent social reality and contemporary life as they really are, as a concerted effort against our limited common sense 'knowledge' of everything.

Keyword: *Social Constructionism, education, disability, delinquency.*

INTRODUCTION

(Our) socially constructed lives Social Constructionism is a post-modern social science perspective that attributes language to the way we react to things. Social construction is a dynamic and ever-changing process that happens in several stages. The first stage starts when we give names or labels to social objects that we perceive. The next stage is when we start to develop a reaction to these names or labels should we come across them in our everyday lives. This is done as a shorthand to simplify life and to organise our thought process because with time, our reactions to these names and labels become automatic and do not require much processing and thinking on our behalf.

As more people learn about these names and labels society forms a collective way of reacting to them, they become homogenous and are mutually shared within that particular society. This value-laden and ethnocentric practice results in what we could refer to as 'common sense'. Due to the fact that common sense is shared and perpetuated by most (if not all) members of society, we tend to never question these labels or names that themselves are socially constructed, because the constructions 'are deeply embedded or solidified as ways of thinking and acting that hardly change at all' (1) (Clarke and Cochrane, 1998, p.39).

What happens next is, society inadvertently begins to form stereotypes of certain groups of people who carry negatively perceived or socially stigmatised labels like 'disabled', 'immigrant', 'homeless', 'poor', or 'homosexual'. We are then moved into the realm of Social Policy, when society begins to develop ways to deal with, and manage these groups of 'others' to intervene in and manage their lives, in order to make these people less deviant and unnatural as compared to the conforming and natural majority.

'Motherhood' as a social construct To explain the social construction perspective further, I shall be using the label 'motherhood' to illustrate how the process of naming or labelling things is then developed into social expectations of the terms. Social constructionists do not just perceive motherhood as a biological construct, but they also consider motherhood as a term that is socially constructed. First and foremost, we take it for granted that motherhood applies only to the female of the human species, and it is socially accepted as an exclusive realm of femininity within given parameters that are socio-culturally determined.

What I mean by this is, motherhood is usually conflated with, and influenced by, other spheres like religion and the Law. For example, mothers could only be seen *as mothers* if the child is born within wedlock and not illegitimate, if there is a father to protect this mother as the breadwinner for her and her child, and if this mother makes certain sacrifices that are expected from 'a mother' within that particular society. Although we could argue that the term mother to us in Malaysia might have slight variations in given roles and social expectations compared to another society living in a different country, in reality social terms and definitions tend to be understood and disseminated the same way around the globe (2) (Cole, 2000).

Hence, we develop constructions of mothers as caregivers, first and foremost. Although at the same time, it is socio-culturally accepted that other people like nannies and nurses can fit into the role, perhaps more confidently and more adept than 'normal' mothers. Mothers are also seen as providers for the child. Again, this notion does not necessarily highlight that fathers, immediate family members, and even the wider kinship and friendship network will be instrumental in providing for the child especially within an Asian context. The child is not an exclusive property of the mother, but is a developing social entity that is cherished and celebrated by people who are close to her or him. Finally, we construct mothers as the main socialising agent and contact point between the child and her or his immediate social and physical world. Simultaneously, it is highly likely that there are other important variables that will influence the socio-physical development of a young child that could perhaps be outside the locus of control of mothers (3) (Adnan, 2002).

Problems will arise when certain mothers do not live up to the high expectations of the constructs above or when the mother does not fit into any one of the roles prescribed to her. This mother then forfeits the high expectations of her, and she is then seen as a deviant 'other'. Her failure to live up to the expectations of that particular society will see her ostracised or even punished, even if there are legitimate reasons for her behaviour. Thus, what is paramount is not her biological responsibilities towards the child, but her ability to live up to the label of a mother and in fulfilling the social expectations that come with the term.

Most importantly, even though we know that natural differences do exist between people due to biology and this is held a common knowledge, the fact cannot be ignored that we ourselves construct and affirm these differences through social construction. According to (4) Berger and Luckmann (1967) two thinkers from the social constructionist school of thought, any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern. These patterns then begin to influence our perception of human conditions, and they dictate our behaviour and expectations, as we construct the layers that make up a society and that build a nation. We now move our discussion to the realm of formal education that serves to stratify society and to aid in nation-building, to critically evaluate if the Malaysian Education System promotes the participation of all groups of students within the system, 'normal' or otherwise.

DISCUSSION

The formal education construct According to (5) Adnan and Smith (2001), education could be seen as a social construct because it 'has been formulated and reformulated, reflecting both change and continuity, in any existing human society' (p.326). There is also a practical reason why education should be viewed as a social construct, it would allow critical evaluation and rethinking of ideas and policies within formal education that might otherwise be accepted as common sense, natural and unproblematic. Like other social constructs, education is inevitably value-laden and it is an embodiment of the beliefs and values of a particular society, at a given point in time. In Malaysia and abroad, education fulfils certain social functions

by aiding in nation building, promoting intercultural understanding, and enhancing the quality of life for all sections of society.

The problem is in this era of rapid modernisation and globalisation, national education systems cannot help but to be 'taken hostage by the instrumental needs of national economies, and [is] constrained by national cultures and dominant subcultures' (5) (Adnan and Smith, 2001, p.326). Given this situation, it is difficult for us to envisage how education could be used as an integrative tool to meet the needs and wants of all sections of society. Practical constraints of time and resources also mean that all stakeholders within the education system is perhaps more willing to meet the needs of those in the majority, and perhaps ignoring the special and immediate requirements of those in the minority.

To uncover how the formal education system might not be meeting the expectations of certain groups of students within our national education system, two constructed labels will be chosen and scrutinised namely 'disabled learners' and 'delinquent students'. These two labels have negative connotations and they exemplify how the subject-position of the 'other' is constructed and ascribed to certain minority groups. Nevertheless, this must not be taken to suggest that our education system views these groups of students negatively. In fact, it would be possible to argue that in terms of philosophy and ethos, the Malaysian Education System covers all possible niches and tries to develop a totally balanced individual in the process.

On the other hand, there are always practical issues to be considered that might hinder the realisation of the (6) National Philosophy of Education (2000). These issues not only hinder the realisation of the national philosophy but they also challenge the actual implementation of social policies regarding education. One such issue is regarding the availability and allocation of resources. A national education system will need much resource, and it should not be surprising that the Malaysian government is amongst the biggest spender on education and health provisions in the world.

(7) The Third World Institute (1999), reports that for the past half decade the Malaysian government's spending on education and health has risen to 48% compared to 38% in the early 1990s. With this belief in the power of education since its Independence from colonial rule until this very day, education in Malaysia has actualised important social functions and allowing for the gradual integration of a multi-cultural people as a 'Malaysian race' whilst meeting the needs of most who are part of the system.

Simultaneously, resource is an area of contention especially when it is allocated to groups of students who might not be seen as contributing actively towards the betterment of Malaysian society and the integration of the Malaysian race. Groups like disabled learners and delinquent students for example, tend to be excluded from educational provisions within national education systems the world over (8) (Russell, 2000). This is due to the fact that they are seen as 'problems' that need to be managed and solved. Although it is difficult to imagine how and if, this would be possible, policy-makers and society tend to take the common sense view in dealing with these two groups. As a result, these students are excluded either intentionally, or intentionally, from educational provisions that should have a positive impact on their lives.

Expertise is another critical issue for Malaysia, as we are in dire need of educationists and educators to work in our institutions of learning. Without people who are knowledgeable in dealing with disabled learners and students with serious discipline problems, it is perhaps inevitable that we turn to our common sense view of the world in dealing with these two groups. In the process of intervening and assisting, our common sense becomes a major hurdle and an obstacle that will always hold back the democratic participation of these learners/students within our education system.

It should be mentioned again that it is not our education system that is outdated or ill informed, but the gap between positive ideals and actual practice might still exclude some of these learners from the educational provisions that are afforded to them. How we actually manage these two groups is explained and elaborated

in the next two sections together with a consideration of how these learners/students are being effected by radical changes at all levels, fitting into the wider discourse of 'social ills' and how the young citizens of Malaysia could be persuaded to contribute positively towards national development.

'Managing' disabled learners From the many constructs within the realm of education, disability is possibly one of the most popular issues that tends to be discussed at length by different people, academics or otherwise. The term disability, is a word that calls for certain common sense responses from people. Within Malaysian society, disability usually entails the need to be pitied and assisted, and perhaps as an ailment that could be cured. (9) Adnan and Hafiz (2001), studied how definitions of disability and misconceptions of people who are disabled are translated into socio-educational policy and actual educational provisions for disabled learners.

Adnan and Hafiz found that the biggest problem facing disabled learners within the education system is the way different agencies empowered to help them are unable to arrive at a consensus and to direct their efforts in a concerted manner, due to the fact that different agencies (and people) have different preconceptions of what disability really means. This is perhaps a tragedy because not only is the experience of disabled people ignored by those who are empowered to assist them, but the voices of disabled learners are not consulted with to ensure that society really tries to meet the real educational needs and wants of these learners.

Our common sense definitions of disability problematically does not take into account that 'the types of impairment associated with disabled people are immense and complex' (10) (Hughes, 1998, p.52). Due to our inability to comprehend degrees and conditions of disability, we tend to group disabled learners into one homogenous cluster instead of treating them as the individuals that they are. Perhaps this might serve a practical reason because focusing on the individual is time-consuming compared to tackling the issue at the level of the group and society. As a result, the agencies outlined by Adnan and Hafiz could distribute scant resources more quickly and effectively to learners who are disabled within the system.

There are also other reasons why we tend to view disabled learners as part of a large group made up of similar individuals, and one clear example is the prevalent images of disability that are dumped into popular culture. As a result we tend to view disabled people as one homogenous group that might even be objects of violence, sinister and evil, self pitying or even sexually dysfunctional (11) (Barnes, 1992). Our interpretations of disability construct people who are disabled as deviant and unnatural (as in the case of delinquent students), compared to the able bodied and normal majority.

To make matters worse, due to the misconceived ways disability is perceived and understood, even when we try to have a positive and liberal outlook on the subject matter, disabled learners within the education system become the object of marginalisation and are excluded from educational provisions afforded to the community and society at large. The stereotypical representation of disability evident within our local culture has made disabled people into deviants, relatively powerless minorities living amongst us, but not as it were, *with us*.

In turn, the way we react towards disability is to find ways in which our disabled learners 'need to be helped or subjected to moral management, discipline and segregation' (10) (Hughes, 1998, p.60). This is consistent with the social constructionist model that states, how we view difference will have profound consequences on how that difference is acted upon. To fit with the representation of disabled people as needing help for example, charity organisations have come about to aid this 'helpless' group of people using the media as a way of channelling their effort. On the other hand, to manage and discipline disabled learners, special schools are set up 'in which strict regimentation and impersonal control tend to dominate' (10) (Hughes, 1998, p.63), because it is believed that those who are disabled are unable to achieve within mainstream educational contexts. The philosophy behind this exclusion strategy is to try to introduce and assimilate disabled learners into society without conflict, and to help them contribute positively towards societal development. It is questionable if such strategies could ever achieve their positive objectives.

Hence in trying to 'manage' disability and to include disabled learners within the education system, the way we define the conditions of disability and how interpret them as differences, has had considerable impact on the real lives of these students. Each viewpoint adopted to make sense of these differences, will bring about distinctly different ways of dealing with the differences. By adopting the medical model for example, disabled learners might be seen as purely patients to be treated. The democratic participation model would want these learners to be included at all levels of society through the education system, again it is open to question if this would be possible given that formal education is also socially constructed within all human societies, past and future (*) (9) (Adnan and Hafiz, 2001). In this sense, social construction has made an impact on determining the ideologies and discourses which are dominant within our society.

'Disciplining' delinquent students Juvenile delinquency is said to be a global problem that affects nearly all developing and developed societies. According to (12) Azizan (2000), 'the increasing crimes committed by schoolchildren are not confined to any country, race or religion [...] These crimes are surely the downside of modernisation, globalisation and technological advances' (p.3). Although I tend to agree with Azizan's first proposition, it is a common mistake to attribute all social 'ills' to modernisation and development. Nevertheless returning to the notion of common sense, we could argue that this is the stereotypical pattern and also the normal response every time the construct of delinquency is discussed.

There is a tendency to attribute discipline problems to factors like lack of communication between members of a family, low motivation in students, the inability of teachers to curb indiscipline, the problems with society at large, and other reasons. Thus, when disabled learners are facing problems due to the way disability is defined through common sense, for delinquency the problem seems to be related to what causes this condition to happen in the first place. It is not so much as the definition that is in contention, rather the issue is the causes of juvenile delinquency that might as well be a contest to see who will come up with the most elaborate and complex reason for this 'social problem'.

Could it be that this issue is being approached from the wrong angle, or perhaps society is severely limiting its scope by focusing only on certain facets of the delinquency construct? If this is developed into real research questions, there might be practical reasons for only focusing on a few variables at one time. This however, might not be a 'true-to-life' representation of delinquent students, their lived experiences and the position they occupy within the education system. Even if it is argued that these students make severe demands on our already limited resources, and the only way to discipline these students is with severe reprimands and mandatory punishments, at this point in time and with our current state of knowing in Malaysia more data should first be gathered by social scientists on a large scale before deciding on a collective plan of action.

Limiting the discussion to only cover the possible causes of delinquency and dealing with this construct with swift judgement before the situation is understood, is also counter-productive because society is bound to be highly reactive to the construct. What I mean by this is, say a group of secondary school students were caught for raping a minor, the automatic and normative reaction would be to punish these students as quickly and as severely as possible with hope that this would be a lesson to others who might become culprits in the future. I would like to refer to this as the 'punishment-illustration-deterrent' reaction. On the contrary we do know, although we rarely acknowledge, that this serious crime could easily be repeated in the future by different students and perhaps in a bigger magnitude.

This suggests that the 'punishment-illustration-deterrent' reaction that has long occupied an uneasy position within education systems, is possibly conceptually ineffective and practically flawed. Although there is no doubt that students who are involved in serious delinquency cases should be subject to moral management from an educational perspective, punishment should not be seen as the 'be-all-end-all' answer to disciplining these students, even if there is some data to suggest that punishment do help instil discipline in young students (13) (Kaur, 2000). A more measured reaction would be to profile students who are found to be delinquent and deal with the case as is. A blanket policy that covers everything ignores the individual

factor in behaviour. Other issues that might seem transparent in the beginning could become clearer once time and resources are allocated for a better understanding of each serious delinquency case.

In this sense social scientists who subscribe to the social constructionist school of thought, might be more productive in their approach to understanding delinquency. As explained earlier, although delinquency itself is a serious problem that could indicate problems in other social spheres like within the institution of the family, or the mass media and popular culture, simultaneously the delinquency construct could also embody the permutations and realisations of our own uncertainties and uneasiness of the rapid changes happening to Malaysia and its multi-cultural society. Without discussing too much about the effects of globalisation on modern life, it would perhaps be more fruitful for the education system to ameliorate delinquency using the bottom-up approach whilst not being too quick to exclude students who are considered to be delinquent from mainstream education.

Instead of dwelling too much on finding out the causes of delinquency, the system should also be looking at how Malaysian students could be prepared with enough knowledge to counter the negative effects of the mass media, for example. Cultural sociologists with expertise in critical media studies could play their role here by suggesting coping skills that could be incorporated within the education system to be taught to students. Social psychologists with expertise in adolescent development could also play their role by collecting data on how to help students to be more confident and able to sieve through the abundance of new information and subcultures that might not be inline with the needs of the nation and the wants of parents and the government. This is how social scientists could play a moral role in dealing with constructs like disability and delinquency, and this is discussed in greater depth in the next section.

The moral role of social scientists It is difficult to envisage any academic disciplines and researchers who work in isolation from the socio-cultural world. Even those who deal with the natural sciences are looking at the physical environment that we interact with, and live in. Without a doubt, it is difficult to separate the social and the 'non-social' in everyday life although this is not impossible. That said should we then say that researchers, in this case social scientists, should not just examine and describe the social world but they also need to play the role of agents of change, to improve social conditions and to enhance the life chances of members of society especially those who are seen as stigmatised, excluded and disenfranchised?

The answer to this long and elaborate question, is perhaps as complex and value-laden as the question itself. By saying that social scientists should play an active role as moral agents of change, we are also constructing another expectation of social scientists. These scientists then need to live up to the given standards, and are likely to be seen as ineffective should they be unable to fulfil this crucial moral role. It should also be mentioned that being 'moral agents of change' does not mean that social scientists will be playing a didactic moralising role within society. Rather, as agents of change social scientists will be actively trying to promote alternative voices of the 'other', whilst bridging the gap between academic knowledge and policy-making to make sound research-driven policies a reality.

On the other hand, there is also the question of methodology and research ethics. The social science tradition has always pride itself on the fact that social scientists are able to stand back and observe social conditions as objectively as possible. Although it is questionable if this is possible in the first place, at least it could be argued that social science tries to be value-free in its conception and objective in its implementation. Again, I have to mention that there is a difference in between playing a moral role compared to becoming moralising agents. The former, which social scientists should aspire to become, requires them to understand that they work not only at the macro level and observing society from a vantage point, but also social scientists will be the ones who are actively involved in increasing the life chances, and improving the social conditions of groups like disabled learners and delinquent students. By voicing their actual needs and wants and presenting their alternative views to an otherwise de-sensitised and possibility misconceived society, perhaps the lived experiences of these learners/students will not be strange and alien anymore.

Social scientists could then play a central role in suggesting and reviewing different areas of social policy that could, and should, be improved upon. If social scientists continue to distance themselves from the subject matter of the human condition and social life, it is difficult to imagine if these scientists are able to be sensitive and aware of the needs and wants of *all* sections of society. It is not an exaggeration to posit that when issues within social policy are developed, the starting point will always be how we ourselves perceive, define and construct differences between what is normal and what is not. This is because by building on these differences, we begin to give meaning to the differences, to aid in our understanding of them and in finding ways to deal with and manage them, for better or for worse.

Within the realm of education, social scientists who participate in research efforts concerning disabled learners and delinquent students must always be aware that whatever findings they produce will have implications, not only on the students themselves but also on society. Instead of just describing, social scientists now must also be trying to change things for the better. They need to work together with socialisation agents like the family and the school, both of which have always played an important part in the development of students' social citizenship, no matter if they are defined as disabled or considered to be juvenile delinquents.

When it comes to political decision-making and implementing social policies, the way we view differences and how we categorise them into groups, will have a deep impact on the way we deal with them. For example, we can view certain people as having problems or we can see these people themselves as problems, in formal education and also other social spheres/realms. We then develop ways, which is necessarily different, to cope with the two distinct categories. Take the social construction of disabled learners and delinquent students as points of reference.

Social scientists must start to play a bigger and more prominent role from the bottom-up and vice versa. They should try to bridge between academic knowledge gathered from research efforts and political decision-making that leads to the implementation of social policies. If the current gap between knowing and acting is not closed, we might always be repeating the same mistakes whilst sidelining the voices of the 'other' like disabled learners and delinquent students. No matter how the issue is understood and how we choose to define these two group, society through the moral role of social scientists must never ignore the possibility that these students could contribute positively towards nation-building, intercultural understanding, and the advancement of society – Just like any other students within the Malaysian Education System.

Conclusion: The way forward I believe that Social Constructionism would allow forward looking and socially responsible social scientists to study, explain and change society, in a more focused and fruitful manner. With reference to the education system, social constructionists are able to problematise certain facets of the system that would otherwise be seen as natural, inevitable and unproblematic. Taking both disability and delinquency as cases in point, I would like to argue that the way these two social constructs are managed within the education system has had real impact on the lives of these students. This is where social scientists come in, as moral agents of change with knowledge and expertise on how social life is maintained and organised. Although being moral is a value-laden practice, this should be done to ensure a prominent role for social scientists in the policy-making process, and to give a voice to those who have been sidelined or constructed as the 'other'.

Although it is understood that social scientists should always try to be objective and detached from the subject matter being studied, this does not mean that they should ignore realisations and implications of the subject matter. Having observed and having understood how disabled learners and delinquent students are constructed and managed by the education system, should social scientists be satisfied with just publishing and disseminating objective knowledge about the two social constructs? This would indeed be a waste of the whole research effort, and would certainly limit the social sciences to nothing more than just an academic endeavour. For the new wave of social scientists working in Sociology, Psychology and other disciplines, a paradigm shift must happen especially within the realm of education to bridge between academic knowledge and social responsibility. Hopefully, this would facilitate in nation building, promoting intercultural understanding, and enhancing the quality of life for all sections of Malaysian society.

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