



Social Constructionism as an Ethnomusicological Approach

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The following text was originally a submission for the book *Musiikki kulttuurina*, which was edited by Pirkko Moisala and Elina Seye and published in 2013 by Finnish Society for Ethnomusicology in Helsinki, Finland. The name of the book can be translated into English as “Music as Culture” and the main objective of the book is to present ethnomusicological thinking and cultural analytical approaches to music. The publication was planned to be used as textbook for introductory courses at universities and as an entrance examination book for young people who apply to become students of musicology. Thus, the submissions were to be written so that also readers with no previous knowledge of the subject would be able to get a general idea of some of the main questions in this field of research. I am not sure if I personally succeeded in this mission, but I am glad that I wrote the chapter, as it forced me to rethink many of the premises that have guided my thinking which I have not previously thought about in a systematic way.

Introduction

Social constructionism is a theoretical approach which examines how social and cultural phenomena, and ideas concerning them, are constructed socially. It is based on the idea that our ways of understanding and classifying a phenomenon not only neutrally reflect an inherent, internal essence of the phenomenon. Instead it argues that many of the things we take for granted are in fact based on knowledge, patterns of thought and concepts, which have developed as a result of social interaction and linguistic communication. Thus, a key feature of constructionism is the idea of knowledge as something socially created.

A constructionist point of departure can occur in many ways in research. It can be a general theoretical idea, which is used when examining some formerly neglected social or conceptual aspect of a multifaceted phenomenon, or it can be a politically motivated method, used to reveal some criticized thought patterns that form peoples' ideas of the world. In this sense it is not an unequivocal method or school of thought, but a perspective on a studied phenomenon or on research in general.

During the last few decades constructionism has become a key scholarly trend in social sciences and cultural studies. It is therefore natural that it has also influenced ethnomusicology and the cultural study of music both directly and indirectly. It has for example been applied when examining the relationship between music and society, the cultural meanings of music, or when scholars have wanted to reveal power structures related to music.

The aim of this article is not to analyse social constructionism in all its various forms, nor to offer a detailed methodological manual for its implementation in a research project. My goal is rather to offer an introduction to some of its fundamental notions and discuss the connections between them and ethnomusicological thinking, as well as to provide examples on how this approach can be applied by using discourse analysis of genre as a case study. When discussing social constructionism it is also worth noting that we are dealing with theories that have also met growing criticism in recent decades. This in turn has forced scholars who choose a constructionist approach to substantiate their positions and clarify the limitations of their thinking, which is also worth discussing in this context.

General features of constructionism

The questions raised by constructionism are not new, but rather belong to a long continuum in the philosophy of science, in which the bounda-

ries of our social and linguistic conceptions are discussed. In their current forms, these questions have been discussed widely in humanities since the 1960s. A significant milestone is the book *The Social Construction of Reality*, by sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), which resulted in the spread of the concept social construction. The book forms a theory of how our everyday knowledge and understanding of things is constructed in social interaction. According to Berger and Luckmann our actions, ideas and categorizations become generally accepted through repetition and when these perceptions become institutionalized, individuals adopt them and take them for granted. According to this view, people's conceptions of reality are determined by a socially institutionalized system of meanings, which cannot be seen merely as some kind of a reflection of natural world.

It is hard to define a single feature, which could be said to identify or summarize all various research traditions that apply constructionist ideas. In fact, even the concept constructionism and the related concept constructivism are defined in slightly different ways in for example, many textbooks (compare e.g. Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2006; Wenneberg 2001; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000; Gergen 1999). According to social psychologist Vivien Burr (1995, 2–5) we might, however, loosely group as social constructionist any approach which has as its foundation one or more of the following four key assumptions. The first crucial starting point is a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge. Social constructionism invites us to challenge a conventional understanding of the world and questions the idea that common beliefs are based on objective, unbiased observation. Another important stance is to view our ideas of the world as historically and culturally specific products. A person's understanding of the world depends on her or his background, therefore all notions are relative in the sense that they are dependent upon the particular social and economic context of their time. A third premise is that knowledge is seen to be sustained by social processes. Our versions of knowledge become fabricated through daily interactions between people in the course of social life rather than through objective perceptions. As a final typical feature of constructionism, Burr mentions the idea that knowledge and social action go together; our ways of understanding the world also influence our ways of operating. Descriptions or constructions of the world sustain some patterns of action and exclude others, which inevitably brings to the forefront questions of power relationships. This also includes research and therefore researchers who adopt constructionist ideas should also identify their own premises and be aware of their consequences.

The basic ideas of constructionism can be clarified by looking at the issue of gender. The division of human beings into men and women can be considered a natural or self-evident biological fact. However, we can

ask ourselves: is this biological division always relevant? Is it only inheritable gender traits that determine human actions? Alternatively, if for example physical features are important, one could for example assume that the division of human beings into tall and short persons would be more relevant in many situations. In fact, today it is common to make a difference between biological sex and cultural or social *gender*. The first concept refers to a genetic and physical category whereas the latter refers to the ways in which the difference between the sexes is constructed socially.

Until a couple of hundreds of years ago European scholars held as kind of a biological truth the idea that the intellectual capacity of women was not similar to that of men. Today this view is commonly considered to be a construction of that time. However, gender scholars stress that even today in our daily life, differences between the sexes are still constructed and reconstructed be it in the case of children's toys or books, issues surrounding physical appearance or professions. To be a man or a woman means that we relate ourselves to these general expectations. These culturally and socially defined constructs are also seen to include dimensions of power: they can partially explain that men still form the majority of all people in leading positions in society and that women are overrepresented in for example service and care work.

As a theory of knowledge, social constructionism can be seen as a reaction to the heritage of the Enlightenment and the positivist thinking of natural sciences, where immediate observations of the objects under study form a starting point of research and where social and personal factors are minimized. Focusing on specifically the social construction of knowledge is a common trait in several intellectual schools of thought of the second half of the 20th century. For example various so-called *poststructuralist* traditions have been interested in how the cultural meanings of reality are formed through social categorizations. Seen from this perspective, all things are understood differently depending on the context and all interpretations, and even truths are related to numerous various variables and ultimately at least to some extent subjective. As a result of this, many researchers aim at *deconstructing* the phenomenon they study. This means that the concepts, meanings and structures of thinking associated with them are studied by re-evaluating the presuppositions and systems of thoughts they build on. At times, poststructuralism and deconstructionism, as well as social constructionism are categorized as *postmodern* theories in which well-established, all-encompassing world views and power relations are critically examined. Although researchers belonging to these schools of thought do not necessarily feel an intellectual kinship with each other, many of them have an idea of the constructed nature of cultural and social reality in common.

Ethnomusicology and constructionism

On one hand, the concept construction has not that often become the explicit subject of debates concerning the ethnomusicological theory of science. On the other hand, there are several points in common between ethnomusicology and constructionist premises and practices. After World War II the focus of ethnomusicology moved gradually from universalist theories towards models that concentrated on the distinguishing features of local music cultures. In this sense, ethnomusicology can be said to have incorporated some of the basic ideas of constructionism. Ethnomusicologists critically examine how different musical phenomena and the meanings associated with them are constructed in their cultural context. This is usually done by problematizing or rejecting ethnocentric theories, which observe the world from Western premises and instead studying music cultures by following a cultural relativist approach.

In this respect, especially the American ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam (1964) became influential. Merriam criticized a simplified structural analysis of music and emphasized the larger cultural context of music. According to him, music should be studied on three analytical levels: conceptualization about music, behavior in relation to music and analysis of music's sounds. It is worth noting that in Merriam's theory, the ideas and concepts concerning music are seen to form a basis for music making and reciprocally for example the feedback from listeners are seen to influence musicians' views and ways of understanding music related things. In other words, a culture can structure musical phenomena through concepts which also influences directly the creation of music. Even the concept "music" means different things in different cultures. For example in many African Bantu languages the concept "music" was introduced only as a European loan word during the colonial period. What is perceived of as music can also vary largely from one culture and historical period to another.

Today ethnomusicologists often emphasize that every music culture has its own *ethnotheory*, in other words some kind of a general principle or set of rules that directs its musical activities. In Western conservatory culture, this theory has traditionally been expressed in written form and is learnt verbally with the help of written sheet music. In many other cultures, the musical traditions and its concepts and norms occur only in orally transmitted form, for example as terms that exist only within this particular culture. These so-called *emic* terms interest researchers because they shed light on how the people who are studied classify and understand music. The concepts "riff" and "fill", which are often used by rock musicians, are examples of a culture's inside terms which structure its musical thinking. In order to form a picture of how the members of this culture comprehend, create and

structure music, a researcher must understand these concepts. Both terms are self-evident for musicians who function in the rock culture. However, they do not have any unequivocal equivalent in other areas of music, where music is constructed differently, both in terms of concepts and musical structure. When presenting her or his research findings to a larger audience, a researcher may be forced to use *etic* terms, for example theme, scale or meter, which are known to a wider scholarly readership. However, in such situations a scholar must be aware of how the "translation" of *emic* terms into *etic* terms can affect a reader's impression of the study object.

As the above mentioned examples show, ethnomusicologists have also contemplated how the conceptions of reality that appear in different cultures have been constructed through social interaction and conceptualizations. At the turn of the 21st century, the theoretical premises of ethnomusicology were extended along with schools of thought that were common in cultural studies. Noteworthy are the new musicological trends, aimed at revealing the constructionist features of the traditional analysis of the structure of music. From this perspective, the analysis does not necessarily only reveal musical structures, but it can also be seen to construct the structures (Horner 1999, 21). In its most far-reaching forms, music research is explained to be a construct and something that should be reassessed (e.g. Williams 2001).

The emphasis on constructs can be seen as a result of the relativist idea, which is fundamental to critical cultural studies and ethnomusicology. Earlier research has been criticized for being *essentialist*, in other words, the idea that every entity – be it a physical object, a group of people, or a concept – has an inherent essence that once and for all makes it what it is. Today, scholars more often emphasize the processual nature of cultural phenomena and even of the whole concept of culture. A typical feature of cultural phenomena is that they are constructed continuously and that they are ascribed with new meanings in relation to other phenomena.

It is, for example, no longer common to view tradition as a stable, unchanged manifestation of some kind of a national character. Instead, tradition is usually understood to be a constantly redefined socially constructed process. During the last few decades ethnomusicologists have critically re-evaluated how some forms of music previously were defined as "authentic" and as age-old folk traditions, although the music's status would have been a result of the activities of the collectors, researchers and institutions (e.g. Harker 1985; Kurkela 1989; Boyes 1994; Brocken 2003).

Similarly also locality has been made more complex in recent research. Today scholars are no longer only interested in some physically defined place. Instead, they emphasize how people use music to construct social spaces, which in some cases can be marked by physical

borders, whereas in other cases they can be stretched across such boundaries (e.g. Stokes 1994a). The way people see themselves as individuals and part of a tradition, locality or grouping is a process in which music plays a part. Music not only represents, expresses or reflects an existing identity; it can also participate in the construction of such an identity (for discussions on this subject see e.g. Frith 1996; Rice 2007; Rice 2010). This applies both to ethnic (e.g. Stokes 1994b; Suutari 2000; Brusila 2008), national (Bohlman 2004) and gender (e.g. Moisala and Diamond 2000) identities.

Discourse analysis

Social constructs are often studied by using discourse analysis, which actually is not an unequivocal, easily defined method, but rather a group of various research practices. Discourse analysis can be used to investigate how social reality is produced conceptually and through different practices (e.g. Jokinen et al. 1999, 21; Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka 2006). A starting point is to study both language and other actions that communicate meaning and see what social consequences these factors can have in society. The analyzed material can consist of interviews and newspaper articles or audio-visual material. Research can also focus on institutionalized structures and actions that for their part create and manifest the discourse in some form. By studying such discourses it is possible to shed light on the linguistic aspects and practices that embody peoples' understanding of reality. Exactly how a scholar defines the discourse and what she or he is mainly interested in varies largely depending on the chosen research question and tradition.

In linguistics, discourse usually refers specifically to verbal interaction, which is analysed by studying spoken or written texts. For example in social psychology, human conversations are analysed in order to examine how language can be an exercise of power or a tool for self-definition and depiction (e.g. Potter and Whetherell 1987). In cultural studies the concept text is usually understood in a broader sense; it can refer to anything that can convey meaning, for example music, audio-visual material, clothing or artefacts.

In cultural and media studies a starting point is often so-called "critical discourse analysis". In this research direction the aim is to reveal how only some ways to socially produce knowledge reach a central position in the society, even if there would be numerous other possibilities available (e.g. Heinonen 2005; Fairclough 1995). This perspective stems in many ways from the French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1980; 1975; 1994 [1969]; 1979 [1976]) analyses of power, where the concept of discourse is used to identify the historical and

social limits of our thinking. For Foucault discourses are both perceptions of things and such practices through which our ideas of things are formed. These features of discourse are always linked to power. Our understanding of sexuality, mental illness, crime and punishment, right and wrong knowledge and so on has changed over time and these changes have, according to this view, always been intertwined with social structures, institutional practices and ultimately questions related to power.

World music as a case study

The practical opportunities which a social constructionist approach and discourse analysis offer can be explained by discussing *world music* as a case study (the following discussion is based on my own research, see Brusila 2003). The concept of world music is in many ways difficult to define. The term has a long history, but its current use as a marketing category of certain types of music spread to general use in Western Europe in the late 1980s.

In discussions and writings, world music is often understood to be a style, form of music, or genre. However, it is problematic to state any stylistic feature that would define a music as world music. In different contexts the concept world music can include Cuban son, Tuvan throat singing or Zimbabwean mbira. By merely analysing the structural features of these musical genres it is hard to find any single factor that they all have in common. Sometimes world music is defined as fusion music. However, it is obvious that only certain musical fusions are conceptualized as world music; for example fusion jazz or blues rock is normally not counted as a part of this group.

World music can also be understood as a marketing category of the music industry and there is good reason for choosing this perspective on the subject. As a marketing category world music was launched by a mutual decision made by a group of small record companies, journalists and record shops during a series of meetings in a pub in London in 1987. Those involved sensed a need for such a category because there were new artists of various kinds, such as African pop bands, Australian aboriginal musicians and Bulgarian female choirs, whose records gained increasing interest, but who could not be classified in any of the existing marketing categories. By creating the category world music, the industry and media tried to bring together certain musical styles and consumers. Despite the clear start, the category soon proved to include a colourful range of practices with diverse local variations. For example in Finland, flamenco can be classified as world music but Finnish folk music rarely is, while in Spain the situation is reversed. On the other

hand, in both Spain and Finland African music can be marketed as world music.

From this perspective it seems meaningful for a researcher to not even try to define, once and for all, what world music is, but to study how others have defined it through their verbal statements and practices and through institutionalization. For the sake of argument, or as a mind game, a good starting point can be to imagine that there is no such thing as world music, and thereafter ask how the idea of its existence has come to being. Following this idea, we can conclude that the statements of fans, journalists and the music industry not only reflect some absolute "object of world music" and instead they all principally participate in creating world music as a conceptualization. The term world music is used in connection to certain magazines, writings, radio programs, record companies and festivals. Thus, these all participate together in constructing the idea of a world music category. What is particularly interesting is that this category appears to be relatively strong, although only rarely would any of the musicians whose music is classified as such call their music world music. In fact, most musicians have not even heard about the whole concept until they enter Western music media and become associated with it.

Although world music can appear to be rather complex and vague when approached from a music analytical or sociological perspective, it has still remained in everyday use, thereby proving it to be relevant and useful for those involved. In fact, a typical feature of discourses is that they are often ambiguous, inconsistent and self-contradictory. On closer examination one sees that below the surface level hides deeper regular structures that are connected to people's previous perceptions and expectations.

The editor in chief of the English magazine *Folk Roots* Ian Anderson (1997) has summarized world music in the sentence "local music, not from here", which crystallizes many of the key principles of this classification. The category is a specifically Western phenomenon, which necessarily does not have any meaning in other cultures, although it touches upon the musics of other cultures. The music which is called world music is defined in the minds of Western people as some kind of "music of the others". In that sense, world music can be said to reconstruct an old, common division between "us and them", where "we" define ourselves through positioning ourselves in relation to "an other", which thereby becomes a contrast or opposite for us. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1992) has called this discourse, which is crucial for Western self-identification, as the concept "The West and the Rest". It is worth noting that this dichotomy is cultural, not geographical. The West refers in this context to a construction, which is based on a certain lifestyle and world view, level of modernization and technological development. For this reason, the music of North American indigenous peoples or

European traditional music can be considered world music, although the popular or art music of these regions would not be categorized as such. A crucial factor is whether the music in the West is seen to signify "otherness", in other words to be a representation of a local and traditional non-Western culture.

A consequence of this idea of otherness is that the artists, whose music in the West is called world music, face many expectations. The musicians are not necessarily familiar with the category, because it usually does not exist outside the West, but when creating an international career they meet the anticipations of their new audiences. The music is supposed to meet these expectations of "authenticity" at the same time it needs to be easily accessible in the ears of the new listeners. The choice of instruments, musical structures, stage behaviour or clothing can mean different things for the musicians and their new audiences. What is often relevant is not so much how music traditionally has been created in the local culture of the musician, but the pre-conceived notions of locality and tradition that their Western audience has. In this sense, the discourse of world music is always associated with power configurations. However, musicians are not necessarily passive bystanders; they negotiate for themselves suitable artistic and career solutions. It can be said that the musicians often have their own musical discourse, which, one way or another, depending on the artist and the music, is affected by the world music discourse. Similarly, the world music discourse also changes over time.

Critique against constructionism

While the fundamental idea of constructionism has established itself in social sciences and cultural studies, some of its basic features have also been criticized. Today, constructionism in its various forms also occurs in contexts where its use is not necessarily always theoretically consistent or well-reasoned. The diverse ranges of research traditions can be grouped in four categories, which share many fundamental ideas yet have differing aims and consequences (my categorization loosely follows Wenneberg 2001, 13-15).

The first category is formed by critical perspectives, which simply want to re-evaluate generally accepted truths. The idea of questioning common knowledge is not ground-breaking as such, but rather a natural goal of all critical scholarship. However, as constructionism has spread, several researchers have also asked to what extent does a widening of our perspectives really require this kind of concept. According to philosopher Ian Hacking (1999, 49) we can ask what is really constructed socially, how this actually happens and whether the word construction in fact has become a dead metaphor in its current form of use. If more

or less everything is explained to be a construct, the concept easily loses its meaning or it leads to excesses, although the thought process behind the concept would include useful ideas.

In the second category, research focuses on social institutions. In this framework it is possible to talk about constructionism as a social theory. It is in fact as a sociological and cultural theory that constructionism has proved to be particularly vital. Especially historical and cultural relativist ideas have become increasingly popular when researchers have for example tried to detach themselves from the pre-conceived thought patterns of their own cultural background, so that they would be able to study how various notions are constructed in different contexts. In these studies, which focus on social institutions, relativism can be classified as a method that the researcher applies in order to analyse an object neutrally on its own premises. The method does not necessarily mean that the researcher positions herself or himself for or against something social, aesthetic or moral issues. Instead she or he simply tries to investigate how such a phenomenon has been formed in a certain way and how and why it is perceived as it is.

When developed further, constructionism focuses on knowledge as a social institution. In this respect it is possible to speak about a third type of constructionism, where it can be primarily seen as a theory of knowledge, or epistemology. In such more radical versions, constructionism can question the existence of any absolute truths. Although this approach can be motivated as a part of a researchers attempt to question general conceptions, it can lead to problems from the perspective of the philosophy of science if its limitations and consequences are not explicated. If knowledge is always seen as being constructed in relation to some framework, such as language or culture, it is possible to ask to what extent a researcher can make any final claims herself or himself. Critics of poststructuralism emphasize that in worse case this approach can result in a situation where no-one would be able to prove any theory or research result to be right or wrong. In an epistemological sense it is also problematic if a researcher chooses an extreme relativist perspective, as the logical consequence of this would be that the researcher's own claim about the rationality of relativism would also become questioned. It is also possible to ask to what extent it is possible for a researcher to break away from the conceptions that have been created by the discourse under study, if the discourse really is as all-encompassing as the most radical constructionists claim.

Taken to its extreme, a vaguely structured epistemological starting point can lead to claims that everything, even physical objects and the nature, and ultimately the entirety of reality, is a social construct. This last category of constructionism is called constructionist ontology, in other words a philosophical theory about the fundamental nature of being. Especially scholars who are more oriented towards natural

sciences warn that this leads to excesses, where research denies the existence of a physical reality. Critically oriented social and cultural theorists can also ask if a constructionist approach in its most radical form leads to ignoring material and economic factors; do we simply close our eyes to the concrete, negative and physical consequences of misery and oppression if we only focus on conceptual aspects? We can of course also ask if the ultimate questions concerning the fundamental nature of being really belong to the sphere of music or cultural research, or should they be left for the philosophical research traditions to discuss. What is maybe more important than trying to find answers to ontological questions is being aware of the potentials and limitations of one's methodological and theoretical choices.

Concluding thoughts

Despite the criticism presented against constructionism, its fundamental ideas and practical implementations are well-established in today's social and cultural sciences and will most likely continue to have an impact in the future. Following theoretician of science Søren Barlebo Wenneberg (2001, 172–174), we can say that the ideas which are called constructionism today have long roots and that they will most likely also occur in future research, although perhaps not under the name construct or discourse. Reflections on the social framework of human conceptions and actions have interested scholars for a long time and the ambition to critically develop this approach is most likely an important objective for humanities also in the future.

Ethnomusicology can also gain from the new perspectives offered by constructionism, as they expand our understanding of the relationships between music and concepts, and between music making and culture in general. This, however, requires that like all theories and methods, we should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of constructionism. It is after all not a general method that encompasses all aspects of study, but, at best, a method that matches the research question posed and that can, through self-critical application, help in finding new angles to the phenomenon under study.

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