



# Instrumental use of socially constructed knowledge?

## Preparing the ground for research on vocational identity formation

Philosophy of Science Essay, Spring 2013

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### Introduction

The intention of this essay is to prepare the ground for research through reflections on meta-theoretical assumptions that my research is based on and which underlie methodological decisions. I make use of the opposing perspectives of social constructionism and anti-social constructionism in order to elucidate and discuss epistemological issues, dilemmas and qualms related to my PhD-project.<sup>1</sup> First, I discuss the relation between the knower (the researcher) and the known (the research object). Then, I discuss the relation between the knowledge product and the wider society in which it is embedded, understood as consumers and users of this research.

The overarching topic of my PhD-project is vocational identity formation among students in upper secondary Vocational Education and Training in Norway. I am concerned with understanding how students in vocational educational tracks come to develop a sense of belonging to their chosen vocation and occupation. Essential is then the interplay between agency and structure in which vocational identity formation as a meaning-making process is believed to take place. In this philosophy of science essay, two main questions are to be discussed:

1. Can the scientific knowledge say something true about how students' vocational identities really are shaped and developed – or is knowledge of this rather a result of a social process, on the part of me as a researcher, of making sense of the world?
2. Which meta-theoretical assumptions underlie consume and use of commissioned research in a context of application?

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<sup>1</sup> These two opposing paradigms or perspectives have been labelled under different names, respectively i.e. social constructivism/interpretivism and realism/positivism. Even though most social researchers today distance themselves from a (strong) positivist perspective – and social constructionism has met tough critique, I will view them as two extremes on a continuum in order to reflect upon my own meta-theoretical assumptions.

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In the subsequent part, I will in short delineate the research object in more detail before I go on to discuss the two above questions.

## Setting the scene and constructing the research object

The discipline of psychology has for decades been concerned with identity development. Psychological approaches foremost emphasise personality-centred aspects, often in terms of stage-based development, whereas the sociological tradition has been more concerned with role-theory and social and political processes of identity formation. Vocational or occupational identity development is assumed to be one core aspect of adolescent identity development (Erikson 1968), and denotes the formation of a sense of belonging to ones' vocation/occupation, where vocational identity provides a framework for motivation and self-direction. Thereby, vocational identity formation has also lately become a central topic in organisational and managerial sciences. Vocational identity formation is believed to be inextricably linked to learning. Aspects suggested to foster both vocational identity formation and learning skills and knowledge are coinciding (Virtanen et al 2008). Vocational identity formation entails learning professional competences and building meaningful relations between knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Schaap et al 2011).

Vocational identity formation is then perceived as a complex and on-going process – simultaneously taking place within the students' minds, the multiple social contexts, institutions and discourses in which they are embedded and the people they interact with. Identity formation then takes place in multiple interwoven levels – in-between structure and agency. Studies on this topic have been accused of emphasised the role of one over the other, i.e. overemphasising social background, class and gender, giving little space for agency – or on the other hand overemphasising agency i.e. where individuals are perceived as strategic and goal-oriented (Brockmann 2012).

The subjects of my study are 17-year old students enrolled in upper secondary Vocational Education and Training in Norway. They find themselves within different learning arenas with different learning cultures such as the classroom, the workshop and authentic learning in companies. Vocational identity formation is taking place in this interplay between the students' subjective experiences and 'processing' of these experiences for development of self-perception and identity. This 'processing' in interwoven in the wider learning- and socialisation processes they undergo.

I conduct longitudinal in-depth interviews with the very same students at four points of time over a three-year period. Through this design, I aim to grasp how the students reflect upon their choice of vocational education, what will come and what has been – and how their approaches to work and further education change over time. My 'intake' to the various aspects, contexts, institutions and social structures in which the students are embedded, is then through the eyes of the students.

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In the following I will discuss Question 1 in light of the opposing perspectives of social constructionism and anti-social constructionism. The focus of attention will be on what Bourdieu termed the *objectifying relation* in knowledge claims between the researcher (the knower) and the research object (the known) – making this relation itself the object of analysis. Bourdieu also distinguished between the *social relation* and the *epistemic relation* in knowledge claims. The former refers to the relation between the researcher and the knowledge claim. Second, there is the epistemic relation refers to the relation between the knowledge claim and the research object. Maton (2003) argues that the social and epistemic relation has dominated our understandings of knowledge; the social relation has been the domain for various (narcissistic) reflexive practices, and the epistemic relation has foremost been the domain of philosophical approaches to knowledge.

**Q1:**

*Can my research say something true about how students' vocational identity formation really is shaped and developed – or is knowledge of this rather a result of a social process, on the part of me as a researcher, of making sense of the world?*

This question to be discussed revolves around epistemological issues – what can we have knowledge of and what is the 'status' of this knowledge? Herein, does the scientific knowledge I produce depict the true nature of vocational identity formation as it really is – or is it socially constructed by me as a researcher? Central to this discussion is the relationship between the knower (me as a researcher) and the known (my research object). First seen from an anti-social constructionist/realist/positivist perspective, the knower is independent of the known, and there is one objective, stable and single reality which exists independently of human perception. First, there is a vast plethora of perspectives within these umbrella-labels, but foremost, it is rooted in a positivist world-view which is usually linked to the natural sciences – striving to uncover law-like mechanisms in search for one objective truth. Herein, the aim for me as a researcher is to discover and extract, in an objectivist manner the true nature of reality and how it really works (Guba 1990). Within such a perspective, the knowledge I produce on vocational identity development can say something objectively true about the nature of the students' identity formation and meaning-making processes. I might even be concerned with uncovering 'laws' or general principles of vocational identity formation which are applicable regardless of setting. Then, this vocational identity formation process is taking place without my apprehension of it.

On the other end of the continuum, there are perspectives gathered under the umbrella-term of social constructionism<sup>2</sup> – more often united in what they oppose, than what unites them (Lee 2012). However, crucial, proponents of such a social constructionist perspective perceive the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Hagen & Gudmundsen (2011) distinguish between social constructivism and epistemological constructivism, where only the latter can establish a foundation for scientific reflection, whereas social constructivism does not. True knowledge within epistemological constructivism does not evolve around a 'correct' image of reality, but rather making the observer (knower/researcher) capable of action. This leads to a pragmatic notion of truth, and where knowledge is a construction.

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between the researcher and the research object as inseparable or interdependent – both embedded in the same social world – co-creating meaning and understandings. The scientific knowledge will always be shaped by the interaction of the researcher and those/what being researched. Proponents for this perspective recognise that the knowledge they build reflects their particular goals, culture, experience and history (Weber 2004). In anti-social constructionist terms; the researcher himself or herself become 'measurement instruments' in interpreting (measuring) the phenomena they observe. Interpretive researchers understand that their research actions affect the research object they are studying, and that the research objects in turn can affect them (Weber 2004). Here, the assumption is that there is no objective true reality awaiting to be discovered by me as a researcher. Rather, meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world (Crotty 1998).

Within a social constructionist perspective, it is difficult to talk about a pre-scientific understanding of my research object, vocational identity formation, on the one hand and the scientific knowledge product on the other. Moreover, the knowledge on vocational identity development is socially constructed – by me as a researcher and the wider sociological discipline that I am a part of. Crotty (1998) calls these two opposing epistemologies respectively *objective* and *constructionist* epistemologies. He also distinguishes between a third epistemological stance called *subjectivism*, where meaning is not created in interplay between subject (researcher) and object, but is imposed on the object by the subject (ibid: 8-9). Regarding this last stance, in my research, I would 'force' 'my' meaning and interpretations of vocational identity formation on to the students – perhaps through pre-defined and static theoretical constructs and categories which is 'imposed' onto the students' vocational formation process.

Taking on a social constructionist perspective on my research, this calls for reflexivity upon one's own research endeavours, one's 'researcher habitus', the concepts and categories deployed and reflections upon the wider context, sociological discipline and society that the research is a part of and will be disseminated to.<sup>3</sup> According to Maton (2003) Bourdieu stresses the need for a disciplinary and collective reflexivity, rather than what he calls a narcissistic reflexivity, where the researcher tries to justify his or her positions by making the researcher's social background and personal characteristics explicit. One bias is linked to the position that the researcher occupies within the academic field, and beyond in the field of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). In the next section I will put focus on the sociological concepts as 'tools' I choose to make sense of my empirical material and which guides my

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<sup>3</sup> Maton (2003) critically distinguishes between three kinds of reflexivity: i) Sociological reflexivity which often is more concerned with the process of doing research (good research practices) rather than bases for knowledge claims.  
ii) Individual Reflexivity as an individual effort to overcome one's own biases, often with a naive ambition to transcend the effect on knowledge of one's social and cultural positioning.  
iii) Narcissistic Reflexivity which focuses on the individual researcher biographical traits, eventually becoming the focus of study risking to become too self-indulgent (Justesen & Mik-Meyer 2012).

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research focus and endeavour. The scientific concepts deployed make out perspectives and decide what 'catches my eye' (Hagen & Gudmundsen 2011).

### Hermeneutic conceptual reflexivity

In my attempts to make sense of the agents which are my subjects and for whom these meanings are (Taylor 1971: 4), I embark on an interpretive endeavour – interpreting “the meanings and actions of actors according to their own frame of reference” (Williams 2000: 210). My approach is hermeneutic dependent on the interpretation of meaningful human behaviour and social practices (Little 1990: 68). Then, in my research on vocational identity formation among students in vocational education, I strive to make meaning of my subjects' (students) meaning-making actions.

My perspective on 'agentic' action is then that I perceive the students as intentional, active, meaning-making and capable of purposive action. In Gambetta's (1978) words: Jumping rather than being pushed by causal factors of which they are unaware. At the same time the students find themselves within different learning- and social contexts and within larger vocational traditions with different 'qualities' of the vocational 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991) for the students to be socialised into – all which contributes to – or hinder/weaken their formation of vocational identity. So, where to place the scientific emphasis and which 'sensitising concepts'<sup>4</sup> (Blumer 1969) to deploy; on the students' subjective experiences and their interpretation of their every-day life in order to understand the development of their own self-perception and identity – or is it rather the broader learning- and socialisation processes that they undergo that is the focus of my analysis? Furthermore, the students are finding themselves in other arenas and leisure activities with implications for identity work within youth cultures. Within my research field, common concepts developed trying to grasp this complex interplay between individuals and their social environments are i.e. 'learning careers' or 'learner identities' which place emphasis on the micro-aspects – whereas concepts such as 'learning culture', 'opportunity structures' or 'vocational socialisation processes' in addition to focus on gender and social background place stronger emphasis on the structural factors of vocational identity formation. In-between concepts such as 'structured individualism' and 'bounded agency' try to capture the ways in which the students' actions are circumscribed by structural, institutional and cultural factors – which can facilitate or pose barriers on action and vocational identity formation (Brockmann 2012).

Within a social constructionist perspective, the scientific knowledge is shaped by the interaction of inquirer and inquired into (Guba 1990). When I perceive the scientific knowledge I produce as co-constructed between my subjects' interpretation of their meaningful practices and the concepts I use to make sense of these interpretations, should I strive to use concepts which are close to the concepts the students themselves use of their own action and practices? When making sense of the complex

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<sup>4</sup> (...) whereas definitive concepts “provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1969: 148).

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social world, I find my research on a higher abstract- and generalisation level, (socially) constructing categories, ideal-types and concepts. As far as I am not taking on a 'naturalist' or 'phenomenalist' perspective, I engage in processes of theoretical abstraction and data reduction in order to make the complexity comprehensible. Hammersley (2008) states that qualitative researchers have had qualms or hesitated to employ abstractions, simplifications and reductions, grounded in nervousness about using theoretical terms that differ from the ones used by the interviewees. Hagen & Gudmundsen (2011) argue that a scientific interpretation must go beyond the actors' own concepts and understandings.

Problematic herein is the idea that I as a researcher 'know best' or 'better than' the students – that there exists some 'truth' behind their backs that they are not aware of. This issue has both ethical and methodological concerns. First, such categorising is by Hacking (1995) termed 'looping effect of human kind'. The term refers to when people become aware of the classification used to describe them. Then, they can choose to adapt to, or escape these classifications that are applied to them which might open up new ways to think of themselves and new ways to behave (Hacking 1999). In the thematic research field I operate within, this is of key importance. Students opting for a vocational education, instead of the general academic track, have been suffering from disparity of esteem where vocational skills are assigned lower status in a hierarchy of knowledge and value when compared to academic tracks (Stevenson 2005). From a policy-perspective, the vocational education and training is often mentioned together with terms connoting problems; unmotivated students dropping out, not 'suited' for academic educational tracks. It is therefore crucial to avoid simplistic assumptions which are co-constructing a negative image of students in vocational education. Second, should I be concerned with preserving or perhaps even amplify the 'voices' of my interviewees – or should I reject speaking on their behalf? Third, if I am concerned with interpreting the students' actions and meaning-making processes on the basis of their subjective frame of reference and their 'lived world', this comes with a somewhat ontological difficulty. Then, I as a researcher must be able to find a way of seeing 'through' the world as it appears to my students, and each student has an individual and unique experience of the social world, in order to grasp how they experience it. This might imply some kind of essentialism when I attempt to go beyond how things appear to me to in order to capture the students' 'reality'. Then, I assume that there a) exist such a different reality and b) that I can access this through some kind of method (Hammersley 2008).

Furthermore, in order to avoid what Crotty (1998) called a subjectivist epistemology, where I as a researcher 'force' my own meaning of the students' practices onto these practices, I need to make the 'right' interpretations of my subjects. But how and when do I know, whether I have made a correct interpretation? Furthermore, assuming that there is *one* right interpretation, gives a somewhat anti-social constructionist 'feeling'. According to Taylor (1971) "a successful interpretation is one which makes clear the meaning originally present in a confused, fragmentary, cloudy form" (ibid: 5). In other

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words, an activity clearing up what is puzzled, contradictory or unclear through expressing meaning in a new way (ibid). However, neither taking stand with a 'rationalist' Hegelian perspective aspiring for an understanding of such clarity with inner necessity entailing the certainty of the undeniable – nor an 'empiricist' stand striving for building knowledge based on information which do not carry with it elements of interpretation (ibid) – I face the issue of polyphony, understood as 'many voices'. This term is often used as a quality criteria within research conducted within a social constructionist perspective – holding that the research should make room, and even strive for many voices to be heard – above all voices that are seen as marginalised or suppressed (Justesen & Mik-Meyer 2012). However, in this context, I refer to polyphony as all the individual voices making out my subjects, my interviewees, each and every one with their unique experiences and interpretations of these. In order to make meaning of all these different interpretations and actions, I try to reduce complexity and make generalisation claims through construction of typologies. Through typology-construction, taken together with the theoretical concepts used and the interpretations made – one might say that I as a researcher is socially constructing the research object – rather than extracting knowledge on vocational identity formation from a reality separate from me and my research object. This addresses the social conditions and contexts social research is conducted within, which have implications for the topic, research questions, concepts, research logics and methods the researcher chooses and how they are used. If the social conditions were different, the 'truth' would also be different, because scientific perspectives are conventions (Hagen & Gudmundsen 2011).

My 'intake' to study these vocational identity processes are through the eyes of the students, through qualitative interviews. From a social constructionist perspective, I then get access to the ways the students speak of their educational endeavour on their way towards a vocation – rather than access to some objective truth about vocational identity formation, seen from an anti-social constructionist perspective. How do they come to develop a sense of belonging to their chosen vocation? What triggers and what weakens such a development? These are relevant questions to pose when trying to make sense of vocational identity formation processes. However, perhaps the students are not aware that it is a vocational identity they are developing – and this is rather my social construction as a researcher, deploying a specific conceptual framework that I interpret their actions and practices within?

So far, I have reflected upon what a social constructionist view on scientific knowledge production brings with it. I have tried to reflect upon and discuss different aspects of sensitivity to the perspectives, concepts, typologies and interpretations I as a researcher make – and herein construct the research object. The intention has been to make lay out some of the assumptions underlying my research and knowledge production and making some of the dilemmas, qualm and difficulties explicit. In the next section, I will view knowledge production from a different perspective. My PhD-project is a part of a large commissioned research project which involves a scientific knowledge consumer, The

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Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training. In the following, I intend to discuss some of the assumptions underlying scientific knowledge production for a 'demand-side' which also undertakes interpretative work of my knowledge product.

**Q2:**

*Which meta-theoretical assumptions underlie consume and use of commissioned research in a context of application?*

In the previous parts I have emphasised a social constructionist perspective over an opposing anti-social constructionist perspective in how the scientific knowledge is socially constructed through the interpretations, concepts and typologies I use in order to make sense of these the students' interpretations of their action and practices. In the previous sections, I have portrayed the anti-social constructionist perspective as rather marginalised, compared to a social constructionist perspective. The scope of this section is rather on the relation between the scientific knowledge product and the wider society which this knowledge is embedded in and at a later stage, disseminated to – consume and use of scientific knowledge for policy-making. Gibbons (1994) argues that a new mode of knowledge production has emerged (Mode 2), driven by a "parallel expansion in the number of potential knowledge producers on the supply side and the expansion of the requirement of specialist knowledge on the demand side (...)" (ibid: 13). The main argument is that while knowledge production traditionally used to be located primarily in universities and structured by scientific disciplines (Mode 1), its locations, practices and principles are now (in Mode 2) much more heterogeneous (Hessels & Lente 2008). Relevant in this respect, is the issue of the new knowledge production mode as produced in the context of application. This means that this scientific knowledge is intended to be useful to someone, and that this aspect is explicit from the beginning. Moreover, herein quality control is guided by practical, policy- and society related concerns – in addition to the traditional 'mono-disciplinary' quality control within Mode 1 of knowledge production (Gibbons 1994). The knowledge I produce is also intended for consume and use, first by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training which commissioned the research project I am a part of, and then second, made publicly available for whoever is interested.

Although most social researchers today will distance themselves from a positivist paradigm, there seems to be remaining some positivist-like perceptions, holding that scientific knowledge can say something objectively true about the social world, and that this knowledge can directly or instrumentally inform policy-making. This perception seems to exert influence on the demand-side of research such as commissioners who order or initiate research projects in search for evidence-based research in order to achieve evidence-based practice. This is to a large degree found within research commissioned by organisations or Ministries/Directorates in the field of initiating, implementing and evaluating efforts within the public service sector. In this respect, the vocational education and training system in Norway, as for many other European countries, is subject to on-going reform and debate

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dominated by a policy-oriented concern for retention rates and 'drop out'. Herein, scientific knowledge is commissioned in order to investigate what seems to be the problem, and to furthermore make out a knowledge basis for policy-making. Moreover, there seems to be an increased emphasis (real or constructed) on this 'need' for evidence-based policy among decision-makers and research institutes. This view is rooted in a 'modernist' faith in progress informed by reason and science. Still, after critique from social constructionist camps, it seems that to ground policy-making in reliable knowledge of 'what works' retains its relevance and importance (Sanderson 2002).

The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training could have had several different motivations for 'ordering' the research project I am a part of. Furthermore, there can be several different ways of using this scientific knowledge – all which might not be one hundred per cent clear and articulated from the Directorate's part. Policy-makers can be selective in which research findings they choose to emphasise and use - findings which support policy-makers' view point and opinions may have a greater chance for being used (Hernes 2008). On the other hand, scientists may be too optimistic regarding to which extent one's research will be used to influence policy making. Also, research use can be non-existing. Overwhelming amounts of information and knowledge, sometimes contradictory, may lead to increased confusion and ambiguity, causing further complexity in policy-making processes (Kingdon 2003; Zahariadis 2003).

Motivations for commissioning research – and later use – within an anti-social constructionist paradigm are based on an assumption and 'faith' in research that it instrumentally can contribute to solve problems based on 'evidence'. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge use presupposes consensus in objectives and understanding of the problem which is to be solved. On the other hand, research use within Gibbons' (1994) knowledge production Mode 2, there are several 'knowledge suppliers' in addition to the universities, in example bureaucrats, political advisors, consultants, NGOs and journalists, and scientific knowledge is one of many source of knowledge. Herein, the policy-makers undertake interpretive work on two levels. First, the scientific knowledge product is interpreted in light of a vast array of other sources of knowledge. Second, whenever the scientific knowledge product involves 'fuzziness' or 'cloudy-ness' – which is difficult to avoid in social research – there is room for (various) interpretations to be made. The knowledge consumers and users, herein The Directorate, might embark on "an activity clearing up what is puzzled, contradictory or unclear through expressing meaning in a new way" (Taylor 1971: 5). The knowledge consumers and users' way of interpreting my knowledge product is somewhat open-ended and beyond my control – whether it is non-use, direct and instrumental use or legitimising use backing up policy-makers already made up decisions (Weiss et al 2005). Should this affect the way I conduct and present my research, if so, in which way? Gibbons (1994) argues that discovery preceded application in the traditional Mode 1 of knowledge production, but that these two aspects cannot be separated within Mode 2 produced in the context of application, because the nature of knowledge production is providing solutions to problems.

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When discussing whether the scientific knowledge I produce can say something true about vocational identity development, or if it is rather socially constructed by me as a researcher, I have been inclining towards the latter. What implies anti-social constructionist use (my research is perceived as saying something objectively true about vocational identity formation) of socially constructed knowledge? Relevant herein is quality criteria, transparency and to explicit discuss generalisation claims arising from my research – issues not included in this philosophy of science essay.

## Closing remarks

In this essay I have tried to lay out some assumptions that my research is based on, and to make explicit some implications arising from different meta-theoretical perspectives. I have somewhat schematically portrayed the two opposing paradigms of social constructionism and anti-social constructionism in order to illuminate different epistemological concerns and difficulties in my PhD-project on formation of vocational identities among students in vocational education. However, voices are coming to the fore arguing for bridge-building rather than continuously using rhetoric making these perspectives as ‘incommensurable’ paradigms (Weber 2004; Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000).

In this essay I have discussed two main questions. First: Can the scientific knowledge say something true about how students’ vocational identities really are shaped and developed – or is knowledge of this rather a result of a social process, on the part of me as a researcher, of making sense of the world? Herein, I have made explicit various epistemological difficulties and qualms concerning my research on vocational identity formation, foremost seen from a social constructionist perspective, conducting ‘reflexive exercises on the concepts I deploy in order to make sense of and interpret the students’ meaning-making processes. The second question discussed is: Which meta-theoretical assumptions underlie consume and use of commissioned research in a context of application? Here, I reflect upon different motivations for commissioning research and use of knowledge for policy-making, often based on an anti-social constructionist view on scientific knowledge. Even though The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training’s motivation to issue this research project and later intended use may best fit within an anti-social constructionist perspective, consume and use (or non-use) may be more complicated and cloudy, characterised by interpretative work. Where the meaning is not clear – there is room for interpretation, and it is through interpretation that meaning is established.

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