My Car is Red

An Introduction to Social Constructionism

'My car is red.' 'Big deal,' you may say, 'my car is blue, green or silver.' On the face of it, 'my car is red' simply sounds like a point for information, principally about the colour of the car. But is that really all it conveys? The relationship between language, culture and personal constructs is complex and profound. 'My car is red' conveys all kind of hidden personal and cultural messages.

'My' relates to 'I'. It says something about how I see myself in relation to others, my 'self' as separate and distinct from others. It's a culturally-constructed 'I'. 'My' says something about possession. I consider the car in some way 'belongs' to me. This notion of possession, of belonging, is a cultural construct. It's about the relationship between 'me' and 'other'.

It points beyond my personal beliefs, my personal constructs, to a wider cultural context and how the relationship between people and objects is perceived and organised in my cultural environment. It has political and economic implications, touches on issues of rights and legality, shared implicit values, rules and behaviours that the culture I live within accepts and endorses.

'Car'. At a literal level, I picture the car and I see an object that has a particular function, a mode of transport. As I explore my 'car' phenomenologically, I realise it evokes feelings of comfort, convenience, freedom and enjoyment for me. Culturally, it also represents something about relative wealth, social status and mobility. It's an object and a personal-cultural symbol.

If I had never seen or heard of 'car' before, or any such vehicle, and encountered one out of context, I could only guess what it is and what it is designed for. I would have no idea how to operate it, what its capabilities are or what significance it carries in my actual cultural environment. In other words, the whole idea of 'car' and what it means is culturally constructed.

'Is red'. This attributes properties to the car, as if 'redness' is inherent to the car, an actual colour of the car. It's about the car, it's not about me. It's a metaphysical view, how I believe things are in the world. To be more accurate, I could say, I experience the car as 'red', where 'red' is the colour I experience in the brain when I see the car in white light. (Is the car still red when it's dark?)

But 'red' is a social construct too. We use red to denote a colour, a label that distinguishes one colour, or a group of similar colours that fall broadly into 'red' within my culture, from other colours. I don't simply see and categorise colours at a personal level. I live within a culture that distinguishes between and organises colour categories in very specific ways.

I inherit the language I use, language that creates its own ways of framing and categorising. I also inherit my own cultural environment and history. My thinking and experience is profoundly influenced by these inheritances. At the same time, I have my own unique experience of the world. How I act in the world shapes language and culture too, it's a mutually-influencing process.

So, 'my car is red'. Simple to say yet profoundly revealing when unpacked. It says something about me, how I perceive and experience the world and myself in the world, and also something about the beliefs, constructs, values and practices of my wider cultural environment. Revealing such assumptions and opening ourselves to re-examination can be a radical route to transformation.

Reflections

The language and metaphors we use are saturated with cultural assumptions. Take an example from your own work – any phase, conversation or document – and spend a moment reflecting on the underlying personal and cultural assumptions it reveals. Here are some examples:

➦   I am a leader.

➦   We work as a team.

➦   Our goal is to delight the customer.

➦   Change is here to stay.

According to social constructionism, the language and metaphors we use both create and convey meaning. In that sense, they help us and they constrain us. If we change the language or the metaphor, we can alter the 'reality' we perceive, create new ideas and open up fresh possibilities.

↱ What underlying beliefs and values does your language reveal?

↱ How is your language constraining you and others you work with?

↱ What do you discover if you play with different words and metaphors?

↱ What metaphor would be most motivating and life-giving for you?

Reading

If you would like to learn more about social constructionism, have a glance at:

Kenneth Gergen, An Invitation to Social Construction (2015)

Vivien Burr, Social Constructionism (2015)

Nick Wright, Social Constructionism Applied (2011): nick-wright.com/blog/social-constructionism-applied

Nick Wright

Nick Wright is a psychological coach, trainer and organisation development (OD) consultant with 25+ years' experience of working with beyond-profit leaders and organisations in the UK and internationally.

Nick has a Postgraduate Diploma in Coaching Psychology, a Masters' Degree in Human Resource Development, a Degree in Theology, a Diploma in Pastoral Studies and a Certificate in Supervision and Consultation.

Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or would be interested to explore how social constructionism could enhance your work, see:

www.nick-wright.com
info@nick-wright.com

Get in touch!