Readiness for Practice in Social Work Through a Constructionist Lens

Author(s)

Karene-Anne Nathaniel, PhD
The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine

Abstract

This conceptual article applies social constructionist thinking to an analysis of the term *readiness for social work practice* and its uses. "Readiness," "ready," and "not ready" are frequently used colloquially in casual conversations and formally in evaluating student/practitioner aptitude for professional practice; multiple understandings of readiness and how it develops are apparent. Multiple understandings of readiness seem to feed practice assessment and for this reason the apparent multiplicity in sense-making about what it means to be ready (or not) becomes potentially problematic. Social work educators are encouraged to be vigilant to how practice interactions are socially constructed and how this informs conclusions about readiness.

Keywords: social constructionism; readiness; field instruction; practice assessment

Introduction

With the expansion of the field of social work and the refining of social work education over the last sixty years, the recognition of social work as a profession has grown considerably (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). This growth has also sparked increasing need for social work intervention to stem the tide of social problems that has accompanied rapid social, economic, and infrastructural development across the globe (Jones & Truell, 2012). Within this global context, how do social workers get

"ready" to meet these demands, and how do educators and supervisors know that they are ready? As it relates to teaching and learning, a constructionist outlook values the role of the student in both intellectual and affective processes, making learning a personal process of sense-making about theoretical and practical learning experiences (Neuman & Blundo, 2000). van Bommel, Kwakman, and Boshuizen (2012) point out that learning to practice social work is not a straightforward process and that there are no prescriptions for practice or guarantees that methods and approaches will have favorable results. Social work situations are complex, therefore, knowledge has to be used for understanding situations and identifying priorities, matching methods to needs, monitoring progress and outcomes, and driving reflectivity. Spiro and DeSchryver (2009) suggest that in this constructive process, highly subjective in nature, both the knowledge and the learner are transformed. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) advance *constructive social work*, describing an approach that *constructs* practice by interrogating and criticizing what is *known* to promote change and transformation.

This conceptual article applies social constructionist thinking, which forms the foundation of constructive social work (Parton, 2003; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000), to an analysis of the term *readiness for social work practice* and its uses. A review of the literature revealed that the term *readiness for practice* is used interchangeably with such terms as *readiness to practice*, *safe to practice*, and *fit to practice*. "Readiness," "ready," and "not ready" are frequently used colloquially in conversations and evaluation of student/practitioner aptitude for professional practice, and multiple understandings of readiness, its constituent parts, and how it develops are apparent. However, the term remains largely undefined and unexplained in social work scholarship. While it may be useful to arrive at a common understanding of what it means to be "ready" for social work practice, it may be even more important to recognize the variability and disparities in sense-making, and the complexities of advancing universal definitions within a context of wide diversity.

Social constructionism offers a valuable framework for dismantling the readiness concept as it relates to the development of professional practice in social work. This article will show how various constructionist concepts may be used to analyze the term *readiness* and how the complex dynamics at play in learning and practice environments influence sense-making. This is important because understandings of readiness can feed practice assessment, a core element of professional education (Le Maistre, Boudreau, & Paré, 2006) and it is primarily in this context that determinations of goodness-of-fit between student/practitioner and service needs, i.e. who is ready or not, are made. It is anticipated that by applying constructionist theory in showing how widely perspectives and interpretations of the concept can vary, field educators may

be alerted to the conflicts, complexities and ambiguities that can arise, and pay due consideration to the use of language in discussing student/practitioner performance.

The Theory

The concept of social construction was first introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their attempt to create a sociology of knowledge. They asserted that as people within social systems interact, they create mutual understandings and expectations of each other's actions. Over time, a reciprocal process of expectations, actions, and reactions evolves, and as these patterns become universally accepted and replicated, they are eventually institutionalized. Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest that in this way, reality is socially constructed. Burr (2003) posits that there is no clearly identifiable definition of what social constructionism is in essence. Burr (2003) describes social constructionism as a school of thought consisting of some common mandatory elements, but which also incorporates other perspectives.

There are four pillars of social constructionist thought (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1985; Parton, 2003; Pearce, 2009). Firstly, social constructionists challenge what is considered common sense or "taken-for-granted knowledge" (Burr, 2003; Parton, 2003) in social life. They question accepted conclusions about the nature of human behavior and social phenomena (such as readiness) which places the approach at odds with traditional scientific methods such as positivism and empiricism. Secondly, knowledge and phenomena need to be understood in their historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, multiple understandings (e.g., of readiness) may coexist with none being more valid or invalid than the others. Thirdly, knowledge is a product of—that is, constructed within—social processes and these perpetual processes also determine how knowledge (e.g., of readiness) evolves. Language is the central mechanism of interaction and, as such, holds the attention of social constructionists. Fourthly, constructed knowledge drives social behavior. The realm of knowledge is broad and diverse, and for every phenomenon (such as readiness), multiple constructions abound. Each construct (of readiness) influences action in different ways, sanctioning certain patterns of behavior and disallowing others. Constructions, therefore, have a power/privilege aspect that is also of particular interest to social constructionists – the idea that a virtual hierarchy of constructions (of readiness) exists.

The identified characteristics of constructionist thinking present the paradigm as non-deterministic, radical, and critical. It denounces the existence of objectivity and also that knowledge proceeds simply from perception. Burr (2003) writes:

> The absence of an ultimate truth seems to be the foundation upon which the theoretical framework of social constructionism is built. Within this framework it is enormously difficult to say that some ways of thinking about the world are correct or true and others are false. If we accept the possibility of many different realities constructed within different historical contexts, we have no way of asserting that one of these is the right one. (p. 80)

Social constructionism emphasizes perspective over perception, that is, less about what we see in the world and more about how we look at the world. Our sense of identity, and experiences of power or powerlessness in social interactions, inform our perspectives. Language is the tool for interpretation, description, sense-making, and response. When these ways of understanding knowledge creation are applied to concepts in social work education and practice, such as readiness, it is apparent that sense-making about practitioner readiness can be subject to variable and complex dynamics.

Constructionism is an approach to thinking about human behavior that is purposed on redirecting the focus and impact of traditional perspectives such as positivism, realism, and modernism (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1985; Taylor & White, 2001). Constructionism finds its utility where existing theories may be prejudicial and harmful, where prevailing ideas, beliefs, or theories may (albeit unintentionally) profile or label some groups while embellishing others, resulting in adverse consequences (Burr, 2003). This provides an important rationale for using a constructionist frame for understanding the term *readiness* as there are indications that selected criteria guide evaluations of who is "ready" and "not ready" for social work. For example, this is present in competency-based assessments, some of which could seem vague and arbitrary and therefore unhelpful for students and practitioners. The orientation of this article is mainly aligned with a macro-constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003), considering the role of language, social structures, and inter-relational factors in shaping how people function. However, this outlook also values a synthesis of both the macro and micro approaches, acknowledging singular positions and sense-making about readiness and other experiences as they intersect with discursive, institutional, and environmental dynamics.

Constructionism and Readiness

An in-depth analysis of social constructionism begins with the critical examination of the role of language in social life and introduces the concept of *circular reasoning* as a

process in social construction (Burr, 2003). To illustrate, when we observe something, for example, another person behaving in a particular way, we infer their character or selected personality traits on the basis of the observed behavior. However, character or personality cannot be seen and measured; we may never know if we are right in our conclusions, yet we accept them as true. Our observations then confirm our conclusions, that is, if someone behaves in X ways, they are X, because, according to our observations, someone who is X behaves in X ways. This cognitive process is referred to as *circular reasoning*, a linguistic device that involves labeling intangible traits using observable behaviors. The label is subsequently verified by association with the said behaviors. Constructionists regard each individual as constructivist – making sense of experiences and interactions on a number of bases, including prior knowledge and experience. Therefore, within the constructionist paradigm the number of possible conclusions using circular reasoning is unfathomable. Circular reasoning can explain how profiles, stereotypes, and stigma are socially constructed, all of which are antithetical to principles of social justice that underpin professional social work.

Circular reasoning can be applied to the concept of *readiness for social work practice* to show through the constructionist lens how conclusions about what "readiness" should look like and whether someone is "ready" or not, can be complicated. In competency-based assessment, for example, someone who demonstrates certain abilities may be deemed "ready" for practice because someone who is "ready" has certain abilities. However, circular reasoning can only be valid if the phenomenon in question is stable, unchanging, and universal (Burr, 2003). A tacit question for this author is whether these are qualities of the concept under examination – is *readiness for practice in social work* stable, unchanging, and universal?

Further questions may be raised: do practitioners demonstrate the same abilities in the same way in every situation and with all client populations? What of the on-lookers and assessors who are deciding whether a social worker is "ready" or "not ready" – are they all looking for the same things? Also, given the important role of self-evaluation in professional development (Ben Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012), are expectations of our own sense of readiness consistent across the board? If the answer to these questions is no, and circular reasoning as described by Burr (2003) is being used subjectively to decide who may or may not be "ready" for practice, then the possibilities are endless for conclusions about practitioner readiness. This could be potentially problematic for selection, training, and assessment in social work. Circular reasoning can lead to prejudice, therefore further questions may be raised about whether professional gatekeeping is consistent with principles of antidiscriminatory practice.

Constructionists challenge ideas of a phenomenon that are taken as "given" (Burr, 2003). An important contribution of this theoretical position to social work is that it stimulates critical thinking about the extent to which understandings of readiness are treated as common-sense knowledge within the profession, that is, as "socially derived and socially maintained, created by people who share meanings through being members of the same society or culture" (Burr, 2003, p. 45), such as members of the social work community. Indeed, it may be that the "taken-for-granted-ness" of *readiness for practice* has contributed to the relative dearth of literature that explains or describes the concept. Constructionists will urge professional educators to unpack ideas that may be taken-for-granted as common sense within social work education and practice. An objective of this article is to stimulate critical thinking about the nature and role of taken-for-granted knowledge in social work education and practice. It is this author's position that *readiness for practice in social work* is one example of taken-for-granted knowledge in light of the lack of clear definition, yet its use is widespread. Consequently, particularly in light of the earlier discussion of the process and impact of circular reasoning, there is a high risk that meanings, expectations, and applications could vary widely, thereby increasing ambiguity about what the profession is reaching for in education and practice.

Constructing Readiness Language

In a discussion of the links between language and social constructs, Pearce (2009) takes a social constructionist view of the phenomenon of burnout and begins by asking the question whether it is found or made. The same question may be asked of readiness — is it pre-existing or the product of social processes? If pre-existing, i.e., a personal trait that is reflected in certain attitudes and behaviors, then manifest characteristics that assessors should look for ought to be easily identifiable. If constructed within social interaction and discourse, the phenomenon is likely to be more subjective and variable, informed by how people act and interact, under what conditions and locations. These are further shaped by specific social, cultural, and historical dynamics, therefore, determining the meanings of readiness may be more complicated.

Whether readiness is found or made, the constructionist perspective shows that there is a wide range of sense-making possibilities, that is, multiplicity in meaning. This is not necessarily problematic as diversity of construction indicates multiple truths (another important constructionist concept) about readiness for social work practice and can accommodate multiple options for shaping readiness. It may also be possible to validate these for use in assessing the extent to which a social worker is equipped

for professional practice, and to create an ordering system that presents those that are deemed more significant and of higher priority (Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Pearce 2009; Taylor & White, 2001; van Bommel et al., 2012).

However, when differing constructs of social phenomena such as readiness confront each other in social interactions, they may clash, and each party will seek to have his/her account verified and validated. Burr (2003) refers to this as:

> [...] the situated use of language, that is, how people actively construct accounts to try to build defensible identities or to have their versions of events legitimated or endorsed by others in the interaction. (p. 57)

Constructionists assert that language is key in this process in describing separate understandings; defending one's version in the face of others; and in accepting and possibly blending with alternate constructs, or even dismissing them. To illustrate, in the context of student/practitioner meeting with a supervisor, from the practitioner's perspective, self-evaluation of one's sense of readiness, in dialogue with a supervisor's perspective on what readiness should look like and how the practitioner may be evaluated, a potential clash becomes apparent as both endeavor to negotiate their positions. Therefore, the linguistic symbols and devices – use of language, non-verbal cues, structure of argument – that are used to convey meaning become particularly important in order for the outcome of the negotiation to be satisfactory for the parties involved.

Additionally, each party depends on the other for affirmation and acceptance of his/her evaluation in order to have a favorable response and outcome (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1985; Parton, 2003). Continuing with the above illustration, if the practitioner believes "I am ready" and the supervisor states "you are not ready," the practitioner will want to convince the supervisor that he/she is correct in the hope that the supervisor/assessor might amend the assessment in the practitioner's favor. The motivation to negotiate will be influenced by what's at stake, i.e. consequences of the evaluation for the practitioner such as good grades, a recommendation, or job security. At the same time, the supervisor thinks his/her appraisal is just, and seeks to argue convincingly to support conclusions made, ultimately wanting the practitioner to accept them and use the feedback provided for his/her development. Again, the inclination to do so is likely to be impacted by individual and contextual factors, e.g. acknowledging the supervisor's vicarious liability for practitioners' actions and responsibility for student development within the field education context. Similarly, if both agree that the practitioner is not "ready," but the practitioner complains that there was limited

opportunity to test and develop skills, while the supervisor says the practitioner did not take advantage of what was available, again, in order for the result to be favorable to one or the other, each would need the other to validate his/her experiences or observations. Communication and language skills are the tools of negotiations such as that described above, and therefore highly functional for parties to achieve a desired outcome (Dickins, 2004; Taylor & White, 2001; White, 2004).

A constructionist perspective also reveals how use of language impacts people both positively and negatively as well as the actions that result (Burr, 2003; Parton, 2003). It is useful to pay attention to how use of language, the application of terms such as *ready*, *not ready, suitable, unsuitable, fit,* and *unfit* in relation to professional aptitude reflects and informs understandings of readiness, professional identity, and social work practice as a whole. The literature on professional gatekeeping in social work, for example, reflects the suitability/unsuitability discourse and takes pains to itemize indicators of both (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). However, Miller and Koerin (1998) point out that suitability and unsuitability do not lie on the same continuum, and in fact, may be separate discourses with distinct aspects, which may be weighted differently. For example, while caring and sensitivity may be indicators of one's suitability, prejudicial attitudes, a clear sign of unsuitability, will cancel these out. Similarly, while maturity is regarded as a desirable trait, gatekeepers may be far less bothered by immaturity than by unethical behavior. Miller and Koerin (1998) also identify a number of non-academic behaviors that signal unfitness, for example, mental health conditions including addictions, problematic classroom behaviors, and illegal activities. Implicit in the fit/unfit discourse is the question of how one determines risk associated with non-academic factors. Such discourses position educators in powerful roles as gatekeepers, determining who enters and leaves the profession, thereby blurring the lines between mentor and assessor (Le Maistre et al., 2006).

Another important issue is how subjects of these assessments – fit/unfit, suitable/ unsuitable, ready/not ready – are likely to be affected and how they respond psychologically, emotionally, and behaviorally. What happens when one is told "you are not ready"? Whether one responds with curiosity, resentment, disillusionment, resignation, or resolve will depend on individual identity, and choice of action can follow accordingly. The vocational nature of social work, the idea that social work is a calling (Guo et al., 2014; Reamer, 1992), is also likely to play a role in how messages of perceived readiness or unreadiness are received. The point has previously been made that within the constructionist paradigm multiple truths exist, and the persons being assessed will also have their own versions of what it means to be ready or not, suitable or not, or fit or not, in addition to their self-evaluation of readiness, fitness,

or suitability. So the use of language and its impact must be carefully examined and understood so that the communication process in practice assessment interactions can be fruitful. The following section takes the constructionist view on how parties position themselves in interaction in order to reconcile differences in sense-making and assessment to meet their needs and achieve their goals.

Readiness and Discourse

Discourse is another important concept in constructionist theory. *Discourse* is explained as representations of the world, of events, or of phenomena each consisting of multiple understandings of them. Discourses can be lenses or frames that provide ways of understanding a phenomenon (White, 2004)—impressions, versions, accounts, or "stories to tell" (Burr, 2003, p. 64) about it; they are not opinions or beliefs because they are not produced by individual experience. Discourses are macro-constructs, created within any of a number of contexts and can in themselves provide a context for opinions and beliefs to give them particular meaning. Each social phenomenon has multiple discourses that can vary by innumerable factors. For example, a social work student may posit that being "ready" means knowing what to do to help a client. The underlying discourse could be that knowledge and skills in problem resolution are fundamentals of readiness, or that readiness amounts to efficiency as a helper. An educator may say that readiness is about the practitioner's confidence in practice, which could be situated within a discursive context of self-identity or professional attitude as reflecting readiness. An appreciation of discourses, how they manifest, how they intersect, and how they shape behavior is central to constructionist thinking, and highly valuable for understanding this phenomenon. Additionally, discourses can also inform evaluation of action (favorably or unfavorably), and so, factor in assessments.

Another important consideration is the relationship between discourse and power. Foucault (1983) shows in his work on knowledge construction and power how discourses can change over time and can influence social behavior as each discourse confers power on some individual, group, or community. Staying with the illustrations above, the discourse about readiness as practice effectiveness potentially makes service users powerful, while the readiness as self-identity discourse situates power in each student/practitioner. In thinking critically about Foucault's assertion, it is apparent that the locus of power implicit in these discourses may not be manifest in reality. The question of authority arises, do the discourses noted above place power in the hands of parties with legitimate or recognized authority for determining readiness? How much say in gatekeeping practice do service users and students actually have? While the profession is predicated on value for service user input (Parton, 2003) and promotes

practitioner reflectivity and reflexivity (Taylor & White, 2001), the formal evaluation of readiness lies neither with service users nor with practitioners themselves. Formal evaluation of readiness lies in alternate perspectives, such as those of gatekeepers, namely academic supervisors. Therefore, there is an inherent contradiction between messages about professional ethics and values around service user engagement and practitioner reflexivity, and the locus of power and authority for decision making about who is "ready" or "not ready" for social work practice. Additionally, it is important to consider the intersection of, and interplay between, multiple discourses in order to appreciate which is dominant, which is latent, how these inform accepted constructs of readiness, and ultimately impact assessment thereof.

Constructionists reaffirm that there is no reality outside of discourse, and language provides the building blocks of discursive reality (Burr, 2003). Such assertions can make the constructionist perspective seem more cerebral than concrete, and less practical for purposes such as the evaluation of social work students' readiness for professional practice. Observable physical events such as natural disasters or disease can reveal the impracticality of constructionist thinking since there is no question that these are physical realities, not social constructions; however, the value of constructionist thinking even to observable phenomena lies in how people experience and create meaning of natural disasters (Burr, 2003). In relation to disease for instance, the person living with HIV is not simply affected by a virus; he or she lives with a disease which is bound up in discourses that either promote stigma and construct acquisition of the virus as a consequence of sexual deviance (Norman, Carr & Jiménez, 2006), or treat HIV as a chronic disease (Deeks, Lewin, & Havlir, 2013; ElZarrad, Eckstein & Glasgow, 2013). The cognitive/critical character of constructionism seems to have manifest utility as a framework for understanding ideas, ideologies (including discourses), and concepts such as readiness. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of physical experiences that pre-exist or operate outside of discourse and spoken word, such as the realities of everyday living and practice interactions. Constructionism focuses on the meanings that are attributed to such events and which are given form through affirmation and consensus (White, 2004).

Why Deconstruct "Readiness"?

Having undertaken an in-depth constructionist analysis of the concept *readiness for practice in social work*, this author agrees with Burr (2003) that there is a need to adopt "a critical stance to the discourses and narratives prevalent in society and ask what effects they are bringing about" (p. 83). "Readiness" may be regarded as such an idea or concept, requiring a critical stance and willingness to challenge dominant truths

about the phenomenon. If discourses are said to be both equally questionable and equally valid, how does one rationalize a choice of one interpretation of a concept such as readiness over others? It is evident that a multiplicity of voices on readiness prevails and it is important to explore these openly, rather than to assume that "readiness" means one thing and not another. For this author, it seems to be unfeasible to attempt to produce a formula or prescription for readiness based on a narrow and possibly prejudiced conclusion about its nature, since to do so would run counter to the very notion of social constructionism.

This author is of the view that competency-based assessments, such as presented in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (Council on Social Work Education, 2015), notably developed through a sophisticated consultative process over five years, can seem reductionist, and may depict a more deterministic rather than organic basis for practice evaluation. Competency lists may be useful within specific contexts and settings, and seem to have contributed significantly to the professionalization of social work. However, it may be arguable that achievement of identified competencies equate to readiness for practice. It may be taken-for-granted that the outcome of successful achievement of competencies is readiness, and that competency based assessments are in fact tools for assessing readiness for practice. The value of constructionism in this analysis lies in its interest in the discourses that inform understandings of and sense-making about readiness, the relationships between them, and their impact on behavior. For this author, these go beyond identifying and assessing competencies, they point to the need for attention to contextual factors, individual identities and personalities, expectations, experiences, and perspectives. In this author's experience, field placements vary widely within contexts as well as across borders, and do not offer students/practitioners the same opportunities for developing selected competencies. Additionally, supervisory expectations and experiences can differ considerably, therefore the quality of the learning outcome may be inconsistent.

It is also interesting to note that social work scholarship does not seem to be agreed on what the outcome of social work education should be and what should be assessed. A number of concepts have been used, e.g. *fit to practice, safe to practice, and readiness to practice* (O'Connor, Cecil, & Boudioni, 2009; Walton, 2005), *preparation for practice* (Allen, Donalds, Hinds, & McLean Cooke, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2009), *the call to social work* (Daniel, 2011; LeCroy, 2012), *suitability for social work* (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Tam & Coleman, 2009; Unwin, Van Soest, & Kretzschmar, 2006), and *professional identity and professional socialization* (Ben Shlomo, Levy, and Itzhaky 2012; Miller, 2013). Attention to competencies seems to be tacit acknowledgment of ambiguity in practice assessment

for social work and may be regarded as an attempt to address this by establishing a formal standard. Lu et al. (2011) put forward a scale for objective structured clinical evaluation that attempts to pay attention to practitioner self-awareness and non-academic factors. In light of the constructionist analysis undertaken, this author is skeptical that scales such as these capture the breadth of the social work practice learning experience and outcome.

An important aspect of social constructionist theory is the link between discourse and identity, and the acknowledgment that language operationalizes identity. Identification, labeling, or naming a phenomenon gives it an identity; however, identities differ by discourse. Labeling a practitioner as "ready" or "not ready" may depend on the discursive orientation of the onlooker, that is, what is he/she looking for and is it a product of circular reasoning? The central role of the individual must be affirmed, both as the subject of the discourse and in deciding whether to accept or reject the label or assessment that the discourse imposes on him/her. In other words, the social work practitioner plays a pivotal role – understanding readiness for practice is not only about what the other person (assessor) thinks is or is not readiness; the individual also decides, and that decision activates any of a range of possible responses. The nature of the relationship and interaction between practitioner and assessor affects the perspectives and positions each takes and whether they wish to "claim or resist these positions" (Burr, 2003, p. 114). In the social work learning or practice environment, where readiness is demonstrated and assessed, the dynamics of that environment are significant. Key factors for attention could include the opportunities and resources practitioners can access, the nature of supervisory and collegial relationships, and perception of one's place in the agency. Any combination of these can inform how practitioners approach and respond to the numerous diverse interactions in which they engage. Moreover, how practitioners view their place in relation to others in the agency (their self-identity) can inform whether they accept, resist, or assume the labels they are assigned (how they are identified). Social constructionism spotlights the potential conflicts that may arise between self-appraisal and performance appraisal of social worker readiness. It stimulates critical questions about the application of circular reasoning and taken-for-granted knowledge, the privileging of selected "truths," and the discourses dominating these conversations and resulting actions.

The issue of identity is inextricably linked to power in the interactional context. It has already been established that discourses impose positions on actors which may be desirable and undesirable. Burr (2003) writes of this process:

> [...] we are doing something that has effects which go beyond the immediate
> social event […] Everyday conversations [...] are far from trivial and represent an
> important arena where identities are fashioned and power relations played out.
> (p. 15)

This statement aptly captures the dynamics of professional gatekeeping, mentorship, and practice assessment in social work. If we consider the student in conversation with the practice teacher within a discursive context of readiness as taking initiative, the practice teacher (who drives this discourse) positions the student as an autonomous/ independent agent (who has the skills and resources to initiate action in response to practice situations). The student may resist this position, identifying him or herself as powerless and dependent on the practice teacher for permission and direction. In response he/she might consider introducing a different discourse, or showing how the one being used is flawed. Alternatively, he/she may take cognizance of the authority of the practice teacher and his/her own (higher order) need for a passing grade (for example), and accept the position; the response is then to be convincing about initiative-taking to satisfy the supervisor/opponent.

In social interactions, individuals essentially want to be heard, and, in giving voice to their experiences and interpretations, to have their versions affirmed and accepted (Gergen, 1985). However, this motivation can cause people to adjust their descriptions depending on the nature of the interaction, the prevailing or dominant discourse, the resulting positions available to them as a consequence, and the desired outcome. The question therefore arises:

> […] what functions a person's talk might have for them, what is at stake for them
> in the interaction, what purposes they are trying to achieve and what discursive
> devices they must employ to bring about the desired effects? (Burr, 2003, p. 127)

This can be regarded from two angles: from that of the individual who is trying to assert a position, and from the angle of where the power lies, where those in influential positions can make themselves heard more frequently. Those who are in positions of power, bearing in mind that as Foucault (1983) explains power is not one-dimensional or one-directional, can choose discursive positions informed by taken-for-granted knowledge that becomes accepted as truth. Understandings of readiness may be intertwined with such processes; versions of readiness that have been accepted and used to drive learning, instructional, and evaluative practices may overlook unacknowledged truths that are equally significant.

A number of social work scholars have advanced ideas on integrative or collaborative assessments that engage key shareholders in social work education and practice, including students and service users, in practice learning and evaluation (Cooper, 2017; Crisp, Green Lister, & Dutton, 2006; Crisp, 2012; Healy, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). In her study in the UK, Cooper (2017) used *criterion-referencing*, akin to a list of competencies, in the collaborative assessment process, requiring in-depth explanation and collective understanding of the criteria for all parties in the assessment. In this way it was anticipated that multiple perspectives would be incorporated in the assessment based on an agreed, negotiated understanding of what was required. What was interesting in this study is that the discussion of the criteria among parties prior to practice and assessment did not result in shared understanding of what was required; instead common understanding emerged through the process of assessment itself. Cooper (2017) talks about an emerging common language in the process of assessment, and this seems to reflect constructionist thinking about knowledge creation in social work practice learning and assessment.

An important criticism of social constructionism is its relative lack of attention to individual factors, such as those that inform how people choose to accept positions and how to respond, especially when the discursive position that is imposed on them may not seem to be in their best interests. Additionally, constructionism is not concerned with psychological processes, for example thought, emotions, life history, and their effects. There is no doubt that with certain topics, this could be limiting, but it may also be a strength, a virtual "selling point" of this approach. This approach can be seen as taking a "here-and-now" orientation, focusing on what is happening and the result and less on why it is happening.

Finally, the central role of context in the process of preparing professional social workers for practice cannot be over-emphasized. In an unpublished study with shareholders in social work education, namely students, practitioners, field instructors, educators, and allied professionals in a developing country, this author noted the expressed centrality of field practicum experience in practice learning outcomes. Some of the points of concern raised included contradiction between theory and practice, scarcity of resources, variable access to supervision, ethical discrepancies, ignorance and disregard for social workers, and clash of expectations. Added to this were the limited options for field placements and qualified supervisors. From the respondents' point of view, these experiences significantly impacted their impressions of readiness for practice. Mioto and Nogueira (2016) in writing about their work in South America validate these findings and refer to the need for the profession to confront the

challenges with which it is presented in the real world of social work settings, as it is in these contexts that professional practice (and readiness) is shaped and manifested. Therefore, all arguments seem to converge on attention to context and the holistic outlook needed in evaluating practice learning outcomes. Constructionism helps to elucidate the multiplicity of factors at play.

Furthermore, social work educators are encouraged to place concentrated attention on orientation and preparing students and field instructors for practicum because of the diversity of needs, opportunities, expectations, resources, etc. Gulalia (2014), in an article from India, discusses the prominence of social work practicum for students, and that the concept of holistic and life-long learning that is needed for social work requires a different kind of educator who appreciates what students bring to the practicum, what their own conceptions and expectations are, and how to bridge the two. Gulalia (2014) also talks about creating a community of educators who explore and refine the art and science of field education, who see their role beyond instructing, evaluating, and correction to actively engage learners in critical reflection of the interplay between self, context, and practice. Gulalia (2014) notes the importance of selection and preparation of field educators who can facilitate practicum experiences that allow learners to do so. This constructionist analysis can add to the understanding of the multiple dynamics in field education and contribute to content for training modules for field educators.

Conclusion

This conceptual article presents a practical analysis of *readiness for practice in social work* from a social constructionist perspective. The wide variance and ambiguity surrounding the use of the term *readiness* to qualify social workers' aptitude in practice requires closer attention to the many interpersonal and contextual factors, including discourse, taken-for-granted knowledge, perspective, power, and identity, all of which are employed and explicated within the constructionist paradigm. Social work educators in the field and the academe are encouraged to be vigilant to the idea that practice interactions are diverse, subjective, temperamental, and highly nuanced, socially constructed in shared as well as divergent meanings and sense-making within different contexts. Social constructionist thinking offers a frame for understanding student/practitioner-supervisor interactions, how people see themselves and their role, how they present themselves and behave in assessment interactions in particular, their sense of powerfulness or powerlessness in the interactions, and their linguistic choices as they negotiate with the other to meet their needs. An appreciation of the range of prevailing discourses on expectations of supervisors and supervisees is pivotal to understanding the use of the terms "ready" and "not ready."

The article sought to show that social constructionism provides a useful framework for understanding the realities of practice interactions between supervisors and practitioners/students, and the associated issues that can arise as academic and field educators attempt to both cultivate and assess practice competence. Challenges for the reliable use of the terms "ready" and "not ready" are also highlighted as there are numerous possibilities for how these terms are understood. Social constructionism directs attention to circular reasoning, taken-for-granted knowledge, diversity in discourse, use of language, and the intersection of power and identity in interactions, all of which can underscore ambiguity in the term *readiness*, and spark questions about its utility for denoting practitioner aptitude for social work. This author maintains that in light of the variable contexts, dynamics, and constructs, and the potential self-defeating impact on student/practitioner professional identity and self-esteem, these terms should not be used to label or qualify students/practitioners aptitude in practice.

The field has already recognized the importance of naming observable behaviors, skill performance, and task completion relative to the setting and the interpersonal and supervisory contexts in practice assessment. These are evident in the standards, guidelines, tools, and scales that currently exist in the Global North and selected parts of the Global South which may be regarded as context specific. This analysis adds to existing scholarship that has progressively sought to address the challenges of field education and practice assessment in social work (e.g., Bogo, 2015; Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo, Lee, McKee, Baird, & Ramjattan, 2016; Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002; Bogo et al., 2011; Bogo et al., 2004; Power & Bogo, 2003; Regehr, Bogo, Regehr, & Power, 2007), in that it demonstrates the wide variation in issues that can arise. Further, it can be instructive in the development of tools for field instruction, assessment, and certification of professionals in the developing world as it draws attention to critical contextual factors that should be considered.

References

Allen, L., Donalds, S., Hinds, K., & McLean Cooke, W. (2010). Preparing to practise: An experiential laboratory approach for beginning social work students. *Caribbean Journal of Social Work, 8-9*, 78-95.

Barlow, C., & Coleman, H. (2003). Suitability for practice guidelines for students: A survey of Canadian social work programmes. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 22*(2), 151–164. doi:10.1080/0261547022000058206

Ben Shlomo, S., Levy D., & Itzhaky, H. (2012). Development of professional identity among social work students: Contributing factors. *The Clinical Supervisor, 31*(2), 240–255. doi:10.1080/07325223.2013.733305

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Bogo, M. (2015). Field education for clinical social work practice: Best practices and contemporary challenges. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 43*(3), 317–324. doi:10.1007/s10615-015-0526-5

Bogo, M., Katz, E., Regehr, C., Logie, C., Mylopoulos, M., & Tufford, L. (2013). Toward understanding meta-competence: An analysis of students' reflection on their simulated interviews. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 32*(2), 259–273. doi:10.1080/02615479.2012.738662

Bogo, M., Lee, B., McKee, E., Baird, S. L., & Ramjattan, R. (2016). Field instructors' perceptions of foundation year students' readiness to engage in field education. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 35*(2), 204–214. doi:10.1080/02615479.2015.1123689

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Hughes, J., Power, R., & Globerman, J. (2002). Evaluating a measure of student field performance in direct service: Testing reliability and validity of explicit criteria. *Journal of Social Work Education, 38*(3), 385–401. doi:10.1080/10437797.2002.10779106

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Logie, C., Katz, E., Mylopoulos, M., & Regehr, G. (2011). Adapting objective structured clinical examinations to assess social work students' performance and reflections. *Journal of Social Work Education, 47*(1), 5–18. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900036

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Power, R., Hughes, J., Woodford, M., & Regehr, G. (2004). Toward new approaches for evaluating student field performance: Tapping the implicit criteria used by experienced field instructors. *Journal of Social Work Education, 40*(3), 417–426. doi:10.1080/10437797.2004.10672297

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Cooper, S. (2017). A collaborative assessment of students' placement learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 42*(1), 61–76. doi:10.1080/02602938.2015.1083093

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards.* Retrieved from https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/2015-EPAS/2015EPAS_Web_FINAL.pdf.aspx

Crisp, B. R., Green Lister, P., & Dutton, K. (2006). Not just social work academics: The involvement of others in the assessment of social work students. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 25*(7), 723–734. doi:10.1080/02615470600905952

Crisp, G. T. (2012). Integrative assessment: Reframing assessment practice for current and future learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 37*(1), 33–43. doi:10.1080/02602938.2010.494234

Daniel, C. (2011). The path to social work: Contextual determinants of career choice among racial/ethnic minority students. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 30*(8), 895-910. doi:10.1080/02615479.2010.520121

Deeks, S. G., Lewin, S. R., & Havlir, D. V. (2013). The end of AIDS: HIV infection as a chronic disease. *The Lancet, 382*(9903), 1525–1533. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61809-7

Dickins, T. E. (2004). Social constructionism as cognitive science. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 34*(4), 333–352. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.2004.00253.x

ElZarrad, M. K., Eckstein, E. T., & Glasgow, R. E. (2013). Applying chronic illness care, implementation science, and self-management support to HIV. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 44*(1), S99–S107. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2012.09.046

Foucault, M. (1983). The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed., pp. 208–226). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist, 40*(3), 266–275. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.40.3.266

Gulalia, P. (2014). Empowerment of student social worker: Reading between the lines. *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice, 2*(6), 303–310. doi: 10.13189/ijrh.2014.020615

Guo, Y., Guan, Y., Yang, X., Xu, J., Zhou, X., She, Z., . . . & Fu, M. (2014). Career adaptability, calling and the professional competence of social work students in China: A career construction perspective. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 85*(3), 394–402. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2014.09.001

Healy, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.* York, UK: The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning- and-teaching-higher

Jones, D. N., & Truell, R. (2012). The global agenda for social work and social development: A place to link together and be effective in a globalized world. *International Social Work, 55*(4), 454-472. doi:10.1177/0020872812440587

LeCroy, C. W. (2012). *The call to social work: Life stories* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Le Maistre, C., Boudreau, S., & Paré, A. (2006). Mentor or evaluator? Assisting and assessing newcomers to the professions. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 18*(6), 344–354. doi:10.1108/13665620610682071

Lu, Y. E., Ain, E., Chamorro, C., Chang, C., Feng, J. Y., Fong, R., . . . & Yu, M. (2011). A new methodology for assessing social work practice: The adaptation of the objective structured clinical evaluation (SW-OSCE). *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 30*(2), 170–185. doi:10.1080/02615479.2011.540385

Miller, J., & Koerin, B. (1998). Can we assess suitability at admission? A review of MSW application procedures. *Journal of Social Work Education, 34*(3), 437–452. doi:10.108 0/10437797.1998.10778938

Miller, S. E. (2013). Professional socialization: A bridge between the explicit and implicit curricula. *Journal of Social Work Education, 49*(3), 368-386. doi:10.1080/104 37797.2013.796773

Mioto, R. C., & Nogueira, V. M. R. (2016). Professional education, internships and supervision: Persistent challenges and impasses. *Revista Katálysis, 19*(3), 309–311. doi:10.1590/1414-49802016.003.00001

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics.* Retrieved from https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

Neuman, K., & Blundo, R. (2000). Curricular philosophy and social work education: A constructivist perspective. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 2*(1/2), 19–38. doi:10.1300/J067v20n01_03

Norman, L. R., Carr, R., & Jiménez, J. (2006). Sexual stigma and sympathy: Attitudes toward persons living with HIV in Jamaica. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 8*(5), 423–433. doi:10.1080/13691050600855748

O'Connor, L., Cecil, B., & Boudioni, M. (2009). Preparing for practice: An evaluation of an undergraduate social work 'preparation for practice' module. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 28*(4), 436-454. doi:10.1080/02615470701634311

Parton, N. (2003). Rethinking professional practice: The contributions of social constructionism and the feminist ethics of care. *The British Journal of Social Work, 33*(1), 1–16. doi:10.1093/bjsw/33.1.1

Parton, N., & O'Byrne, P. (2000). What do we mean by constructive social work? *Critical Social Work, 1*(2). Retrieved from http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/what-do-we-mean-by-constructive-social-work

Pearce, W. B. (2009). Communication and social construction: Claiming our birthright. In G. J. Galanes & W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Eds.), *Socially constructing communication* (pp. 33–56). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Power, R., & Bogo, M. (2003). Educating field instructors and students to deal with challenges in their teaching relationships. *The Clinical Supervisor, 21*(1), 39–58. doi:10.1300/J001v21n01_04

Reamer, F. G. (1992). Social work and the public good: Calling or career? In P. N. Reid & P. R. Popple (Eds.), *The moral purposes of social work: The character and intentions of a profession* (pp. 11–33). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

Regehr, G., Bogo, M., Regehr, C., & Power, R. (2007). Can we build a better mousetrap? Improving the measures of practice performance in the field practicum. *Journal of Social Work Education, 43*(2), 327–344. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2007.200600607

Spiro, R. J., & DeSchryver, M. (2009). Constructivism: When it's the wrong idea and when it's the only idea. In S. Tobias & T. M. Duffy (Eds.), *Constructivist instruction: Success or failure?* (pp. 106-123). New York, NY: Routledge.

Tam, D. M. Y., & Coleman, H. (2009). Construction and validation of a professional suitability scale for social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(1), 47-63. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2009.200500527

Taylor, C., & White, S. (2001). Knowledge, truth and reflexivity: The problem of judgement in social work. *Journal of Social Work, 1*(1), 37–59. doi:10.1177/146801730100100104

van Bommel, M., Kwakman, K., & Boshuizen, H. P. A. (2012). Experiences of social work students with learning theoretical knowledge in constructivist higher vocational education: a qualitative exploration. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 64*(4), 529–542. doi:10.1080/13636820.2012.727857

Walton, C. (2005). How well does the preparation for practice delivered at the university prepare the student for their first practice learning opportunity in the social work degree? *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 6*(3), 62-81. Retrieved from https://journals.whitingbirch.net/index.php/JPTS/article/viewFile/332/364

White, R. (2004). Discourse analysis and social constructionism. *Nurse Researcher, 12*(2), 7–16. doi:10.7748/nr2004.10.12.2.7.c5935