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Knowledge production connected to the social construction
of the Urgent Project System in Sharp Co.
: Revisiting social constructionism

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# Knowledge production connected to the social construction of the Urgent Project System in Sharp Co. : Revisiting social constructionism

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Abstract: In this article, we propose that the scientific knowledge has a public nature. Our knowledge production, therefore, is inevitably connected to the realities socially constructed. We discuss how our knowledge production is connected to the management practices, according to our field research of the urgent project system in Sharp Co..

## 1. Introduction

'Society' (including corporation itself) as perceived by us does not exist externally ('out there') but rather exists as visualization in our mind ('in here'). This is not to say that our reality is therefore all fiction. The society in our mind concretises our daily life and constructs our lived reality. This type of reality cannot be comprehended with a positivist approach, since this approach is predicated on the externality of 'society' and seeks (or attempts to seek) to explore its essence. This is one of the fundamental reasons why organisational ethnography is often adopted as a method in our attempts to comprehend our lived reality (Kanai, Sato, Kunda, and Van Maanen, 2010).

This is what is called *social constructionism*, and its lineage goes back to Merton (1979) and even to Mannheim (1925). However, because the practice of natural scientists, who are the torchbearers of positivism on our society, was selected as the object of analysis in early discussions from a social constructionist viewpoint, it has become adopted as received wisdom and also emerged in a form that can only be described as a sensationalist fad, for better or worse (e.g., Latour and Woolgar, 1986). In sociology it is now almost taken for granted that the lived reality is shaped by the 'society' constructed in the mind. Social constructionism has had this significant impact because it has encouraged a revival of classical works as an attempt to re-evaluate the fundamental theoretical propositions of the social sciences in the face of the dominance of positivism.

However, according to Hacking (1999), though social constructionism had been trendy, now has become rather dull and uttering the very phrase 'social construction' seems more like standing up at a revival meeting than enunciating thesis or project (pp. 35–36). Just as positivism which holds that an exploration of the essence of externally existing society leads to an understanding of reality has also now become disesteemed, in fact a derogatory epithet (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 5), so too has social constructionism lost its initial impact when the changes in its meaning and use are acknowledged.

Still, we should be able to see the ways in which reality is socially constructed by examining the use of the now over-used term 'social constructionism'. We

also should be able to find a way forward in the act of identifying the disagreements in the methodological discussion surrounding social constructionism.

The current article aims, first, to revisit the over-tired concept of social constructionism and then to reconstruct it as a useful method of knowledge production in the study of management theory. In the second section, the article reviews the rise and fall of social constructionism and explores what connotation we need to preserve or discard from it. In the third section, the article examines the aspects in which academic knowledge production intersects with the practice of business management, drawing on our fieldwork.

## 2. Revisiting social constructionism

As there are a number of detailed reviews of theoretical developments and disputes in social constructionism in a variety of fields, there is no need to add any more words to this topic (see e.g., Gargen, 1982; Nakagawa, 1999; Nakagawa, Kitazawa, and Dio, 2001; Ueno, 2001; Taira and Nakagawa, 2006). It is almost impossible and useless to conduct a comprehensive review of works drawing from social constructionist theory due to the proliferation of various arguments purporting to be based on social constructionism, which has now become faddish, as mentioned above. This article first re-examines what is meant when it is said that something is 'socially constructed' (2.1). Following that, it reviews the heated methodological debate in social constructionism (2.2) and identifies a new research agenda which we should address (2.3).

### 2.1 What is meant by 'socially constructed'?

In the context of the social sciences which analyse the society that comes into existence in the mind and the reality that is predicated on that society, it goes without saying that reality is socially constructed.

However, as 'social constructionism' has become taken for granted as part of the mental furniture in these disciplines, it has become clear that social constructionism has now become a sacred cow and has gone far beyond what was originally intended.

Hacking (1999) has been sarcastic about the ways in which social constructionism is used in the social sciences. According to him, the radical political attitudes that are associated with social constructionism have been used to indicate attitudes ranging from 'bemused irony and angry unmasking up to reform, rebellion, and revolution' (p. 35). Not only that: 'If you use it favourably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable, and respectable' (p. vii). However this sarcasm does not mean that social constructionism is an empty theory completely devoid of content. In fact, this situation is exactly what demonstrates reality being 'socially constructed'. In other words, because of social construction, a new reality based on social constructionism is being formed.

Therefore, not all of what is described as 'socially constructed' in explaining a phenomenon constitutes social constructionism. Let us now examine the cases which are often described as being 'socially constructed' in a more concrete manner. These situations can be divided into two groups. One of them, which is common, includes situations that are described as socially constructed because they are the products of human interpretation. Indeed, it is intuitive to distinguish objective reality from subjective reality based on ontological perspective. The other group collects those situations that are described as socially constructed because of the interaction involved between people (or between people and objects). It appears that this group also reasonably represents the idea behind social constructionism, namely, not to reduce reality to some collection of essential attributes. However, these instances can actually be understood

without describing them as 'socially constructed'. When 'social' simply signifies interpretations and interactions, one does necessarily gain anything by describing these situations as 'socially constructed'; they can just be described as interpretations and interactions.

In other words, in these arguments, a reason or imperative for the use of the term 'socially constructed' is simply missing. Let us now return to what is deemed to be the canon of social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) phenomenologically driven conception of social constructionism can be summarised in the following way. Their argument starts with the recognition that 'society' appears to us in a self-evident, forceful, objective form and that it simply exists there (pp. 21–23; p. 60). According to this premise, objectified society simply constrains human thought and action; therefore, the argument of Berger and Luckmann (1966) has been criticised as lacking in dynamism (e.g., Yoshida, 2002, pp. 204–207).

However, this critique is not necessarily on target. For as Berger and Luckmann (1966) see it in relation to the tradition of phenomenology, the 'society' that has been objectified according to common practice serves as a source of resources or clues in constructing a new reality. In short, what is important in social construction is not the subject's interpretation or interactions. As soon as we begin to interpret society, it becomes, as the object of interpretation, a necessity to move forward (pp. 30–31). The starting point is not the subject but 'society'. Therefore there remains no other way but to say that reality is constructed as 'social products'.

As long as a researcher believes in a 'scientific' approach, we may as well assume that he/she should explore where the 'society' that constitutes that reality (interpretation) comes from and furthermore, by what processes it has been constructed (interaction). It goes

without saying that the 'society' is a product of human interpretation through interaction, and it can be analysed if necessary. However, that 'society' is also socially constructed. The pursuit of the 'society' that constitutes the reality, an act of endless going back, is not of any interest to theories of social constructionism.[1] Therefore, Berger and Luckmann (1966) have emphasised that what is to be examined through experiential analyses is the reality that humans constitute as their daily life, and that 'within the frame of reference of sociology as an empirical science it is possible to take this reality as given, to take as data particular phenomena arising within it, without further inquiring about the foundations of this reality, which is a philosophical task' (p.19).

If reality is constructed on the basis of a reserve of resources or clues provided by 'society', researchers must also take some kind of 'society' as a site of analysis. Mannheim (1925), the founder of the school of thought known as the sociology of knowledge, saw its role as exposing the socially constructed reality. Its role, however, is not limited to critiquing reality, since even that requires the perception of the 'society' that is the basis of the critique. In other words, the researchers, too, can construct a new reality using the objectified 'society' as a clue. The new reality that is constructed by the researchers can then finally expose the impossibility of the 'society'. In this sense, describing the reality constructed by (the use of) social constructionism, just as Hacking (1999) did, is an act of exposing what cannot be taken for granted that goes beyond the original intention of the philosophy.

2.2 Learning from the methodological debate in social constructionism

What remains in our memory is not only social

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[1] This can be examined by focusing on the methodological origin of social constructionism as an attempt to reject positivism; we will look at this in more detail in the next section.

constructionism as a theoretical framework to explain the phenomena discussed above, but also the methodological debate that has arisen when the explanatory principle of social constructionism was applied back to the researchers themselves (Holstein and Miller, 1993; Miller and Holstein, 1993).

The debate was initiated by Steve Woolgar, a theorist of scientific and technological society who has also played an important role in developing social constructionism as it exists today, and Dorothy Pawluch, an ethnomethodologist (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). They focused on a contradiction that they identified hidden in the method of ethnomethodology as adopted by Spector and Kitsuse (1977), who critiqued the positivistic epistemology of the conventional study of social problems, proposing that these problems had to be re-captured from the viewpoint of the actor and should not be identified lopsidedly by the researchers. In other words, they tried to define social problems as 'activities of individuals or groups making assertions or grievances and claims with respect to some putative condition' (p. 75). However, what is problematic here is whether, methodologically speaking, this truly defines social problems from the actor's point of view. For example, in exploring the actor's definition of claim-making activities (e.g., infant abuse), the researcher has already selected a particular situation (for instance, the act on the part of a parent of beating his/her child) from numerous other potential situations. Woolgar and Pawluch dubbed this methodological contradiction of ethnomethodology with the name 'ontological gerrymandering (OG)'.

A heated debate on this methodological contradiction ensued and resulted in two positions: *thorough constructionists* and *strict constructionists*.

Let us first review the position taken by thorough constructionists, including by Woolgar, who pointed out this methodological contradiction in the first place.

This camp of scholars emphasise methodological objectivity by arguing that if the researcher takes the view, as an ethnomethodologist would do, that the actor interprets social problems (i.e., the view implying self-reflexively through experience), the same principle should be applied to the researcher him-/herself (Woolgar, 1988). While it is possible for a researcher to focus on the actor's own definition, he/she has to select the situation to be problematised and, moreover, to interpret (secondary observation) the actor's interpretation (primary observation). Thorough constructionists have therefore come up with a solution: to examine the researcher's interpretation on equal terms as the actor's interpretation.

For instance, Woolgar (1991) reports on fieldwork involved in the project to develop an educational computer in which he participated as an assistant to the project manager. He attempted to capture the processes through which the image(s) of the eventual user held by employees reflexively evolved as the computer development progressed. Not only during the experiments, in which they observed the users' reactions first hand, but also when deciding the size of the computer, the differences among departments became evident and the image of the user was revised This was reported together with the evolution of the image of the user held by Woolgar.

Has the methodological contradiction that Woolgar brings up been solved by this method? The conclusion Woolgar reached after examining and re-examining various interpretations is that technology has been interpreted in a multitude of ways, which is a very evident thesis. It is of course methodologically correct to apply the method of social constructionism to the researcher himself/herself (as long as social constructionism means 'interpretation'). However, even if the researcher is conscious of this, it does not mean that he/she can free him-/herself from a self-imposed, theoretically loaded interpretation. That

is a different problem altogether. As a result, some have pointed out that the method of the thorough constructionists has only achieved to compromise the critical capacity to expose the impossibility of the constructed reality by social consructionism (Kanamori, 2000, p. 219).

In contrast, John I. Kitsuse and his colleagues, who were criticised by Woolgar, are classified as 'strict constructionists'. Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) argue that the researcher has to capture the actor's definition of a situation more strictly to address the OG problem. However, we need to be careful as to what is meant by 'strict'. Nakagawa (1999) distinguishes two levels in the OG problem. The first is OG of the definition of the situation itself; there is no use for the method of social constructionism if an explanation is made by way of the perceived concepts of the researcher. Therefore we need to avoid OG at this level. The other level is OG concerning daily language. Even if we ignore this on purpose, the type of methodological contradiction which has been pointed out by Woolgar and others would not occur (Nakagawa, 1999, pp. 275–284). In other words, the method of the strict constructionists is a kind of declaration of intent that we should approximate the actor's definition of a situation as much as possible, if not to the level of daily language.

In short, what the strict constructionists aimed to do was not to confront the methodological contradiction Woolgar and his colleagues have pointed out but to elegantly dodge it. They have proposed a method to analyse socially constructed reality itself, and they were not at all concerned with the fact that the researcher's reality was also socially constructed. Furthermore, as the case of Woolgar shows, being obsessed with methodology and losing sight of simple research interest in the phenomenon to be observed would often end up making one a prisoner of one's theoretically loaded interpretation. Therefore, Nakagawa (2004) supports the strict constructionists

who dare not to apply the method back to the researchers. In short, it strictly adheres to the substantive aim to expose the self-evident nature of the socially constructed reality.

As we have seen, the participants in the methodological debates concerning social constructionism have right from the beginning been talking past each other. It follows that there is no merit in discussing which camp should more rightfully be supported.

On the other hand, there is a common concern that can be found in both. That is, both have been discussing the social construction of reality and the researcher who observes it separately. The strict constructionists, who focus on the substantive meaning of social constructionism, overlook the fact that the researchers themselves construct the reality. Even if scholars studying this issue are not concerned with the analysis of the specific reality that is constructed by the researchers, it is still a substantive problem for social constructionism if they are involved with construction of the reality (Nakagawa and Taira, 2006, pp. 317–320). On the other hand, the thorough constructionists, who emphasise interpretation by the researchers, appear to presuppose that the researchers have an interpretive process which 'correctly' analyses the actor's interpretation. This is what is called *methodological essentialism* (Matsushima, 2005; 2009). In other words, the thorough constructionists fail to comprehend that the researchers are as particular as the actors and that they are also involved in the social construction of reality (Rouse, 2001, pp. 196–7).

In short, regardless of whether one is a strict constructionist or a thorough one, the debate surrounding the methodology of social consructionism has isolated the researchers from the real world and as a result has come to bear resemblance to positivism, the very philosophy that social constructionism has rejected.

## 2.3 The new research agenda for social constructionism

So far, this article has re-examined the theoretical meaning of 'socially constructed reality' (2.1) and reviewed the methodological debate in social constructionism. By so doing, it has acknowledged that there is a risk of convergence between social constructionism and positivism, which social constructionism has been trying to overcome, as evidenced in an ill-focused debate (2.2).

This last sub-section in section 2 examines the problems that we need to tackle as a result of the preceding debate: to expand the scope of analysis regarding the practice of constructing a lived reality so as to clarify various phases of reality in which the researchers are substantively involved in (not just the reality for the researchers).

Steve Fuller points out that researchers are involved in the social construction of reality in all aspects of production, dissemination and consumption of scientific knowledge in today's knowledge society (Fuller, 1988 [2002]; 2002). He starts with the premise that knowledge produced by researchers is not beyond the reach of actors who construct a reality but is a public good that is a referent in the construction of a lived reality.

Fuller uses the *scientific management* method proposed by Frederick W. Taylor as a case to illustrate the fundamental relationship between the public nature of scientific knowledge and the construction of reality (Fuller, 1992, pp. 413–419; 1993, pp. 307–311). According to Fuller, scientific management is not something that explores what is already there and tries to uncover the law behind it, as assumed in positivism. Upon considering Taylor's management method, more concretely in its aspects of time management and task management, it becomes clear that scientific management is a result of the segmentation of

normative knowledge, or producing job units that had not existed before by way of *job breakdown*. At its base, we can see Taylor's belief system, that of someone brought up by a Quaker father and the mother who have ancestral ties with Puritan (Wren and Greenwood, 1998, pp. 134–140) as well as the exercise of power[2] based on efficiency, a concept that has been legitimised in modernity (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006, pp. 46–52).

What is important here, however, is that the scientific management method, which is characterised by the segmentation of knowledge, has allowed the construction of various realities through industrial production. Jobs which had been trusted to the workers were now managed by the firm. Tools which used to be the workers' personal property were now standardised and managed by the firm.[3] To the workers whose ultimate decision-making rights in doing the job were taken away in various ways, the management method proposed by Taylor was none other than rule of the workplace by the supervisor. For this reason, the confrontation between the employers and the International Union of Mechanics arose. At the Watertown Arsenal, where Taylor himself introduced time management, it even escalated to the sacking of foundry workers who refused to abide by the method. Taylor was summonsed to testify as a guilty party at the special inquiry set up at the demand of the labour union leaders to look into this incident. Quite simply, the responsibility of the knowledge manufacturer was

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[2] For instance, Taylor tried to pacify the resistance to the deprivation of the final say in work matters from the workers, which was brought about by the segmentation of knowledge through job breakdown by arguing that they are 'higher priced men' (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006, pp. 47–48). Here we can catch a glimpse of the exercise of power using efficiency as a stalking horse (by Taylor himself), which is the same as switching the point.

[3] One of the characteristics of company management in the US is the 'puzzle of ownership' in which not only financial ownership by the capitalist but also ownership of strategy by management and ownership of the tools and jobs by the workers are intricately entangled (Ito, 2009).

questioned.

But for Taylor, the objections from the workers were unexpected because his aim was not to merely improve the efficiency of the factory (meaning that the exploitation of the workers was not at all intended) but to eliminate labour disputes. He originally proposed the discriminatory payment-by-result system in order to redress the vicious circle in which the harder one worked the less the rate of pay became. At that time, employers reduced the unit price as output grew, in accord with the approach of *outcome management*, which was prevalent. Taylor's intention was to create a system in which hard-working employees would be remunerated fairly and therefore would have an incentive to work (Taylor, 1985, p. 861). This is why Taylor emphasised at the special committee hearing that his management method would reduce confrontation between employers and workers and as a result contribute to an increase in national wealth (U. S. Government Printing Office, 1912 [1947], pp. 17–18).

The reason why Taylor adopted the term 'scientific management method' emerged from these labour disputes. The term was originally coined by the 'people's lawyer', Louis D. Brandeis, in order to oppose the rail-fare rise triggered by the Eastern Rate Case.[4] Brandeis argued that if Taylor's management method, which was supposed to solve labour disputes and contribute to the growth of national wealth, were to be adopted, it would be possible to increase efficiency

in the railway business and, furthermore, to raise the workers' pay. We can see that the designation of the term 'scientific' to Taylor's management method was taken up by Brandeis as an ideological move, to legitimise his position.

However, Taylor certainly did not add the term 'scientific' to the management method he developed in Brandeis's step to defend his otherwise indefensible method. Ultimately, Taylor argued in *The Scientific Management Method* (1911) that his aim was neither to ensure co-prosperity of the employers and the workers, nor to overcome organisational slowdown, nor to propose a new pay system to achieve those two. In short, he completely changed his stance. It was in the end an incredibly simple argument: transition from 'empirical rule' to 'science' (pp. 24–25). Taylor did not, however, see his management method as a 'scientific' endeavour. The management method he came up with was not like metal cutting involving meticulous measurement; it was not any kind of science that lay people may imagine (pp. 116–117). Furthermore, Taylor was aware that even with insights from physics and physiology, which were the cutting-edge science of the time, one could not determine the optimal tasks for a worker (pp. 53–54). Still, at the special inquiry hearing, he asserted the system was not a subjective 'Taylor system' but a scientific management method (U. S. Government Printing Office, 1912 [1947], pp. 5–7). In this instance, what Taylor meant by 'science' was a virtue that leads humanity.

As we have seen, knowledge production by researchers is not like what positivism assumes it is; knowledge is not produced by observing reality as an outsider. Scientific knowledge is involved in the constitution of lived reality in all aspects of production, distribution, and consumption. This is expected when knowledge in business management is produced to address real problems in management on the assumption that it will be referred to by the firms and

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[4] Just before the public hearing by the State Trade Committee took place, Brandeis realised that they did not have a proper name under which to publicise Taylor's management method and gathered Taylor's students including Frank B. Gibreth and Henry L. Gantt to discuss a name. Brandeis pointed out that Taylor often used the word 'scientific' in his papers, and it was decided to call it the 'scientific management method'. Because this public hearing was widely reported by the newspapers and magazines, the 'scientific management method' attracted much attention, and because the scientific management method was then adopted by the Army's supply department, it led to the dispute at Watertown Arsenal, which in turn led to the setting up of the special inquiry committee (Wren 1994, pp. 120–121).

used to solve problems (Willmott, 2009, pp. 148–149). What researchers need is not the positivistic attitudes to expect naively that identification of the essence of the society at issue will uncover a law to solve the problem; they need constant, active participation in the constitution of reality, predicated on an understanding of the society through the production of knowledge. In the next section, we will examine the ways in which researchers' knowledge production is connected to the socially produced reality of the practice of business management, drawing from the fieldwork we conducted.

3. Knowledge production connected to the reality constructed by the Urgent Project System

In this section, we examine our fieldwork on the Urgent Project System (hereafter, 'the System'), a well-known system of Sharp Corporation intended to produce innovation. The article focuses on the fact that the System constructs a lived reality and that not only the actors but also the researchers are involved in various manners with this reality.

To summarize the conclusion beforehand, there are four aspects in which researchers' knowledge production is connected to the practice of business management via the System. First, the theory of business management uncovers new issues in business management when it's utilized to by the firms (3.1). Second, while researchers' knowledge production is primarily oriented to the act of theoretical revision, the knowledge is internalized in the context of involved actors to contribute to the solution of real problems (3.2). Third, researchers' production of theoretical knowledge nonetheless becomes involved in real political interaction (3.3). Fourth, although involved in the interaction, the knowledge produced by researchers still needs to be recognisable as public 'science' (3.4).

3.1 Management theory contributing to the formation of a problem of business management

The Urgent Project System has been explained from a variety of angles as an exemplary form of project organisation developed in Japan for developing new products by forming a cross-functional team which directly reports to the president. This article focuses on the fact that business management theory has been deeply involved in providing such explanations. In fact, lectures and writings by Sharp employees make frequent reference to explanations provided by business management theory. According to them, the System achieves innovation, such as the development of a new product, by cross-functionally mobilising a range of knowledge across departments and enabling flexible decision-making due to the allocation of special authorities where needed. In other words, the Urgent Project System has been described as a form of organisation which can overcome the problem characteristic of bureaucracy in which novelty is blocked due to departmental/sectional division and new initiatives are stifled by power relationships.

However, such explanations are creating new problems. For instance, Mr Katsuhiko Machida, the fourth president of Sharp, has stated the following:

> When I introduce Sharp's Urgent Project System in my lectures and so on, all the business leaders in attendance say, 'This is such a good idea. We will definitely try it ourselves'. But when we meet in a few years' time and I ask them how it went, they would invariably say 'well, it did not work for us'. (Machida, 2008, p. 157)

We have also frequently encountered the response 'systems like the Urgent Project System can be found everywhere these days',[5] when we tell corporate leaders that we are conducting fieldwork on Sharp's System. Advocating dismantling bureaucracy is now

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[5] On the other hand, some said it was spooky that although a cross-functional organizational structure which is with special authorities was adopted everywhere, it only works for Sharp.

considered common sense that there is no need to refer to business management theory. In fact, since the overcoming of bureaucracy has now become common sense, it lost its appeal as an insightful explanation of Sharp's Urgent Project System.

The Urgent Project System office, which is responsible for planning and management and has facilitated our fieldwork, was seriously concerned with this problem. The disenchantment found in the popular attitude toward the System has become an urgent problem in terms of its ontological security. As we explain later, our fieldwork was initiated as a part of the Industry-Academia Partnership for Human Resource Development project by the Japanese Ministry of the Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Our first point of contact with Sharp was therefore the Human Resource Development Centre in the Human Resources Department. As the fieldwork progressed, the main point of contact shifted to the Urgent Project System office, with which we were put in touch by the Human Resource Development Centre. This was because those who were most in need of a new justification of the System were at the System office itself.

3.2 Production of knowledge in business management and practical problem solving

Led by the System office in the search for a new justification, we were then exposed to a different side of the project from what had been offered as an official explanation.

As mentioned earlier, the conventional explanation had it that creativity was nurtured in the System by gathering members cross-functionally from the firm. However, we found that existing networks were used in selecting members for urgent projects. Once the implementation of an urgent project was decided, the selection of the department that would be responsible for the project would follow, and the designated department would then nominate the personnel necessary for the project. As a result, if a number of projects which require similar skills were to come in succession, the project teams would be constituted by largely the same members.

Furthermore, urgent project teams were not separate from existing power relationships and obligation. As a project is set up and the lead department or section is selected, the responsibility of running the project is transferred to the head of the department or section. The project chief who drives the project is not the person who has proposed the theme but instead someone who has a strong presence and is known to everyone in the department. As a result, the same people are repeatedly nominated as project chief (e.g., Sakurai and Fujimura, 2008).

As long as the conventional portrayal of urgent project team as a debureaucratized organisation is accepted, the above description of the System, which is so different from the official one, would never have been disclosed to us, researchers from the outside. However, some doubts had already been raised about the conventional description. The Urgent Project System office was therefore in search of a new understanding of the System.

Faced with a reality different from the publicly circulated explanation of debureaucratization, our concern as researchers was revising the conventional theories of bureaucracy (Urano and Matsushima, 2011). Max Weber's main argument about the function of bureaucracy can be simply stated that bureaucracy possesses a principle which enables organisational behaviour without co-ordinating specific behaviour of individuals under rational and legitimate rules (compliance to formalised rules. However, bureaucracy, which has been described as an 'iron cage', evokes a pessimistic image that has obscured its fundamental function, and the inflexible side of bureaucracy has

often been emphasised.[6] One of the reasons why innovation is discussed as the key virtue in business administration today is in reaction to the stifling image of bureaucracy. It goes without saying that debureaucratization (i.e., bypassing the rules and being liberated from existing power relationship) is no more than an antithesis to the image of bureaucracy. In addition, innovation attempted by debureaucratization was originally a function that was expected of a bureaucracy to enable flexible responses in a constantly changing environment.

What must not be forgotten here is the fact that no matter how eager we are to revise theories of business management, what the actor, in this case, the Urgent Project System office, wants to know is not a new management theory (or correct theoretical explanation) itself. With the assistance of the System office, we came to focus on bureaucracy, and it was all because the problem they were facing was created because of a theory of business management (in this case, the theory of bureaucracy).

Consequently, the System office was engaged with translating our explanations into their own vocabulary and reconstituting them as 'useable knowledge' rather than referring to them as they were. In fact, the System office, representatives of which accompanied our fieldwork throughout, was in the process of producing its own vocabulary and analogies to explain the System. For instance, the Urgent Project System was described as a 'very sentimental institution' as well as, variously, 'the weapon of last resort, which can be repeatedly used as a trump card because it is so useful, but needs constant attention'; 'it is the magic feather which encouraged Dumbo the elephant to fly when challenging a difficult issue which is widely seen as

high-risk'; and 'a pampered and talented horse which chooses its rider and which can be difficult from time to time'.

As we have seen, our knowledge production itself did not solve problems in the area of business management. However, theories proposed by researchers create a new reality by being translated by actors. The System office acquired 'practitioner's insight, which is so self-evident yet easy to overlook' through interactions with us and found that 'it has led us to an answer to the problem of "what is the Urgent Project System?", a question which had been very vaguely asked among ourselves'.[7] Obviously this does not mean that the System office is now making direct reference to the theory we have proposed to proclaim the essence of the Urgent Project System lies in bureaucracy. But the vocabulary they have developed for themselves constitutes new knowledge for their own problem-solving process.

3.3 The politics of knowledge production

While researchers' primary concern is usually directed to revising theories, it's not that our knowledge production does not take place independent of external realities. Our knowledge production is also involved with political interactions arising from differences in the practice of management.

As already mentioned, our fieldwork was initiated as part of the Industry-Academia Partnership for Human Resource Development project by MEIT. As seen in the phrase 'knowledge-infrastructure society', what is now sought after in society is creative individuals that create new industry who are also highly developed, intelligent, and talented. With this as guidance from MEIT, we took part in the project with the aim to develop and train leaders that would actively lead enterprise innovation. The Urgent Project System

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[6] According to Clegg and Lounsbury (2009), the origin of this image of inflexible bureaucracy lies in Parsons' mistranslation of *stahlhartes Gehäuse* as the 'iron case', when it would be better translated as the 'steel-hardened shall or casing' (p. 119).

[7] Personal e-mail communication from Mr A. from the Urgent Project System secretariat on 9 September 2010.

was included in the project because its benefit in staff development had begun to be widely touted.

The reason they began touting the benefit of the System in staff development probably had to do with the fact that the explanation of the System as a debureacratized organisation had become overused. Innovation is not a mere organisational mechanism; what is important is the individuals who will create innovation. The System is equipped with a mechanism through which such individuals are developed. What is more, those individuals whose talent is developed through participation in urgent project then become staff members who take on the future running of urgent projects and ultimately the company itself. In short, the System is seen as a model example of 'leadership chain reaction'. In fact, Sharp's executives touched upon this when they gave lectures. [8]

The staff development effect has not only been discussed in talks and articles. We have also found evidence that confirms the System's positive effect on staff development in our fieldwork. For instance, all technology-related directors at Sharp had worked on urgent projects in the past. There were also cases in which technical staff members who were not up to scratch for an urgent project were nonetheless sent to join the team because their departments or sections wanted their abilities to develop further. Furthermore, ex-members of the HR department who were in charge of staff development would argue that staff development in general should be pursued through the System. [9]

It goes without saying that we did not conclude that the System was organised for the purpose of staff development, solely based on the accounts of the actors. It is true that there were a number of new products developed through urgent projects. However, we considered it is not an exaggeration to point out that one of the main effective functions of the System is staff development.

At the same time, the Urgent Project System office, which acted as the facilitator of our fieldwork, responded to our conclusion regarding staff development immediately and with concern. They did not want the purpose of the System to be 'misunderstood' as staff development even as an unexpected consequence. [10]

There is no point in trying to figure out which position is right. What is required here is to understand why this conflict in views has emerged. The clue lies in the fact that, from the System office's point of view, the purpose of the Urgent Project System had to be for quickly solving urgent issues that may change the future of Sharp.

The Urgent Project System has not only developed new products. It has been engaged with a number of issues, including re-organisation of the company in order to address Sharp's environmental impact and natural resource exhaustion, reforming the internal IT system, and reviewing the sales organisation. Each of these problems was an urgent issue the solution to which played a role in determining Sharp's future.

However, if staff development is touted as a benefit of the System, it would lead actors to feel that it's acceptable for an urgent project to fail solving urgent problems, since at least staff would be being trained and developed. This would lead to a benign attitude to

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[8] 'Leadership chain reaction' has been proposed by Kanai (2008), who is one of the authors of this article. Kanai was chairing the lecture ('leadership and climate for the human resource cultivation lecture' hosted by Japan society for chief human officer, held on 21, May, 2009) in which leadership chain reaction was mentioned.

[9] This corresponds to 'theory-in-use' as used in Schön (1983).

[10] At the lecture in which the 'leadership chain reaction' was mentioned, there was a question from the floor whether some individuals were assigned to an urgent project for the purpose of training and development. To this, the System secretariat replied that the Urgent Project System was not for staff development and that no staff was deliberately assigned to an urgent project for the purpose of training and development.

the failure of urgent project to address the problems. It is conceivable to regard staff development as one of the issues that Sharp faces and, in fact, one of the ex-HR managers clearly held this view. However, the System office regards the same situation differently, as mentioned above: it would undermine the System's *raison d'être* if there were a 'way out' for urgent projects. This illustrates the fact that even researchers who are engaged with the revision of theories are connected to real politics, in which the different intentions held by actors in different positions collide.

## 3.4 Business management as science

Last, we would like to examine the meaning of the commoditisation of the knowledge we produce as 'science', as an aspect of the connection of researchers to the socially constructed reality. As discussed in section 2.2, the management theory we revised based on our fieldwork did not directly solve the problem of the System office. Sure enough, alerted to their concern, we have uncovered the side of the System which could not be accounted for by publicly circulated explanation—its *inbuilt bureaucratic principles*. We then engaged to revise the theory in order to describe more accurately what we saw. In contrast, the System office was not concerned with the theoretical point of whether bureaucracy can underpin innovation. This was the reason why they were engaged with developing their own more practically oriented analogies and knowledge which could be used in their reality while we were busy with theoretical reflection.

This is not to say, however, that the System office and Sharp were completely oblivious of or uninterested in the theory we were developing as a research finding. The case study we compiled by re-evaluating the bureaucratic principles was checked thoroughly for publication. It was read not only by the System office, our facilitator, and the respondents, who provided us with information through interviews and so on, but also

by the heads of R&D and HR at Sharp, who had explained the Urgent Project System to the public through lectures and talks, as well as the vice president. The document went through numerous revisions, taking more than half a year from the first draft; in the end we exchanged a formal contract for joint development with an official seal.[11] In drafting this joint development contract, the System office was most insistent that the following wording should be inserted: the documented case study 'would not be used except for educational and research purposes'.

What is intriguing here is that they felt the need to examine very closely a theoretical exploration which was not of much interest to them. This is because they had been using the theories of business management, which was developed and presented as a 'science'. The theory we have produced while led by the System office naturally contradicts this official explanation. The System office felt that it was beyond their capacity to gauge what kind of impact the publication of an explanation which 'goes beyond [the official explanation] by miles'[12] would have when it is published as a scientific finding.

Furthermore, using debureaucratization to convey the Urgent Project System is effective when debureaucratization is commonly accepted as today. In other words, by making the use of management theories, one can justify and legitimise initiatives. In a sense, Sharp has been making good use of management theories in explaining the System. From Sharp's point of view, while explanations given by famous management scholars may not be entirely convincing, it would be foolish not to use the message of debureaucratization at times when it is the most effective means to internally and externally

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[11] Upon the signing of this joint development contract, Urano, Matsushima and Kanai (2010) was published, describing the process.

[12] Personal e-mail communication from Mr A. from the System secretariat on 3 February 2010.

communicate the position of the System as being responsible for the company's future. Our revision of the bureaucratic principles could therefore be seen as carrying the danger of ruining such a resource.

However, as we have repeatedly stated, the official rationale for the System already contained problems. Therefore, neither Sharp nor the System office necessarily viewed negatively the revision of management theory based on the findings on the System They did not ask for our seal to be stamped on the joint development contract because they wanted to hide our research findings away from the public gaze. However, they were concerned that our attempt to review the bureaucratic principles when there are various prevailing theories of bureaucracy and their usage as ideology was common could lead to a misunderstanding that Sharp's Urgent Project System was phony institution. Notwithstanding this concern, what they wished for from us was a 'scientific' explanation of the System as a mechanism for creative activities unique to Sharp.

4. Conclusion

We have reflected upon the rise and fall of social constructionism and argued that the theoretical meaning of 'social construction' lies in the way it captures various aspects of the constitution of realities by focusing on 'society' as objectified existence (2.1). In addition, by reviewing the methodological debate, we have argued that it is not enough to regard the socially constructed reality as an object of observation (2.2) and that the knowledge we—researchers—produce is publicly shared 'science' which is used in the substantive construction of reality 2.3). Our fieldwork at Sharp has also revealed specific phases in which researchers are connected to the practice of management through the System. To sum up, what the article has been arguing is that researchers are invariably involved with the social construction of

reality. This is a simple and rather obvious point. However, it has rather profound implications.

That's because if researchers are involved in the construction of reality, the normative nature of the knowledge that they produce must be presupposed, and its utility becomes the focus of questions. It is not because social constructionism takes a so-called post-modern stance that this complicated problem arises. In positivism it is held that scientific knowledge is useful because of the superiority of the researchers in the act of exploration of laws or regular patterns behind the facts (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 5). However, it is not inevitable that laws and regularity in facts will be found. There is no reason in that instance why researchers should occupy an advantageous position, and above all, there is no reason why researchers' knowledge would be useful. The various assumptions on which positivism is built are merely norms socially constructed by researchers who are conscious of natural science.

This kind of attitudes still survives in the social sciences, which should be examining lived realities rather than striving for objectivity. Even the post-modernists who reject positivism still hold the aim of science as the accurate description of reality while placing oneself outside of what is being described. According to the anthropologist James Clifford, this reflects the persistence of the ideology that claims the transparency of expression and the intuitiveness of experience (Clifford, 1986, p. 2) and is an expression of strategic opposition by those who are afraid of the collapse of clear criteria for evaluation (Clifford, 1986, p. 7).

But as we witnessed in our fieldwork on the System, management theory created a management problem (3.1) and the production of knowledge by the researchers was also part of the politics of the real practice of management (differences in positions) (3.3). The theory we developed is not something that would

directly lead to the solution of the problems the actors had (it leads to problem-solving once translated into their own vocabulary) (3.2). On the other hand, our theory was expected to be 'scientific' and publicly sharable (3.4). This illustrates the fact that business management theory is embedded in practice, which already constitutes reality in a complicated manner. Researchers are not supposed to assume there is a theory that is distinguishable from the practice and then to ask whether that theory is useful in practice to begin with.

In the past, Kurt Lewin declared that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1943 [1951], p. 169). What Lewin meant is not as simple as saying that 'good research will in the end be useful'. Inspired by traditional American pragmatism, Lewin proposed 'Action Research', [13] which aimed at research practice thoroughly based in reality, [14] as shown in sayings such as 'no research without action and no action without research' and 'the best way of understanding a system that is constituted by human beings is to try to change it'. What we should do is not question the utility of scientific knowledge but instead try to comprehend utility as one of the constitutive conditions of science.

To conclude this article, we would like to remind the readers that the last lecture by Professor Tadao Kagono, Professor Emeritus at the University of Kobe, one of the leading scholars promoting positivistic research in business management in Japan, was entitled 'In defence of normative business management'.

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[13] Argyris (1993) proposes 'Action Science', an approach which aims to produce a theory that would be useful in solving real problems, drawing from Lewin's idea of Action Research. It should be mentioned here that the concept of the leadership chain reaction, which was given to the Urgent Project System but rejected by the System secretariat, was not proposed as a simple descriptive model but as a way of solving the problem of developing staff who were leadership material.

[14] This is what he repeatedly told Douglas M. McGregor of MIT and the young Edgar H. Schein.

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