



UNIVERSITY
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Teaching tension

The link between objectivity and social construction

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plan

- 1. INTRODUCING THE TENSION**
constructionist vs. anti-constructionist stances on the ACRL Framework
- 2. REFRAMING TRUTH**
as a guiding norm for information evaluation
- 3. OBJECTION: POST-TRUTH**
distracts from encouraging better practices of justificatory responsibility
- 4. LATERAL + VERTICAL INTERPRETATION**
context and construction as essential tools stabilizing meaning and evaluating information
- 5. EXAMPLES FROM CLASS**
malapropisms as an entry point for lateral interpretation
citation as relationality, respect, and reciprocity

tension



ACRL Framework

AUTHORITY IS CONSTRUCTED AND CONTEXTUAL

Credibility is partially determined by the needs of the information user and the information creator's standing within a context (ACRL, 2016).

Note:

For the sake of brevity, I will use the term 'construction' to denote both social construction and context.

construction + context

constructionism

The idea that our concepts, language, practices, and many of the objects we use could have been otherwise. Constructionist theorists place varying degrees of emphasis on this contingency (Hacking, 1999; Haslinger, 2012; Mallon, 2016)

contextualism

The notion that various factors, such as history, social practices, linguistic conventions, and material conditions impact a community of interpreters in their communication and interpretation. Statements can have different meanings depending on the context (Hacking, 1999; Haslinger, 2012; Recanati, 2004).

two stances

1. ANTI-CONSTRUCTIONISM

- Construction undermines the ability to determine authority and/or accuracy
- There are important ways in which things are correct or incorrect
- Construction = post-truth

2. CONSTRUCTIONISM

- Affirms the FRAMEWORK (with qualifications)
- Questions and/or denies the legitimacy of stable 'correct' or 'incorrect' concepts and categories (e.g., LCC and LCSH)
- Concepts and categories *seem* real because they are entrenched, often through the use of power

main similarity

both anti-con + con agree
that:

context and construction
destabilize concepts and categories,
ultimately undermining notions of
"truth."

main difference

anti-con sees construction
as illegitimate and
untenable

con sees construction as
legitimate and necessary

two questions

a.

is construction worth the
loss of truth
as a goal?

b.

are anti-con
and con mutually
exclusive?

my answer to
both questions
is, "no."

conceptual adjustment

CONSTRUCTION AND CONTEXT

- Are dependent on concepts like truth, warrant, accuracy, and correctness
- Can be leveraged to strengthen information evaluation practices
- Are necessary for meaningful interpretation of information, including assertions

reframing truth



what is truth?

1. **SIDESTEP ABSTRACT AND/ OR METAPHYSICAL TRUTH**
2. **TRUTH AS A PROPERTY**
What is the property that makes _____ true? (Wrenn, 2015)
3. **TRUTH-EVALUABLE INFORMATION**
What is the property that makes **information** true?
4. **FOCUSING ON TESTIMONY**
Evaluating second-hand information is a big part of academic research.

assertion

1. DECLARATIVE ACT

Assertions, in this context, are semiotic declarations, often expressed in the form of linguistic statements. Assertions are actions. We do things with assertions (e.g., we claim).

2. COMMITMENT

When one asserts, one commits to a position, sincerely or insincerely, even if that position is modified and/or negotiated.

3. TRUTH EVALUABLE

Assertions are evaluable using truth-related concepts (e.g., accuracy). They can be true or false, in some sense.

WE CAN EVALUATE ASSERTIONS AS BEING MORE-OR-LESS CORRECT

Therefore, assertions are constrained by **norms** of our social practices, which includes coordination between agents and our causal interactions with our shared world.

norm(s) of assertion

OVERVIEW

Implicit or explicit rules, guidelines, and/or responsibilities that are internal to and govern what counts as a *warranted assertion*. (Brandom, 1989; Lackey, 2007; McKinnon, 2015)

EXAMPLES OF PROPOSED NORMS

1. One must *know* something in order to assert it. (Williamson, 2000).
2. One must *reasonably believe* something in order to assert it. (Lackey, 2007).
3. One must have *supportive reasons* for something in order to assert it. These supportive reasons vary depending on context. (McKinnon, 2015).

basic norm of assertion

“JUSTIFICATORY RESPONSIBILITY”

(Brandom, 1989, p. 641)

1. "**Commitment**": putting an assertion within a context of prior assertions and licensing it for use in future assertions (Brandom, 2001, p.190). ---->Committing to the idea that an assertion (i) *entails* further assertions and (ii) is *entailed by* prior assertions.
2. "**Entitlement**" : Using one's commitments to provide justifications in a manner that fits social practices, including triangulating our beliefs and perceptions with our community and shared world (Brandom, 2001, p.190)
3. **Interest in fulfilling norms of trust and reliability. Distrust and skepticism is contingent of an "overall framework of trust"** (Shapin, 1994, p.19).

*We place our assertion in a justificatory framework, in "the *logical space of reasons*, of justifying and being able to justify what one says." (Sellars, 1997/1953, p.76).

what is truth? redux

TRUTH, FOR OUR PRACTICAL PURPOSES, IS
THE PROPERTY THAT MAKES
ASSERTIONS/TESTIMONY WARRANTED

FULFILLMENT OF JUSTIFICATORY
RESPONSIBILITY, INCLUDING
TRUSTWORTHINESS, AS A STARTING POINT
FOR A PARTICULAR INFORMATIONAL GOAL
(I.E., ASSESSING INFORMATIONAL VERACITY)

post- truth



objection

Doesn't post-truth present a challenge to your notion of warrant? Isn't post-truth an example of assertions made without concern for warrant or the norms that determine warrant?

Do norms matter if they can be flaunted, such as in the case of post-truth?

Post-truth and/or post-truth-like ideas are raised by both constructionism and anti-constructionism.

- **Constructionism:** one cannot justifiably apply concepts related to true/false and correct/incorrect. This is a post-truth realization.
- **Anti-constructionism:** Ideas related to constructionism and contextualism entail post-truth thinking.

definition

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

"Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("post-truth," 2018).

elaboration

APPARENT CONDITIONS OF POST-TRUTH

- (i) The proliferation of false information
- (ii) The attitude that truth is, at best, a convenient coincidence that can be superseded by ideological, instrumental, and/or emotional concerns
- (iii) The attitude that acting on certain beliefs, specifically false ones, can be a good in and of itself.

example

LOW HANGING FRUIT: TRUMP

(i) The proliferation of false information:

Misleading and inaccurate tweets of videos

(ii) The attitude that truth is, at best, a convenient coincidence that can be superseded by ideological, instrumental, and/or emotional concerns:

Inaccuracy was deemed less important than 'imminent threat.'

(iii) The attitude that acting on certain beliefs, specifically false ones, can be a good in and of itself:

There was something good about these misleading tweets--it was apparently a matter of national significance.

problems with this view

(i) The example shows a *concern* for truthfulness. Trump was challenged and, in his own way, attempted to justify his views.

(ii) Instrumental falsehoods are usually put forward and/or believed for a reason (e.g., another perceived justification or truth). Post-truth seems to offhandedly allow for widespread delusion. This is a strong and unwarranted claim.

* Post-truth seems to be, at best, a convenient yet overly reductive shorthand to describe assertions we disagree with (that are often legitimately problematic!).

Can be used by anyone against any view, e.g., Trump's appropriation of "fake news."

some objections

(A) Assertions made for convenience or comfort are still conditioned by an interest in 'getting things right.'

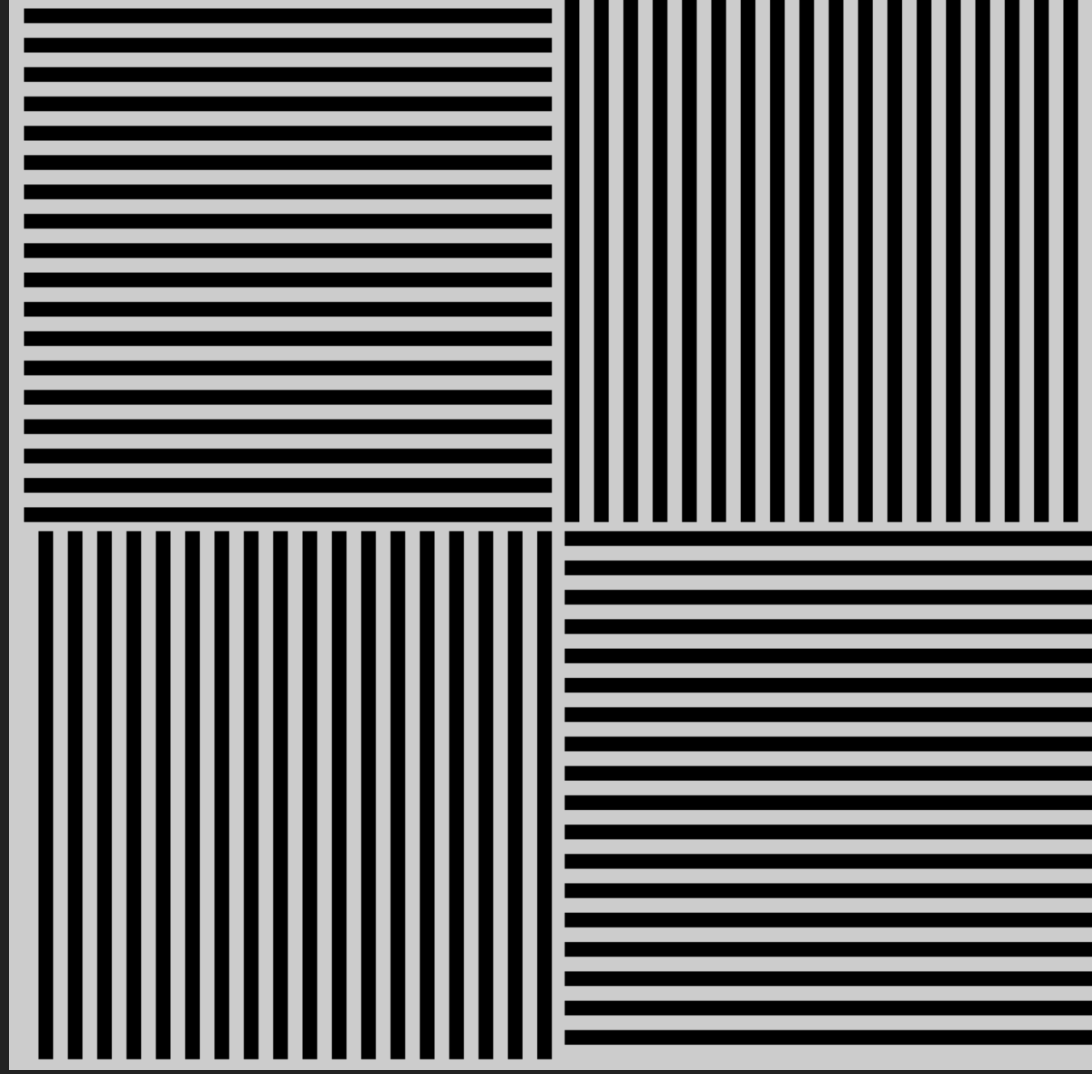
(B) Assertions made "*by virtue of the absurd*" seem, in most cases, to be less valuable than warranted assertions (Kierkegaard, 1843/2006, p.60). All things being equal, having warrant is a type of good in making assertions that nullifies the value of absurd.

the upshot

POST-TRUTH:

1. **LACKS PLAUSIBILITY**
It is difficult to figure out how one can be sincerely post-truth, Given the conceptual/linguistic value of truth + value of warranted assertions over falsehoods. There is still a widespread concern with getting things right.
2. **LACKS COHERENCE + PLAUSIBILITY**
Viciously circular. It implies that there is no concern for truth by being concerned with truth.
3. **MISTAKES TRUTH WITH PASSING AS TRUTH**
Saying that there is "no truth," "too many truths," or that interpreters don't care about truth, confuses the endorsement of *cognitively primed assertions* with warranted assertions.
4. **CONVENIENT, BUT A RED HERRING**
Post-truth paints the majority of people as operating without a concern for truth—that their emotions override any type of practice that has truth-orientation. *It distracts from trying to encourage better practices of justificatory responsibility.*

leveraging the space of reasons



interpretation

LATERAL (e.g., taking bearings)

Determining the warrant and meaning of an assertion through its *context*. For textual documents, this includes:

- Reviewing secondary sources cited/footnoted in the original text. Is the original source's interpretation accurate? Do the secondary sources provide more meaning?
- Reading commentary, analysis, and criticism of the original text
- Evaluating the historico-political context of the original text and its author(s).

VERTICAL (e.g., close reading)

Determining the warrant and meaning of assertions more or less on its own terms.

For textual documents, this includes:

- Looking up definitions of complex terms, jargon, and non-English words (e.g., Latin)
- Assessing the internal consistency and coherence of the text. Are there contradictory facts or arguments? Are there leaps in the logic of the text (e.g., *non sequitur*)?
- Identifying clear indications of meaning (e.g., a thesis statement, arguments, or beliefs)
- Working out the structure of the text

Source: Wineburg, S., & McGrew, S. (2017). *Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. ID 3048994). Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

examples from class



Citation

INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES + CITATION

- In general, students were not citing sources, let alone citing according to a given style.
- I consulted with students, elders, and Indigenous professors, and relevant literature to emphasize the relational nature of citation, rather than focusing primarily on academic integrity.
- As a result, we framed citation in terms of Indigenous scholar and educator Evelyn Steinhauer's criteria for research: "Respect, Reciprocity and Relationality (as cited in Wilson, 2008, p.58).
- **Result:** instructors said citation was more prevalent as a practice among students. This did not markedly improve the alignment with citation style standards.

example technique to
emphasize lateral
interpretation

MALAPROPISMS + COMMUNICATION

At a BBQ, a friend tells you, "I'm going to get a *hutdog*."



+



"hut" + "dog"

WE NEED TO APPEAL TO SALIENT CONTEXTUAL
INGREDIENTS TO MAKE SENSE OF THIS STATEMENT

conclusions

1.

TRUTH, CONTEXT + CONSTRUCTION ARE MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE.

con/anti-con debate leads to theoretical paralysis. I have proposed an adjustment to remedy this that seems to fit our practices

2.

TRUTH/WARRANT ARE THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL PRACTICES, INCLUDING INFORMATION EVALUATION

3.

IT SEEMS TO BE THE CASE THAT MOST PEOPLE FEEL COMFORTABLE MAKING USE OF WARRANT AND FRAMING THEIR VIEWS IN TERMS OF JUSTIFICATION

even making the case for post-truth or constructionist ideas, one makes a case within a context that follows norms related to warrant

4.

WE NEED TO MAKE EFFORTS TO MAKE OUR NORMS OF ASSERTION EXPLICIT THROUGH CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF OUR SOCIAL PRACTICES AND PEDAGOGY. ONCE THIS IS DONE WE CAN REVISE THEM ITERATIVELY. NO NECESSARY END TO THIS PROCESS OF INQUIRY.



Questions?

Thanks

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