

# **Imaginative Constructionism in the Social Theories of Randall Collins**

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## **Abstract**

The main feature of the imaginative constructionism in Randall Collins' works is the emphasis on the emotional component of the interactive ritual chains that form the social structure and are represented by repetitive microsituations. Thus, the model of the sociological imagination of the sociologist includes such social constructs as symbolic interaction and emotional drama of everyday life. These constructs are expressed, in particular, in all sorts of imagined communities, which are visual symbols of belonging to society and the denial of social inattention by the demonstration of the permanent inclusion.

**Key words:** imagination, constructionism, solidarity, interaction, Randall Collins

## **Introduction**

Given in the article approach (imaginative constructionism) can be used to analyze the formation of social theories taking into account peculiarities of cognitive, historical and social processes that affect the intellectual production. The combination of the processes of imagination and construction is creative and synthesizing by its nature which allows to consider from different perspectives and even to reconstruct existing social theory.

Having the pre combined concepts of imagination and constructionism it would be, however, necessary to start with a differentiated examination of each term separately. In this paper, along with the already known and existing in the Western European tradition theories of imagination I also consider the tradition of the Russian-speaking social thought, modern and classical.

The term "imagination" was widespread in the Russian-speaking environment of the social sciences after active treatment of the J. Golosovker's texts. The philosopher and his intellectual followers emphasize the difference between the new Latin-formed word "imaginative" from the usual for Russian ear word "imagination." And, although the core of the word "imagination" in Russian and in English have the same meaning as "image" but the term "imaginative" decided to attribute some wider implications.

Imagination was explained through the basic concept of "image" by W. Hegel (in Stern, 2002), S. Langer (1957), J.-P. Sartre (2004). They say about the image as a cognitive sense-conscious mental activity.

It should be noted that the concept of image is multilevel enough. "Image" is often understood as a visualization of a real object or the object existing only in mind activity (it is used to be called "imagination"). This way of understanding of the «image» through the visualization is the most close to the Latin root meaning "a picture". In addition, in Russian speaking tradition it is customary to speak about lifestyle, way of thinking, meaning in this case, the established course of everyday life and a set of actions of the individual using the root "image" in the core of the words defining these concepts.

Understanding imagination as a productive capacity is also typical for G.W.Leibniz (in Heidegger, 1983), I. Kant (1994), I.G. Fichte (1995), M. Heidegger (1983), R. G. Collingwood (1964), S. Katrechko (1999).

The tradition of Russian philosophy is inclined to choose as a starting point in the interpretation of the imagination the category of creativity and sometimes even identify

these two concepts: "to say "imagination" meaning to say" creativity " (Katrechko, 1999). This approach can be traced in the work of B. P. Vysheslavitsev (2010), J. Golosovker (1987), A. F. Losev (2003), S. Borchikov (in Katrechko, 1999). S. Borchikov defines imagination as the mental capacity of sense-consciousness that has the content, form, an embodiment of the object and the corresponding epistemological functions.

In formulating the definitions of the imagination, I would like to focus on understanding the imagination as the ability to reason, in this case, of course, given the scope of sensory experience and consciousness.

My concept of imaginative constructionism can be partly described by the following scheme:

Imagination (as mental ability) – Symbolism (as a technique of mind) – Ritual (embodiment of the structure of the thought process through the activity).

Before I move on to the main part of my paper, I would like to start with the definition of "imaginative constructionism." In many ways this concept is similar to that proposed by C .R. Mills (1959) "sociological imagination" only without reference to the substantive scope of sociology and therefore somewhat more abstract.

Among the theories which anticipated the constructivism there are phenomenological sociology of A. Schutz (1970), cultural-historical psychology of L.S. Vygotsky (1983), as well as symbolic interactionism of G. Mead (1934). The central idea of constructivism is the idea of cognition not as the reflection and representation, but as an active construction of the comprehensible image of objects and events in the mind of the subject.

We can say that the constructivists mostly consider communication as a cognitive process of understanding the world, but the social constructionists - as a social process of creating the world. Constructivism takes on top perception, and social constructionism - action, unless, of course, we do not apply to all these terms as mutually exclusive (Pearce 1995: 98).

Besides, as suggested by constructionists, all that we think as real, true, good, valuable and desirable, is a product of social exchange, coordination and interaction (K.J. Gergen, 1985). J. Raskin (2002) points out that both constructivism and constructionism share the view on knowledge as a process of interpretation. In addition, the similarity in these theories can be summarized: 1) knowledge is the construction, 2) the truth is plural, and 3) the criterion of a "good" knowledge is suitability. The difference in the theory of constructivism and constructionism is that the last does not focus on the individual, but on

the interaction and conversational symbolism. Randall Collins himself believes that the social construction of ideas is much deeper than a simple dichotomy between logic and empirical data, on the one hand, and social constraints - on the other. In addition, Randall Collins also uses such a concept as a sociological eye. All these terms mean a nontrivial view of society and innovative ways to explain it. Hence I can try to define the term "sociological imagination". Sociological imagination - is the process of creating new social constructs, their reinterpretation, verbalization and / or visualization under the influence of already existing social theories, by comparison, contrast and social construction, including historical and practical testing of these constructs. I will try to show here this kind of intellectual way of imaginative constructionism of Randall Collins.

We can see that the social constructionist tradition inherited ideas of E. Durkheim about understanding of the role of knowledge and concepts as a collective (social phenomena), from J. Piaget they adopted aspects of the social construction of meaning and reality, and from S. Freud the process by which the external realities of people's surroundings become part of their inner world and worldview was accepted. By studying the career of Randall Collins, we see that the inclusion of these theories in the field of his scientific interests is due, among other things, to the events of his personal life. For example, his interest in geopolitics and Gofman's ideas about the front and back stage is due to his living in a diplomat family, observing the mass protest movements in the 60s brought an interest of sociologist in the dissemination of emotional energy, and education in a boarding school of New England let him to trace the moments of social stratification and network interaction.

Drawing parallels between the social context and scientific research of Randall Collins one can trace how discourse influences the creation of his social theory. However, it should be noted that this construction was possible, in particular, thanks to well developed imagination - a process that "does not repeat the same combination and the same forms of individual perceptions, accumulated before, but create some new series from the accumulated impressions"(Vygotsky, 1983: 46).

### **1. Symbolic interactionism as a result of microanalysis**

In fact, sociology's aim is the observation and description of everyday life. According to Randall Collins all society consists of a series of interactive rituals. Thus, he concludes that social communication creates a basic repertoire of ideas. There are several similar mechanisms, each of them runs through conversational and nonverbal interaction, and they involve emotions, cultural capital and personal reputation. These are micro resources which lead to macro consequences because they affect the way repetitive encounters are organized (Collins, 1983).

According to Randall Collins the reality that is being investigated is always a larger or smaller number of microsituations. Empirical reality appears to us in the form of a specific microdetail. Consequently, repetitive microsituations are what we call social structure, and repetitive answers to the questions we call the theory. One of the universal theories, allowing more or less convincingly answer the question about what keeps people together and why this mechanism works is the theory of emotional solidarity. About this mechanism in his works speaks E. Durkheim (1995). His ideas have continued and rethinking in the theories of Randall Collins.

And another sociological theory of a very wide scope, which tells us the conditions under which symbols are generated and cognitively bound, is the theory of interaction rituals. It connects symbols to social membership, and hence both to emotions of solidarity and to the structure of social groups. Such a theory accounts for variations in solidarity and belief found across different social structures, and for the dynamics of individual lives.

Speaking about symbolic interactionism it should be noted that it was formed in two ways. The first way of it is a definition of microsituations, i.e. understanding that society is not a structure but a process. Reality itself is socially constructed and the fact that it takes the same forms is the result of identification of the situations by negotiating agents.

In contrast to the symbolic interactionists, social constructionists do formulation of philosophical arguments in favor of discursive grounds of "I". They can be called revisionists in the sense that they do not create their own general theory (as opposed to interactionism), and only are reviewing other disciplines in the light of the main postulate of social and discursive origin of the "I", theorizing about the serious implications of this postulate, in particular, in philosophy, literary theory and psychology (Carbaugh, 1996: 6).

The second way is the theory of social roles. Theorists of the symbolic interactionism have also introduced the concept of front and back stage of interaction.

Everyday constructed subjective reality is a combination of symbolism of the front stage and the "anti symbolism" of the back stage. The front stage of the scientific community for example is the creation and accumulation of intellectual capital. And at the same time the back scene is the struggle for redistribution of wealth and status roles. In economics, on the contrary, the front stage is the redistribution of wealth, while the backstage is the possession of intangible status, which allows you to be included in a particular community. The world of politics and diplomacy consists of a cold mannerism and a strict focus on the protection of public interests in the front stage while the backstage is the everyday life and interaction at the level of close circle of friends. Thus,

we can assume that ritual interaction is supported by internal antagonisms. This means that emotional stress, which supports emotional solidarity, arises from contrasting front stage and backstage interaction.

I would like to emphasize this constant internal conflict of social interaction about which speaks Collins. In order to show how micro-interactions are transformed into the class structure of modern society he proposed the concept of networks of ritual interaction.

In particular, Collins shows that the theory of emotional solidarity at the micro level provides an opportunity for the conflict theory to explain class diversity of cultures. It builds from these interactions stratified network, which creates a macrostructure of domination and struggle for power in the society. Thus, according to Randall Collins, now we have all the possibilities for constructing a theory of macro-states, organizations, classes (something that has been still engaged in conflict theory) based on the microanalysis of face to face interaction in various situations (Collins, 2009).

In the proposed by me scheme (Figure 1), I would like to demonstrate how does the method of imaginative constructionism works in describing and analyzing of the social theory by Randall Collins, as well as to show that imaginative constructionism is also included in the creation of the social theory.

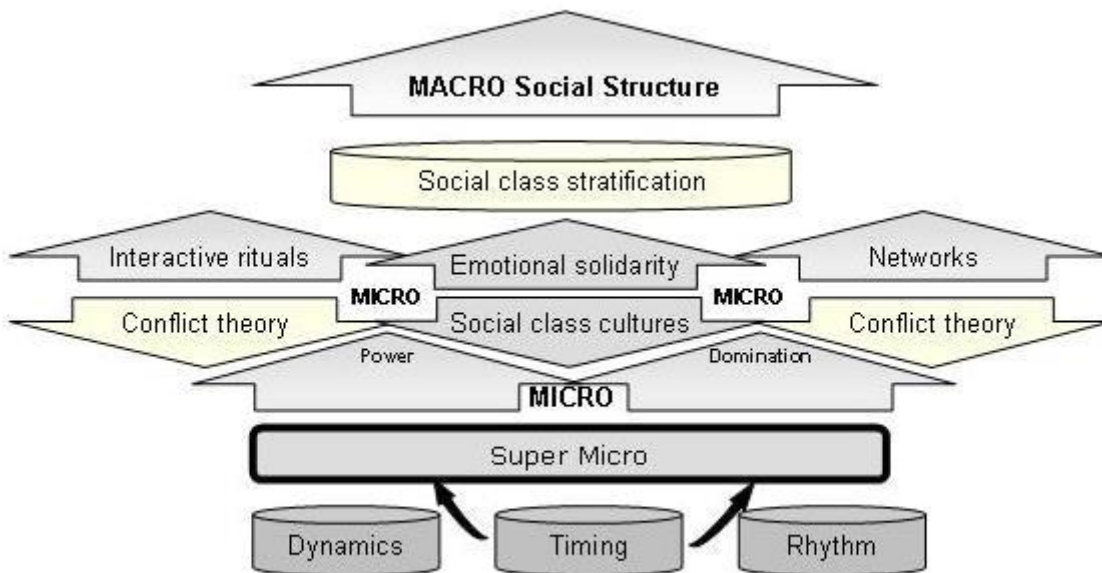


Figure 1.

If we use a metaphor, this visual model represents a process of macrophotography. Its principle is forming of an enlarged image of a very small subject. But in the case of

social theory the method of close-up shooting is used for a very “large objects”. This means that we have to put on a micro lens if we want to see the macrostructure as a whole. Collins also adds that we need to pay more attention to the timing and rhythm of situations if we are going to imagine the world in a more powerfully sociological way (Collins, 2010). Speaking in terms of above proposed metaphor, these concepts relate to the super micro level.

## **2. Emotional energy of intellectual rituals**

The analysis of the intellectual path of Randall Collins makes it possible to notice that his interest in the micro-level was dictated by his study of psychology at the beginning of his career. In the words of Collins, this choice was also determined by his interest in existentialism.

Being involved in gestalt therapy groups Randall Collins noticed that there always was a group leader who controlled the conversational turn taking because of much more higher emotional energy than anyone else. And he began to think about emotional stratification of interaction.

These thoughts have led the sociologist to the conclusion that creativity is a specific form of this emotional energy. He adds that, though the consideration of emotional energy as the feature of creativity applies more to psychological study, but its distribution, however, is socially patterned (Collins, 1998: 33). At the same time he claims that symbols are charged with social meaning by the experience of interaction rituals and emotional energy flows from situations when individuals participate in interactive rituals to situations when they are alone (Collins, 1998: 23). The key variable here is how closely one is drawn into participation in these symbolic activities. Hence the core experiences of intellectuals are their immediate interactions with other intellectuals (Collins, 1998: 35). The process of interaction realizes not only through face-to-face encounters but also through vicarious actions:

“Reading and thinking are vicarious interaction rituals to the extent that an individual can take part in them, and thus can affect his or her level of emotional energy. This is true also for the experience of writing. Writing is a vicarious participation in the world of symbolic memberships” (Collins, 1998: 36).

Collins also adds that: “even when intellectuals sit silently in the audience, they are conscious of their own part as members of this ongoing community. This, then, is the intellectual ritual” (Collins, 1998: 28).

Proceeding from the above concepts, no less important is the question of identity formation of intellectuals. Identity formation can be described using a number of key concepts used by Randall Collins to explain the patterns of social and cultural reproduction. Among these concepts we distinguish group solidarity, the theory of social rituals, and also agree with the statement that the foundation of human society by its very nature is irrational. "The mechanism that holds together the macrostructure should be looked for at the micro level, to some extent in the microsituations that are deeper than the norms and beliefs", - says Collins (Collins, 1983: 186).

With the current limited set of cognitive and communicative practices arising from a number of cultural and socio-economic conditions of existence, each individual at the micro level reproduces a familiar and acceptable for existent time frame model of the interaction. If the existing "pure" theory of social rituals would be applied to the earlier period of development of society, it would still work, explaining the mechanism of group cohesion and retention of social elements all together. Thus, in our opinion, the key point in describing the features of construction of identity within the scientific community is to achieve the greatest element of emotion at the expense of an easy way of belonging to the majority of "identical" cultural consumers, that is pretty much easier than belonging to a smaller number of "producers" of the unique cultural capital. And even in this context both of these mechanisms mutually perform the role, demonstrating the action of the theory of group solidarity and providing, thus, the conditions of implementation of intersubjective forms of construction of social reality.

### **3. Imagined reality: the everyday life in a standby mode**

According to the existential theory of Heidegger the basic human's emotion is anxiety which we feel in the flow of reasoning. But what is the subject of this emotion? In my opinion, the human's main anxiety is an intuitive concern about the extent of its involvement in the society. This is evidenced by a continuous stream of individual imaginatively generated images and ideas of others.

C. H. Cooley (1897) argues that, there are no significant differences between the imaginary and real people. When we talk about the world famous actor, historical figure or a fictional literary character, their reality is no doubt, because people live in multi-level reality. Thus, fiction represents a natural play of the mind. It is such as natural as a child's dialogue with an imaginary companion.

Personal identity has a dual component: on the one hand, this identity as underlined belong to a group or community, and the ratio of its own "I" with the group due to similar or identical set of indicators. On the other hand is an understanding of their own identity as a "selfness", the distinctiveness of another individual because of the



presence or ascribing a certain unique properties. Thus, the sense of identity is to belong to some kind of social union or not to belong to another, in this case it is the same. The classic version of the first case is belonging to a community that has a set of visual symbols and ideas.

Dichotomous structure of identity is not a paradox for the society. It is this duality of supporting a particular social order at the micro level, which in turn provides the foundation for the functioning of the macro-level.

Modern solidarity is also supported by many imagined communities: football or music fans for example. Involvement in these imaginary communities on the symbolic level is expressed with visual symbols to wearing certain clothes, characterized by a certain set patterns of behavior. There is also involvement in virtual communities which are additionally constructed through technical equipment - computers, mobile phones. Participation in social networks is a modern way of ritual interaction without the physical presence of people. It is similar with vicarious intellectual rituals we have spoken above.

"Check in" one's own presence in virtual networks, or the permanent holding of the mobile phones in fact pursuing such objectives - to demonstrate a performance of being busy, or being needed or to say: "I am in the community even in the virtual" (Collins and Munro 2010). In fact, mobile phone, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism is a visual representation of self in a "standby call."

Thus, imagined communities are visual symbols of belonging to society and the denial of social inattention by the demonstration of the permanent inclusion. Hence there is the theatricality of everyday rituals which supports the emotional energy at a rather high level. As shown by violence studies as soon as an element of drama disappears from the microsituation the emotional tension immediately stops and the situation becomes routine.

Randall Collins comes to the conclusion that social reality, in fact, is doubtful, but, paradoxically, this is the source of its strength. He adds that people have intuitive feeling about the social world as a set of random structures, built over the abyss. These constructs, he claims, take their place, because we do not doubt them, and we resist the very formulation of these issues until the world crumbles (Collins, 2009).

Thus, the fuel that supports social relationships includes the emotional solidarity, which has its source in the ritual interaction between people. The degree of emotional solidarity is not constant and needs recharge. And if the followers of earlier symbolic interactionism spoke primarily of ritual interaction between individuals physically present,

today we wonder whether this remote solidarity is real? And what are the characteristics of this kind of solidarity?

Speaking about rituals, Collins develops the ideas of E. Durkheim, complementing them with more recent theories of such sociologists as R. Merton, E. Goffman, G. Garfinkel. As a result of this synthesis it can be seen that the concepts of social scientists that, at first glance, describe the different social phenomena and use different terminology for this, largely overlap and can be used for a wider range of phenomena than anticipated. Thus, we can notice, for example, that social rituals are the same with the value rational action by M. Weber. Interconnection and interpenetration of theories can be easily traced. For example, explaining the nature of religion, scholars have come to the theory of social rituals, which explains how social groups interact, and this in turn gives a rise to the development of the theory of everyday life.

Summing up, I would like to leave you with such an idea that the main feature of the imaginative constructionism of Randall Collins is the emphasis on the emotional component of the interactive ritual chains occurring on the micro level and that shape the social structure on the macro level and are represented by repetitive microsituations. And if we want to go further in developing social theory we have to investigate the dynamics of the situations including its timing and rhythm.

Clarity, non-obviousness and elegance of effective and relevant sociological theory by Randall Collins precisely aims to review the functioning of society in the terms of deeper emotional processes that produce social bonds.

Approaching to the social theories from the perspective of imaginative constructionism proves that, despite the fact that in sociology there is such a variety of theoretical and methodological schools, however, the recombination of this knowledge gives us unexpected, non-obvious effect. In this case, one can observe a synergistic effect when the result of adding and combining of theories is not a simple sum or a set of knowledge, but a new integrated and solid social theory.

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