



Integrating Discourse, Construction and Objectivity: A Contemporary Realist Approach

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Raymond WK Lau

The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Jamie Morgan

Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

In recent developments in the realism-constructionism debate, attempts have been made by individual scholars on both sides to assimilate the other side's insights into one's own position. With respect to epistemology, such attempts have so far failed. Situated in this context, this article proposes a general approach in which valid insights from constructionism, discourse theory, and pragmatist critique of realism are integrated into realist epistemology. Discourses are distinguished along two dimensions; interrelating these two dimensions, the interplay between epistemic and extra-discursive factors along them in discursive contention are analyzed under different categories of situations across the entire discursive spectrum. The balance between the determinative effects of epistemic and extra-discursive factors varies from one type of situation to another. Our approach enables the retention of the critical edge of skepticism, shows realist epistemology to be useful in sociological research in ways previously unrealized, and provides heuristic guidelines for conducting sociological research.

Keywords

construction of reality, discourse and realism, epistemic objectivity, epistemic relativism, weak constructionism

There has been a long-running debate between realism and constructionism (including, since the 1980s, some versions of discourse theory). This debate pertains to both

Corresponding author:

Raymond WK Lau, School of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University of Hong Kong, 7th floor, 30 Good Shepherd Street, Homantin, Kowloon, Hong Kong.

Email: rlau@ouhk.edu.hk

ontology and epistemology. Very schematically, realists believe (a) in the existence of an objective reality which is independent of human knowledge of it (ontology); and (b) that this reality is epistemically knowable, hence different theories or propositions concerning it can be empirically adjudicated on epistemic grounds (epistemology).

In contrast, Berger and Luckmann (1967), founders of constructionism, 'bracket' (suspend from epistemic consideration) objective social reality and, again very schematically, they then argue as follows. On the one hand, since objective social reality has been 'bracketed', different rival discourses (corresponding to what realists call propositions) about it cannot be adjudicated on epistemic grounds to ascertain which, if any, corresponds more to objective reality, a position known as epistemic relativism. Thus, concerning epistemology, they argue that the outcome of discursive contention (i.e. competition between rival discourses) is decided upon, not on the basis of epistemic adjudication between these discourses, but exclusively due to the effects of non-epistemic factors, i.e. factors of all kinds not related to the comparative knowledge value of the rival discourses, such as power, material interests, or even trickery (induced by whatever factors). Non-epistemic factors are more usually referred to as extra-discursive factors in contemporary usage. The two terms are synonymous and used interchangeably hereinafter. On the other hand, because of the above, the ontology of social reality, instead of being objective, is discursive, in the sense that, because the discourse that achieves hegemony out of discursive contention exerts real effects on people and how they act, it thereby constitutes reality.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define what we understand by discourse in the present article, since it is understood differently in different theoretical contexts, as referring variously to linguistic form, textuality, systems of meaning, and so forth. For our purpose, we define discourse in a way similar to what Berger and Luckmann call 'competing definitions of reality'. According to this definition, realists understand discourse as representations of an objective and knowable reality. On the other hand, those adopting Foucault's concept of discourse in his archaeological phase as systems of statements structured by historically specific formation rules, most usually see discourse as producing its own object of analysis with its own criteria of truth and falsity that bear no correspondence to the putative reality that the discourse is referring to. It is in this sense that contemporary constructionists *more or less*¹ use the concept of discourse, though the discourses that they are concerned with invariably have much narrower scopes and are in relation to specific issues, instead of the overarching epochal discursive formations that Foucault is concerned with.

Thus, discourse in the present article refers to propositions, claims, ideas or views concerning some reality that realists regard as objective and knowable, while constructionists regard as merely putative. It should be noted that 'discourse' and 'hegemonic discourse' (with hegemony meaning discursive dominance) are not Berger and Luckmann's but contemporary terms often employed by contemporary constructionists, which correspond respectively to Berger and Luckmann's 'competing definitions' and 'commonsense knowledge'. We follow contemporary terminology hereinafter.

The present article is situated in the context of recent developments in the realism-constructionism debate, which look towards some form of integrating realism and constructionism. A brief account of these developments is provided here. Concerning social

ontology, on the realist side, a main strand of contemporary realism known as critical realism based on the work of Roy Bhaskar (1997[1975], 1998[1979]) has made considerable advances (Archer, 1995, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2010).² But some realists such as Fairclough et al. (2002) argue that most critical realist literature, while not denying the reality of the discursive dimension, *has paid insufficient attention* to the fact that the discursive can possess objective ontological status, to remedy which they propose what they call critical semiotic analysis (CSA), itself based upon Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis. CSA argues that semiosis (the production of meaning) constitutes 'an [ontological] element/moment of the "social"', attributing 'causal effectivity to semiotic/linguistic forms'.³

Concerning epistemology, on the realist side, scholars such as Sayer (2000), in engaging with various forms of postmodernist thought, have expressed readiness to accept 'weak social constructionism' as being compatible with realism. On the constructionist side, some constructionists are ready to give up epistemic relativism, at least to a certain degree, and have also called for a 'weak' form of constructionism. However, 'weak' constructionism, on both the realist and constructionist sides, has failed to bring about any advance in terms of integration (see Section 4).

The present article picks up from these recent developments looking towards integration on the *epistemological* side of the debate. It is motivated by the recognition that efforts towards integration on the epistemological side (in the form of 'weak constructionism' or otherwise) have so far made little meaningful progress. On the one hand, at present, in focusing on critiquing constructionist epistemic relativism, most *realists pay only lip service* to the possible (indeed, often decisive) role of extra-discursive factors in determining the outcome of discursive contention,⁴ and fail to recognize that constructionist insights concerning such a role can fruitfully and compatibly be integrated into realist epistemology. On the other hand, constructionists who admit that epistemic relativism is untenable are nonetheless unwilling to forego their radical skepticism that queries (in their terminology, problematizes) objective knowledge claims (which has originally been built upon epistemic relativism), and have been unable to find a way in which such skepticism can be grounded on a non-relativist basis. This impasse on both sides is discussed in Section 4.

What the present article aims to show is, on the one hand, that realism can and should integrate the above-mentioned constructionist insights into its epistemology, while, on the other, skepticism and the role of extra-discursive factors can both be grounded upon realist epistemology without sacrificing their critical edge. Further, it argues that these dual objectives can be attained *systematically* by means of a general approach to be mentioned in the next paragraph but one. Such an approach will, hence, enable the overcoming of the above-mentioned impasse (see Section 5). Further, it will provide researchers with heuristic guidelines in conducting empirical research in various sociological areas (see Section 6).

The following begins with an account of realist epistemology. An account of constructionism, and its critique of realism follows. Realism's response to that critique, and constructionism's basic self-contradictions are then explained. The idea of 'weak' constructionism is then assessed and rejected, and the above-mentioned impasse discussed in detail. Realist epistemology has also been critiqued by pragmatism (Baert,

2005, 2008), and, like constructionism, it has made valid insights from which realism can learn. Specifically, we argue that Baert's stress on non-epistemic cognitive objectives (this term is explained in Section 4) should be recognized as another valid kind of extra-discursive factor.

After that, we come to the present article's principal objective, namely, to propose a *general approach concerning discursive contention* ('discursive contention' as defined in the second paragraph above). On the basis of recognizing the validity of constructionism's central insight concerning the role of extra-discursive factors, and pragmatism's stress on non-epistemic cognitive objectives as another form of extra-discursive factor, our approach takes into account both epistemic factors (realism's focus) and extra-discursive factors, though we argue that the latter are objectively grounded in the sense of being subject to social explanation. Various types of discourses are distinguished along two dimensions. First, we distinguish between observers' discourse, participants' discourse, and observers' discourse functioning as participants' discourse. Then, discourses are differentiated according to the degree to which epistemic objectivity can be evaluated and adjudicated in principle and/or in practice on the one hand, and the degree of importance being placed on epistemic objectivity in different situations on the other. By interrelating these two dimensions, the interplay between epistemic and extra-discursive factors along them in discursive contention can be analyzed under different categories of situations across the entire discursive spectrum. How our integrated approach can overcome the above-mentioned impasse and enable sociological research will then be explained.

Despite calling for integrating discourse, construction and objectivity in the present article's title, our approach remains realist-based (hence the subtitle), first because we insist on the possibility of epistemic objectivity, in principle and *sometimes* also in practice; and second because we ground non-epistemic factors on an objective basis. The word 'objectivity' in the title refers to these two points.

I Realism

Realism comprises a set of composite beliefs. First, it believes that there is an objective reality (physical, social, psychological) having properties independent of theoretical discourse about and concepts of them. This is referred to as ontological realism. In relation to social reality and psychological reality, ontological realism applies even though social reality itself is constituted by social agents' self-conceptualized practices in their actions and interactions, while psychological reality is imbued with the social dimension.

With respect to empirical and theoretical discourses about reality, realism believes in *linguistic objectivity* and *epistemic objectivity*. A description is linguistically objective if it makes a claim about a putative existent and attributes properties to it, and if it is true/accurate or false/inaccurate according to whether or not the putative existent exists and, if it does, has the properties attributed to it.⁵ For example, an empirical description such as 'the cat is on the mat' is linguistically objective because it is true if and only if there is in fact a cat on the mat; the same applies to a theoretical description such as 'the earth revolves round the sun'.

Three qualifications are required concerning linguistic objectivity. First, contrary to positivism-empiricism,⁶ language is not a 'picture', 'copy', 'image', 'reflection' or 'resemblance' of reality. The description 'the house is on fire' does not in any way resemble the actual event, but simply corresponds to it. Second, also contrary to empiricism, theoretical descriptions need not be defined operationally, i.e. in terms of observation statements (see note 6). Third, empiricism adopts what is called the instrumentalist position, which argues that theoretical descriptions which are not operationally defined are merely fictive devices used to link together observational descriptions. The simplest illustration of this is Hume's assertion that the concept of cause is merely a habit of mind to account for the observable constant conjunction of events, whereas in fact natural necessity (causation) does not exist. Realism rejects instrumentalism and believes that non-operationally defined theoretical descriptions correspond to real existents (things, relations or structures).

An empirical description is epistemically objective if and only if its truth or falsity can be evaluated on rational and empirical grounds. While rejecting empiricism as a theoretical position, realism does share with it the stress on empirical evidence, evaluation and adjudication (between different theories). It should be noted that linguistic objectivity and epistemic objectivity are closely linked (e.g. the statement 'the earth revolves round the sun' is both linguistically and epistemically objective), but it is possible for certain descriptions to be linguistically objective, yet not epistemically objective. For instance, 'there is free will' is linguistically objective insofar as it is true if and only if there is indeed something called free will, but such an assertion concerns what Kant calls the transcendent, and is beyond empirical evaluation (or, for that matter, logical proof).

A special word must be said concerning realism's view that theoretical discourse about, and concepts of, social and psychological realities are independent of these realities. Greenwood's (1994: 31) explanation of this point concerning psychological reality is precise: 'identity and emotion may be said to have social dimensions, [but] the social dimension of identity and emotion are not a constitutive consequence of, and cannot be identified with, the social dimensions of our theoretical descriptions of them'. That is to say, though identity and emotion on the one hand, and our theoretical descriptions of them on the other, are both social products, the social dimensions of identity and emotion are not produced by the social dimensions of *theories* concerning them, i.e. these two categories of social dimensions are separate, distinct and independent of one another. Hence, these theories are independent of the reality which constitutes their objects (identity and emotion).

One issue that has divided realists concerns the correspondence theory of truth. Collier (1994) and Greenwood (1994) accept it; Bhaskar (1993, 1997[1975]) and Chalmers (1982) reject it. We agree with Collier (1994) in this regard, and for illustration, consider Bhaskar's reasons for rejecting the theory. Collier (1994: 239–40), following Kant, explains that the theory gives a definition of truth, not a criterion (of which there is none). He points out that Bhaskar rejects the theory only because of a double conflation. First, Bhaskar (1997[1975]: 249; see also 1993: 215) conflates 'correspondence' with 'resemblance', i.e. mistakes 'correspond' to mean 'resemble': 'A proposition is true if, and only if, the state of affairs that it expresses (describes) is real. But propositions cannot be compared with states of affairs.' Bhaskar's word 'compare' implies 'resemblance', and,

as previously pointed out, realism rejects the idea of language 'resembling' reality. Second, Bhaskar (1997[1975]: 249) conflates definition with criterion: 'Philosophers have wanted a theory of truth to provide a criterion or stamp of knowledge. But no such stamp is possible.' As just mentioned, the correspondence theory of truth does not say that such a stamp is possible.

Finally, it should be stressed that although many realists continue to speak of linguistic and epistemic objectivity in terms of true/untrue (as we also do, for simplicity) and uphold the correspondence theory, they reject any idea of foundational truth, due to the recognition of the fallibility of knowledge. Thus, Sayer (1992: 68–9) prefers to speak of 'practical adequacy': 'To be practically adequate, knowledge must generate expectations about the world and about the results of our actions which are actually realized ... The error of [anti-realism] is to ignore practice.' We support this concept provided that it not be given an instrumentalist reading.

2 Constructionism and its Critique of Realism

Berger and Luckmann do not mean their perspective to apply to physical reality for they take for granted the epistemic validity of the natural sciences. However, later constructionists regard the perspective as applicable to both physical and social and psychological reality (Barnes, 1982; Bloor, 1976). In defending epistemic relativism, constructionists focus on linguistic and epistemic objectivity:

Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal exchange ... the vocabulary of mind is not anchored in, defined by or ostensibly grounded in real-world particulars in such a way that propositions about mental events are subject to correction through observation. What counts as observation is determined by preexisting theoretical commitments ... the theory will determine what counts as evidence, confirmation and disconfirmation. Competing theories ... are thus incommensurable. (Gergen, 1985: 266, 1988: 2, 1989: 71, all cited in Greenwood, 1994: 36)

The problem with talking about a reality that exists beyond language is that as soon as you begin to talk about it, it immediately enters the discursive realm ... even if there were some ultimate or fixed reality behind discourse and social constructions, we could never describe it. (The constructionist Burr's [1998: 19] summation of constructionist 'thoroughgoing relativism')

These arguments make the same composite point: (a) language and reality are distinct, since language is not a 'reflection' or 'map' of reality (first quotation), it cannot describe (second quotation) the latter; (b) since theoretical discourses are always linguistic, because of point (a), they cannot be empirically evaluated or adjudicated with reference to reality, for all so-called empirical evidence is internal to language generally, and specifically to the discourses being so evaluated or adjudicated (first quotation). Given both points, reality becomes unknowable and discourses are neither true nor false with respect to it.

Point (a) concerns linguistic objectivity. Constructionists usually reject it by critiquing the 'reflection' view of language and with reference to Saussure. Point (b) concerns epistemic objectivity; constructionists usually reject it by noting the theory-ladenness of

observation, on the basis of the Quine-Duhem thesis, and of the concept of incommensurability. These points are discussed in the next section.

3 Realism's Response to Constructionism's Critique and Constructionist Self-contradictions

Concerning point (a) above, it is clear that constructionists conflate realism with empiricism by attributing the empiricist 'reflection' theory of language to realism (conflating realism with empiricism is rife in constructionist critiques of realism).⁷ On the correct argument that language is not a 'reflection' of reality, they jump to the wrong conclusion that language cannot describe and correspond to reality. The incorrectness of this conclusion can be simply illustrated by means of an empirical description. The exclamation 'Fire!' does not, of course, resemble the event; however, that it does describe and correspond to the event in a way understandable by members of the same linguistic community is shown by the fact that if someone shouts 'Fire!' in a room, others in the room will immediately either try to ascertain whether or not the event is occurring or rush for the exit.

With regard to constructionists' reference to Saussure, he actually makes it clear that in analyzing signifier and signified as intra-linguistic, he is abstracting from the referent (i.e. external reality) only for methodological reasons. As Collier (1998: 48) remarks: 'what he [Saussure] has in fact shown is that words refer to reality by virtue of their relation with other words'. To argue that Saussure's theory supports the view that language cannot describe and correspond to reality is to illegitimately turn a methodological move into a substantive assertion.

In addition, realists also stress that human engagement with the world is not confined to linguistic engagement, but is more fundamentally a practical engagement (cf. the previous quote from Sayer that 'The error of [anti-realists] is to ignore practice'), and that, as the 'Fire!' example shows, linguistic engagement itself is underpinned by practical engagement.

Concerning theory-laden observation, realism maintains, contrary to empiricism, that observation is always theory laden. However, to say that empirical evidence is necessarily internal to the theory being evaluated (first quotation in the previous section), is to misrepresent real scientific practices, in which the theory (or theories) informing an observation is/are not the same as, nor constituted or implied by the theory (or theories) being evaluated. Greenwood (1994: 60–1) cites the example of DNA. Rosalind Franklin's photographs were laden with the theory of X-ray diffraction concerning how structures would appear under X-ray diffraction, which was unrelated to different models of DNA structure. That theory did not pre-determine what model, if any, was to be sustained. That her photographs provided conclusive evidence in support of the double-helix model was accepted by rival accounts of DNA structure.

The Quine-Duhem thesis of Pierre Duhem and Willard Quine states that it is always possible to accommodate a failed prediction by modifying or replacement of auxiliary hypotheses, causal posits, etc., employed in deriving the prediction. While this is true in principle, in practice, doing so would often undermine other crucial aspects of the theory such that the cost would be fatal (see Greenwood, 1994: 62–5 for a detailed critique with examples).

The relativist philosophers of science Kuhn (1970) and Feyerabend (1997[1975]) are justly famous for, inter alia, the concept of incommensurability.⁸ Two theories are incommensurable if and when they do not share any observation statements. However, Feyerabend himself admits that while incommensurability entails the impossibility of logical comparison between the theories concerned, they can still be empirically compared by confronting each of them with a series of observations and seeing how each is compatible with those observations interpreted in its own terms. As he once noted, 'it is possible to refute a theory by an experience that is entirely interpreted within its own terms' (cited in Sayer, 1992: 275). That this is possible is due to the fact that the theory informing the observation is unrelated to the theory being evaluated.

Not only does constructionist linguistic relativism fail, there is also common recognition, even among constructionists, that constructionism is stricken with self-contradictions. For simplicity, we illustrate with just one such self-contradiction: what the constructionists Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) call 'ontological gerrymandering'. They explain that the typical explanatory structure of constructionist studies of social problems is: 1) a putative condition is identified; 2) competing claims about it are enumerated; 3) the condition is supposed to have remained unchanged while claims about it have varied over time; 4) the conclusion is drawn that given point 3, the fact that different claims prevail at different times, in consequence to which the condition becomes or ceases to be a social problem, is a purely constructionist outcome. This structure falls into 'ontological gerrymandering' because, on the one hand, the ontological status of the competing claims is bracketed in accordance with constructionist theory; on the other, the condition is ontologically 'taken to be an *objective* real life event which exists independently' (1985: 222), contrary to that theory.

While we differ from Woolgar and Pawluch concerning their identification of where the self-contradiction precisely lies, this can be bypassed for the present purpose. The important point is their recognition that once constructionist epistemic relativism is applied to empirical studies, it cannot avoid falling into self-contradiction. Leading constructionist social psychologist Ken Gergen (1998: 152) similarly admits: 'it has long been recognized as a forgivable irony that social studies of science scholars, attempting to demonstrate the constructed character of scientific knowledge, will employ traditional ethnographical data to secure the case'. 'Forgivable irony' is an amazing way to gloss over such a fundamental self-contradiction.

Some constructionists try to justify ontological gerrymandering in practical terms. These constructionists, known as contextual constructionists, admit (a) that objective reality is knowable, and (b) that contending discourses with regard to that reality can be made subject to empirical epistemic adjudication. In short, they readily abandon constructionist relativism. However, they insist on conducting constructionist analysis because it, they say, enables the production of valuable insights by showing a disjunction between the knowable objective reality and the reality constructed by the hegemonic discourse which is ascertainably false with respect to objective reality (Best, 1993). As we show in Section 5, the valuable insights craved for by contextual constructionists can be achieved by means of our approach without paying the self-contradictory price of ontological gerrymandering.

4 'Weak' Constructionism, Constructionist Self-doubt, and Pragmatist Criticism of Realism

The idea of 'weak' constructionism has arisen among both constructionists and realists as attempts to integrate the other side's insights into one's own position. Constructionists arguing for a 'weak' version usually propose to retreat from thoroughgoing relativism. Fopp (2008: 4) states: "'Weak' social constructionism ... 'does not entirely reject the notion of an objective understanding' of 'truth'". Similarly, Dittmar (1992: 74) states that though the 'weak' version 'too, abandons the idea of objective truth, but maintains that observations can play a role in selecting one among several descriptions of the world ... [which] can – to some extent – be verified through repeated experience'.

However, it is obvious that Dittmar's 'can – to some extent – be verified' contradicts her own 'too, abandons the idea of objective truth'; whereas not only is the precise meaning of Fopp's 'does not entirely reject' unclear, what its implications are for constructionism have not been spelt out by him. If Dittmar and Fopp seem unable to decide what 'weak' constructionism really implies, Burr (1998: 14–16) is similarly troubled by self-doubt concerning constructionist relativism:

Abandoning the idea of an ultimate truth appears at first a liberatory move, but brings with it the question of how one is then to decide between alternative perspectives ... how can we justify advocating one view of the world over another ... if the answer is that we must build back into our theorizing some notion of a reality ... then what kind of reality is this? ... Is there a 'real' beyond the text ... and discourse ...? ... while the certainty furnished by a realist position may indeed provide a basis for choice and action ... the radical skepticism of the relativist is in the end, I believe, indispensable.

Burr is honest: for constructionists who recognize epistemic relativism to be untenable (and, we may add, who do not want to pay the self-contradictory price of ontological gerrymandering), constructionism has reached an impasse.

Some realists have also spoken of embracing 'weak' constructionism, which Sayer (2000: 91–2) states, 'merely emphasizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge and institutions, and the way in which knowledge often bears the marks of its social origins ... Realists can happily accept weak social constructionism.' However, the view that knowledge bears the imprint of being a social product is a rather mundane one that few if any today would deny. This hardly constitutes any integration of constructionist insights into realism.

Dickens (1996) is another realist who embraces 'weak' constructionism:

The 'weak' version recognizes that all knowledge is socially constructed ... An example of weak constructionism is Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's ideas ... were socially constructed in the sense that they emerged from the very specific social milieu of industrial capitalism ... On the other hand ... [Darwin's ideas] have indeed remained relatively robust. (1996: 73–6).

Darwin's theory is socially constructed *in the sense* of being a social product, but, despite this, Darwin's theory possesses epistemic objectivity ('relatively robust'). So far this is in line with what Sayer says and remains a completely realist position. To embrace 'weak' constructionism, Dickens then regards Darwin's theory as 'an example of weak

constructionism'. But in what sense is it a constructionism? Constructionism ('weak' or 'strong') is a theory concerning knowledge, whereas Darwinism constitutes a specific knowledge, hence calling it 'an example of weak constructionism' is to conflate a theory concerning knowledge with a specific object of this theory.

It is hence clear that the idea of 'weak' constructionism, on both the realist and constructionist sides, does not lead us anywhere in integrating the other side's insights into one's own position. At the same time, constructionists wishing to retain the critical edge of skepticism while abandoning epistemic relativism are unclear as to how to proceed. We show in Section 5 how valid constructionist insights can be integrated into realist epistemology, thereby allowing the retention of the critical edge of skepticism on a sound theoretical basis.

Realist epistemology can also learn from the critique of it by pragmatists. For simplicity, we illustrate with the contemporary pragmatist Baert. Baert's (2005, 2008) critique is directed both at critical realism specifically (concerning what Baert sees as its programmatic objectives) and realist epistemology in general. Since the former does not concern us, we focus on the latter, concerning which Baert (2008: 20) critiques 'the age-old dualism between knowledge and the world', because 'The separation between knowledge and the world ties in with the metaphor of vision according to which knowledge mirrors the essence of the external realm'. As seen, the idea of knowledge 'mirroring' reality is empiricist, not realist.

More importantly, Baert (2008: 16) speaks of 'a variety of cognitive interests – including understanding, but also description, explanation, emancipation and self-understanding – and there is no good reason to attribute ... priority to one of them'. Baert (2008: 17) does not support epistemic relativism:

... if by this is meant that there are no criteria to judge and compare between different theories. Rather, my point is that ... It is perfectly feasible that some social theories are better than others in various ways, but not because they mysteriously 'match' reality, capture or approximate the 'truth'. If they are regarded as better, it is because they are seen as more successful in accomplishing various objectives. (NB: these objectives refer to the variety of cognitive interests mentioned above).

The word 'match' echoes 'mirror', which has already been discussed. If Baert agrees that cognitive interests include, *inter alia*, understanding and explanation, then at least in these cases, should not a better theory be 'better' in terms of epistemic value? Nonetheless, Baert's point that there are cognitive interests or objectives other than understanding and explanation (such as emancipation), and that a certain theory can be judged as being 'better', *not* in terms of epistemic value, *but* with regard to *these other* cognitive interests or objectives is a perfectly valid and valuable one, to which realists have failed to pay sufficient attention. We take up this point in the following section, in which the term non-epistemic cognitive interests refers to these other objectives.

5 Integrating Discourse, Construction and Objectivity

Though epistemic relativism is untenable, constructionism's thesis concerning the role of non-epistemic factors is valuable, which, suitably modified and grounded on an

Table 1. Typology of discourse in discursive contention.

Whether or not epistemic value is pertinent and degree of importance accorded to it					
Epistemic value highly pertinent and important			Epistemic value pertinent to varying extents, but degree of importance accorded to it in practice is contingent in different cases or types of cases		Not pertinent
Observers' discourse	A(i) Empirical evaluation and adjudication possible and available	A(ii) Empirical evaluation and adjudication not currently possible or available	A(iii) Empirical evaluation and adjudication possible and available but not or not sufficiently conclusive	B(i) Primary cognitive objectives are non-epistemic, e.g. liberatory promise of the discourse concerned	C
Observers' discourse functioning as participants' discourse				B(ii)	
Participants' discourse				B(iii)	

objective basis, can fruitfully be integrated into realism. Towards that end, we propose a general approach to the analysis of discursive contention, which will achieve what ‘weak’ constructionism has failed to do, overcome the impasse mentioned in Section 4, serve heuristically to facilitate sociological research, and show realist epistemology’s usefulness in empirical research in ways previously unrealized.

Our approach distinguishes between discourses along two dimensions. On the first dimension, we distinguish between observers’ discourse, participants’ discourse and observers’ discourse functioning as participants’ discourse (see vertical dimension of Table 1). Observers’ discourses, such as realism and constructionism, have theoretical objects and are subject to epistemic evaluation. Participants’ discourses are constitutive of everyday social life in a direct way. To illustrate, theoretical astronomy is an observers’ discourse; while its findings may eventually filter down to impact upon everyday social life, it is not constitutive of the latter in a direct way. In contrast, Darwinism is also an observers’ discourse in relation to its object, but its ideas also had *direct* impact upon the formation of values and attitudes in Europe (e.g. militarism drawing inspiration from it, by wrongfully interpreting ‘fittest’ as ‘strongest’ instead of adaptability to changing environments), it thus also *functioned as* a participants’ discourse. We do not claim that these are very rigorous definitions, but they should serve our purpose adequately.

The above distinction is not entirely new. Carter (2000), drawing upon Layder (1990), makes a distinction between what he terms lay and scientific discourses. One may also

note that our idea of observers' discourse functioning as participants' discourse has some affinity to Giddens' idea of double hermeneutic, according to which social scientific concepts enter into lay use.

The realist-constructionist dispute is often conducted, on both sides, in terms of linguistic relativism with reference to observers' discourses of science at the level of observers' discourse. At this level, constructionism is indefensible. However, the focus of many constructionists is not on observers' discourse at this level, but on participants' discourse or the functioning of observers' discourse as participants' discourse. Actually, Berger and Luckmann are clearly talking about participants' discourse. In many participants' discourses, the relevance of epistemic objectivity ranges in degree from minimal to significant, but, even in the latter case, as shown below, it is often afforded little practical importance. This focus of many constructionists is one reason why they remain unmoved by realism's convincing critique of epistemic relativism.

Our approach also distinguishes between discourses on a second dimension: whether or not in discursive contention the epistemic value of discourses is pertinent and, if so, the degree of importance accorded to it in practice (see horizontal dimension of Table 1). First, there are discourses in which epistemic objectivity is highly pertinent and important (to be referred to as type A hereinafter). Type A discourses are all observers' discourses; hence, with reference to Baert's idea of cognitive objectives (see previous section), in type A discourses, the relevant cognitive objectives are *primarily* epistemic, i.e. that of understanding and explanation (in some cases, of prediction too). We can further distinguish between various sub-categories: A(i) discourses for which empirical evaluation and adjudication are possible and available; A(ii) discourses for which empirical evaluation and adjudication may not at the present state of knowledge be achievable in principle and/or practice; A(iii) discourses for which empirical evaluation and adjudication are possible and available, but which, at the present state of knowledge, are by nature less than conclusive or inconclusive: the difference between the two is that in 'less than conclusive' there is sufficient evidence to favour one discourse over others, but without the required 'knock-out blow' (as can be obtained in natural scientific experiments); in 'inconclusive', the evidence is more balanced.

It is in the case of category A(i) that, over the long term, the role of epistemic adjudication between rival discourses overrides the role of extra-discursive factors in deciding the outcome of discursive disputes. 'Over the long term' because in the history of science, cases have occurred in which epistemically superior discourses have initially become hegemonic for non-epistemic reasons (e.g. Feyerabend's 1997[1975] case of many scientists adopting the Copernican theory, due to Galileo's 'deception and trickery', long before there was any decisive empirical evidence to favour it over the Ptolemaic theory). But the realist argument is that, without subsequent confirmation of epistemic superiority, such hegemony could not have lasted.

In A(ii) and A(iii) situations, non-epistemic factors become significant, possibly even more so than epistemic factors. A(ii) situations may occur to particular theories or arguments in any branch of knowledge in which epistemic objectivity is involved. A(iii) situations are commonly found in the social sciences, inexact branches of natural science, and humanities disciplines such as history.⁹

Next, there are discourses (type B) in which the issue of epistemic objectivity exists to varying extents but may or may not be given due importance in practice. Type B has three sub-categories: Type B(i), which are observers' discourses in which, with reference to Baert, the *primary* cognitive objectives are non-epistemic;¹⁰ type B(ii), which are observers' discourses functioning as participants' discourses; and type B(iii), which are participants' discourses. An example of B(i) is the observers' discourse of constructionism itself, at least among constructionists whose self-confessed reason for adopting constructionism is its emancipatory promise (Burr, 1998: 13–18, cf. quote from Burr at beginning of Section 4 above).¹¹ An example of B(ii) is the Bell Curve thesis, which is an observers' discourse purporting to show that 'race' and 'intelligence' are related, but whose real importance has been its functioning as a participants' discourse. An example of B(iii) would be a lay discourse concerning the supposed sexual potency of black people, as discussed in Fanon (1967). In being constitutive of everyday social life, the issue of the epistemic objectivity of B(ii) and B(iii) discourses may or may not count (depending on each specific case's contingent situation), and it may well happen that a discourse of inferior epistemic value, as far as is ascertainable at the current state of knowledge, triumphs over discourses of superior epistemic value indefinitely. Finally, to complete our typology, we provide for a residual category (type C) for discourses, at either the observers' or participants' level, in which the main issue(s) at stake might involve no true/false issue at all.

In sum, the role of non-epistemic factors is least in A(i) cases, at least in the long term. The role of non-epistemic factors increases in A(ii) and A(iii) cases, and may well (depending on the contingent specific circumstances of each individual situation) become decisive. The same applies to B(i), B(ii) and B(iii) cases. In (C) cases, the role of non-epistemic factors predominates completely. The above typology may neither be watertight (e.g. permeability between B(i) and type A – see note 11) nor exhaustive, but it should be sufficient provisionally.

The dispute over linguistic relativism is usually conducted with reference to A(i) cases, with disputants on both sides overlooking the fact that many constructionist analyses are not of this type. In underlining the role or potential role of non-epistemic factors in A(ii), A(iii), B(i), B(ii), B(iii) and (C) cases, the realist position is not being diluted. This is firstly because we insist on the possibility, where relevant, of linguistic and epistemic objectivity, and secondly, because in the analysis of the (potential) role of non-epistemic factors, that these factors are knowable and can be ascertained on an objective basis is taken for granted. Gergen's talk of 'forgivable irony' and contextual constructionists' willingness to pay ontological gerrymandering's price are constructionists' self-admission of this.

Extra-discursive factors involved in discursive contention can be of any kind, such as issues concerning power, right of discourse and institutions raised by Foucault; what Bourdieu refers to by his concepts of strategy and *illusio* (Lau, 2004); institutionalized traditions; and so on. For instance, in a certain discursive contention, discourse X may in epistemic terms be significantly inferior to discourses Y and Z, but because it is advanced by an authoritative institution (we have Foucault in mind here) it dominates over Y and Z. In any particular situation, the non-epistemic factors involved may differ among the different parties involved.

While our approach applies across the entire discursive spectrum, it is in A(ii), A(iii), B(i), B(ii) and B(iii) situations that its distinctiveness would be most prominent, because the interplay between epistemic and non-epistemic factors will be most intriguing. In these situations, it can indeed occur that due to the effects of extra-discursive factors, a discourse that can reasonably be ascertained as being epistemically inferior compared to rival discourses becomes hegemonic, exerts real effects on individuals and society, and hence for that reason constitutes reality. In such cases, it is legitimate to speak of reality being constructed by the hegemonic discourse. It should be noted that in such cases, both the underlying and constructed realities can be ascertained on an objective basis, and how a disjunction between the two occurs can also be shown as being due to the effects of objectively grounded extra-discursive factors.

Thus, we can usefully employ the concept of construction whenever (*but only if and when*) we can show a disjunction between the underlying objective reality and the reality described by a discourse which has become hegemonic and exerts real effects. But this can be done *only* on the basis of our realist-based approach, and *not* on the basis of constructionism tainted as it is by relativism. In other words, the concept of construction can and should be delinked from constructionism. By means of this, the valuable insights craved for by contextual constructionists can be achieved without paying the price of self-contradiction (see end of Section 3); and the critical edge of skepticism treasured by constructionists ready to abandon relativism (see middle of Section 4) can be retained in a theoretically consistent way. On the other hand, realist epistemology, without dilution, can show itself to be useful in sociological research in ways previously unrealized.

6 Discussion and Implications for Sociological Research

Some individual constructionists are aware of relativism's problems, yet adhere to constructionism largely for two reasons. First, constructionism serves non-epistemic cognitive objectives for them (liberatory promise, critical edge of skepticism); second, the subject matter of many constructionist analysis pertains to the A(ii), A(iii) and B situations, in which epistemic factors *may* only be minimally relevant, hence constructionists fail to see why, despite relativism's problems, they should give up constructionism. These are legitimate grounds which realists, paying little serious attention to discourse in practice, fail to recognize. Under these circumstances, previous attempts by individual realists and constructionists to arrive at some form of mutual integration have failed. Our approach should constitute a more fruitful integration.

Moreover, it can also provide heuristic guidelines for conducting research in various sociological areas. Based on our approach, one begins with a certain phenomenon/event to be explained, such as school children being given mandatory counseling upon a tragedy happening to a fellow student or a family member of hers. One could first identify the discourse underpinning such a practice, and then identify under what kind of probable scenario among the various situations described in Table 1 it is that this discourse has become hegemonic, thereby giving rise to and informing such a practice. If the scenario is one in which extra-discursive factors are likely to have played a significant or dominant role in enabling the discourse to become hegemonic, then one could next identify the underlying reality and any discrepancy existing between it and the reality described

by the hegemonic discourse. If such a discrepancy is indeed revealed, the next step is to identify the various epistemic and extra-discursive factors involved, and analyze how their interplay has given rise to the phenomenon in question. This procedure is eminently applicable to explain social phenomena/events ranging from what Furedi (2002) calls the culture of fear to the constitution of a graffitist into an artist. For instance, one of us (Lau, 2012) has applied our approach to analyzing news.

Finally, if and when construction occurs (see end of Section 5), since the hegemonic discourse exerts real effects, it possesses causal effectivity, which touches upon ontology. Though ontology is not the present article's concern, it is worth mentioning that, whereas the causal effectivity of many hegemonic discourses is likely to be relatively short lived, some hegemonic discourses may become institutionalized, thereby exerting long-term effects. In such cases, the construction of reality has structural ontological implications.

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Notes

1. We stress 'more or less' because we certainly do not wish to imply that contemporary constructionists necessarily agree with the details of Foucault's view.
2. It should be stressed that our position is inclined towards the general realist position (as expounded, for instance, by Chalmers, 1982), and not the specific critical realist position (with its special concepts such as emergence and explanatory critique), though we do generally agree with Bhaskar's early (pre-dialectical) works.
3. Other recent works on realism, language and discourse include Carter and Sealey (2004), Jones (2007), and Sealey (2007). Space forbids consideration of these works here.
4. Cf. Fairclough et al.'s (1992) above-mentioned view that realists pay insufficient attention to the discursive dimension while not denying its reality.
5. Strictly speaking, it is sentences, statements or judgments employing a description that is true/false or accurate/inaccurate, but for simplicity, we skip this qualification hereinafter. Our focus is on descriptions only, concerning other linguistic forms such as imperatives, see Greenwood (1994).
6. Hereinafter, 'empiricism' refers to both classical empiricism and logical positivism. Empiricism rejects all concepts such as electrons that are not directly observable, and all theoretical descriptions that are not defined in terms of direct observation statements. Realism is diametrically opposed to empiricism (see Bhaskar, 1997[1975]; Chalmers, 1982; Greenwood, 1994).
7. Thus, the constructionist Gergen (1998) slides between the terms 'realism' and 'empiricism' throughout his discussion.
8. Kuhn denies that he is a relativist, but as Chalmers (1982: 107–9) convincingly shows, his denial can hardly be sustained.

9. Particular historical arguments can sometimes be subject to conclusive refutation or confirmation, as in the discovery of genuine and precisely datable (such as 'not before c.200 BCE') historical documents; but this affects only a tiny minority of historical arguments. Incidentally, rare among realists, Greenwood (1994: 51, 72) shows awareness of our A(ii) cases, and of A(iii) cases in relation to social psychology.
- 10 It is this difference in primary cognitive objectives that places these observers' discourses in B(i) and not type A.
- 11 Given that, even among these constructionists, epistemic cognitive objectives are probably also present, where this presence is relatively more significant, there is some overlap between B(i) and type A.

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Raymond WK Lau is associate professor in sociology at the School of Arts and Social Science, The Open University of Hong Kong. He has previously published in the areas of sociological theory, the theoretical aspects of media sociology and tourism sociology, and on the character of contemporary modernity in journals including *Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Current Sociology*, *Media, Culture & Society*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*. His current research interests include, inter alia, cultural heritage from a theoretical sociological angle.

Jamie A Morgan is a former editor of the *Journal of Critical Realism*, a member of the editorial board of the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, co-editor of *Real World Economics Review* (the world's largest subscription open-source economics journal) and is Secretary of the Association for Heterodox Economics. He has published widely in economics, politics, social theory and philosophy. Having worked for a number of years at the Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research, University of Helsinki, he now works at Leeds Metropolitan University.

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