

# Social Constructionism as Ontology

## Exposition and Example

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper contends that anti-realist claims regarding the 'nature' of social constructionism and the world it describes are erroneous. Specifically, we argue that claims regarding the impossibility of referentiality and objectivity—often seen as defining characteristics of constructionism—mistake both the nature of the subject matter at hand and the consequences that follow from theoretical critiques of naïve objectivism and realism. Drawing upon the (critical) realist philosophy of science, we illustrate, through the use of a particular case study, that the version of constructionism proposed here is more compelling, credible and has greater utility than others that have been offered.

**KEY WORDS:** anti-realism, constructionism, ontology, realism, relativism

*... when we venture out to identify the 'something beyond the convention of representation'—the realm of the 'really there'—we implicitly arrogate ourselves to the status of minor gods. (Gergen, 2001, p. 425)*

This paper is concerned with aspects of the realism/anti-realism debate<sup>1</sup> within (social) constructionist theorizing, a core debate concerning the possibility of postulating and adequately theorizing a world independent of our representations of it. Specifically, can constructionism furnish a 'true' account of such a world? We argue, with certain provisos, that it can. In what follows, we offer, first, a critical summary of the central theoretical and philosophical assumptions that buttress 'strong' constructionists' anti-realist claims concerning (i) the extent to which language might be seen as referential to an external reality, and (ii) the impossibility of gaining 'truthful' or objective knowledge of the world (see Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995; Gergen, 1994, 1999; Potter, 1996). Our critique draws upon arguments from the (critical) realist philosophy of science (Norris, 1997; Sayer, 2000) that suggest that these anti-realist claims, while compelling, are

nonetheless erroneous. From this we argue that it is possible to theorize a knowable, extra-discursive 'reality' in ways consonant with the main tenets of constructionism. Second, we offer a case study to illustrate that such a 'critical realist' constructionism is more credible, has greater utility and is closer to a 'truth' than the alternatives we discuss.

### **Realism and Anti-realism**

At the heart of this debate are two opposing assertions: on the one hand, realism—the doctrine that an external world exists independently of our representations of it (Searle, 1995)—and, on the other, anti-realism—the belief that there are no grounds for necessarily postulating or investigating a reality independent of the knower (e.g. Potter, 1998). However, there are perhaps as many positions within this debate as there are versions of constructionism (Burr, 1995, pp. 1–17; Stam, 2001, pp. 294–295): unreserved defences of relativism (Davies, 1998); positions that defend versions of realism (Collier, 1998; Galloway, 2000; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999a); anti-realist critiques of realism (Gergen, 1994, 1999); claims that realists have failed to understand the subtleties of anti-realist arguments (Edwards et al., 1995), and vice versa (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999b; Sayer, 2000, pp. 62–64); those who claim that particular authors have failed to understand the implications of their own position (Maze, 2001); those who offer suggestions as to how we might recast the terms of the debate (Edley, 2001; Liebrucks, 2001); and numerous others.

What follows is a summary of two anti-realist assertions that have been central to many of these debates: first, referentiality—the extent to which language can be said to refer to a world beyond or 'before' language—and, second, objectivity—simply, the extent to which we can make ontological rather than epistemological claims regarding this world. While the various constructionist positions mentioned above are clearly relevant to these issues, space permits no more than a passing reference to most. To illustrate the debates we focus primarily on the works of Gergen, who has rigorously and eloquently explicated the anti-realist position with respect to these issues; hence, while what follows is necessarily partial and perspectival, we hope it is representative of the general thrust of anti-realist arguments.

### **Referentiality**

*How should we answer questions about what is 'independent of language' save through language? (Gergen 2001, p. 425)*

As Sayer (2000) notes, ‘a commonsensical or naïve objectivism/realism might attempt to root meaning in a ‘vertical’ relation between terms and their referents’ (p. 35): that is, words, in some simple fashion or another, correspond directly to reality. However, a key constructionist assertion is that there is no Archimedean position or ‘God’s-Eye View’ (Putnam, 1991/1998, p. 109) from which we might compare our utterances to the world; as Gergen (1994) states, ‘there is no foundational description to be made about an “out there” as opposed to an “in here”, . . . once we attempt to articulate “what there is” . . . we enter the world of discourse’ (p. 72).<sup>2</sup> In other words, both language and knowledge are seen as socially constructed rather than as an unmediated reflection or ‘mirror’ of an objectively knowable reality (Rorty, 1979). This is a central, though often confusing, thesis in constructionist arguments, and many authors have taken such assertions to imply that language can never refer to any aspects or properties of an external reality (e.g. Hibberd, 2001; Maze, 2001; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999b); a conclusion that has led to claims that these versions of constructionism are nothing more than a form of radical scepticism or idealism (Collin, 1997). However, this charge is often specifically denied by these authors (e.g. Gergen, 2001, pp. 420–423; Parker, 2001). For example, Edwards et al. (1995) do not deny ‘that people get killed’, but claim that ‘even ostensibly bottom-line instances of brute reality are demonstrably social accomplishments’ (p. 37). Likewise, Gergen (1994) states that ‘description can function as picture or mirror, but only in a local game where we invest it with this function’ (p. 86). In this sense, then, ‘strong’ constructionism claims to be neither idealistic nor a form of linguistic determinism; rather, it remains necessarily agnostic, or mute, with respect to ontology.

Whilst Gergen (1999) acknowledges that ‘we typically require objects of various kinds within particular settings’ (p. 36), these ‘objects’ appear to have no properties outwith their place in discourse; as he states: ‘“Whatever exists” will scarcely resist, determine or constrain the particular sounds or markings we make in its presence’ (2001, p. 422). However, there is something disingenuous about these claims and the language game within which they appear: it seems that Gergen and others want both to deny their ontological cake and to eat it at the same time. If objects exist independently of language, then, unless materiality were wholly uniform (in which case the markings we call text would be imperceptible), they must have differential properties. And if objects have differential properties, it is untenable that the language we use to socially construct our world and activity does not—on occasion, and however imperfectly, partially, tangentially or implicitly—reference these differences.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, admitting the existence of such differences and their linguistic referents need not imply claims to the deified objectivity that Gergen fears.

## Objectivity and Truth

*... I am certainly not trying to answer ontological questions about what sort of things exist. The focus is upon the way people construct descriptions as factual, and how others undermine those constructions. This does not require an answer to the philosophical question of what factuality is.* (Potter, 1996, p. 6)

There is an increasing body of literature that has critiqued wholly discursive versions of constructionism, as advocated by Gergen (1994, 1999) and Potter (1996), for their fundamental failure to take account of external reality. Not in the limited sense outlined above—whether or not constructionism admits a limited form of referentiality—but in its thorough failure to theorize the ways in which discursive practices and human experiences are *already* grounded in, and structured by, aspects of external reality such as subjectivity, embodiment, materiality, aesthetics and power (e.g. Brown, 2001; Burkitt, 1999; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Of course, such arguments (which in any case are not without their own problems) can easily be recuperated by anti-realists as examples of misplaced realist rhetoric, misunderstandings of constructionism or further gambits in a debate increasingly seen as ‘antagonistic’ (Gergen, 1998, p. 154) and of possibly limited utility (Stam, 2001, p. 296). Gergen (1999) suggests that ‘the terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by “what is there”’ (p. 47). However, elsewhere (Gergen, 1999, p. 57), he concedes that a statement such as ‘smoking causes cancer’—on the face of it, a realist claim regarding the nature of human physiology and carcinogenic substances—is not necessarily untrue. What is at stake here for Gergen is not the objective nature of the world, but the status of the various claims made about such a world. Drawing upon literature from the sociology of science (e.g. Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1979), he illustrates the ways in which science itself is a social rather than objective enterprise, how claims such as ‘smoking causes cancer’ are true within the traditions of science, but that science has no more privileged route to ‘something beyond the convention of representation’ (2001, p. 425) than other forms of cultural life.

A central aim of Gergen’s theorizing is to guard against foundationalism, to ensure that we don’t ‘find doors shut and voices silenced’ through our ‘claims to the real’ (2001, p. 425). But does postulating an external reality of which we might gain ‘truthful’ knowledge necessarily entail foundationalism? As Sayer (2000, p. 41) notes, many anti-realists assume that all forms of realism are foundationalist: that is, that realists claim privileged access to the world of which their accounts stand as objective representations. However, as he notes:

To say that certain propositions are true is not to say that they are beyond improvement. It is not only that they may later be shown to be false but

that, even if they are not, they may be shown to be partial rather than complete, or integrated within a wider conceptual scheme that is flawed. (p. 43)

Norris (1997, pp. 248–264) discusses the case of aerodynamic theory to illustrate this argument. He notes that early theorists, including Newton, postulated that ‘the only way in which a plane surface could generate lift was through the pressure exerted on its underside’, a view consonant with physical theory of the time: that is, that ‘fluid resistance was calculated as the sine-square product of its angle of incidence’ (p. 249). However, in actuality, air does not behave ‘as an “ideal fluid” (frictionless, inviscid, incompressible, irrotational) but in quite different ways which the early theorists . . . failed to take into account’ (p. 250). On the basis of this theory, a plane’s wings would need to be tilted in excess of 60 degrees with an obviously insupportable increase in both thrust and/or wing area. In 1738 Bernoulli developed ‘a formula for the precise relation between pressure and kinetic energy when a fluid flows over a solid object’ (p. 250). This formula, as Norris notes, became the basis for subsequent developments within aerodynamics, not least because it successfully explained how an aerofoil generates lift by reducing the pressure above the wing. The key point here is that ‘there is simply no explaining the basic principles of flight . . . except on the assumption that Bernoulli’s theorem . . . must correspond to something in the nature of aerodynamic reality’ (p. 255).

However, this need not be seen as a foundational claim. As Norris goes on to show, Bernoulli’s theorem assumes that (ideal) fluids—in this case air—lack both resistance and viscosity, when, in fact, they do not. As such, the theorem is unusable in practice. In its place hydraulics was developed, which, in comparison to the mathematical elegance of Bernoulli’s theorem, is ‘a chaotic collection of recipes, hints, descriptions and techniques—a plumber’s toolbox’ (Hanson, 1971, p. 283, cited in Norris, 1997, p. 255). In Sayer’s terms then, Bernoulli’s theorem and hydraulics are not untrue, in that they have ‘practical adequacy’ with respect to the question of the movement of solids through fluids, but they may only be ‘partial’ explanations of this phenomenon. As he states, to assess these issues in terms of ‘(absolute) truth or falsity does no justice to the complexity of the relation of practical knowledge to its referents’ (2000, p. 43).

So, language is never a perfect mirror of materiality. But this need not entail that we consider it autonomous, transcendent, free-floating and wholly self-referencing; instead, language performs flawed, incomplete reference. However, this implies that constructionism, far from being ontologically mute, must itself be an ontology. In other words, constructionism, as we present it here, has the potential to function as an explanatory framework within which we might examine the actual ‘nature’ of our world rather than just our knowledge of such a world. In this sense, we take issue with strong

constructionists' claims that knowledge may always be reduced to social convention. Thus, the imperfect fit between language and materiality, world and word, creates uncertainty, flexibility and indeterminacy, which, in the course of its deployment and situated use, means that language actually *co-constitutes* reality. The play of linguistic meaning and signification is shaped and constrained by embodiment, materiality, socio-cultural institutions, interpersonal practices and their historical trajectories (all of these structured by, and reproducing structures of, power) such that language does not independently and thoroughly constitute our world. But within such constraints, language, in its objective materiality, discursively co-constitutes the realities we experience. Below we present a case study demonstrating the utility of the view that persons are in this way co-constituted: in their lived, experiential, observable actuality, not just in our knowledge of them or beliefs about them. In our view, such an account has three primary strengths: it is theoretically and conceptually coherent, so need not fall prey to Cartesian or agency/structure dualisms; it is ethically and morally sensitive and politically progressive; and it displays a utility and range of convenience that makes it more credible than other (typically essentialist, individualistic) accounts.

### Case Study

In what follows we take from German critical psychology (e.g. Tolman, 1994) the understanding that people construct their own subjectivities but not in conditions of their own choosing. We also draw on Burkitt (1999), who emphasizes embodiment and (following Foucault) posits three dimensions of social analysis that transcend the distinction between ontology and epistemology: relations of communication, relations of power and relations that transform the real (the case study is structured around the first two of these dimensions). Other influences include Harré (1987), who posited a 'special version' of the Vygotskian theory, suggesting that, through enculturation, children come to organize their perceptions and activities consonant with whatever notions of self are locally legitimated and available. Shotter (1989) also emphasized the constitutive potentials of social interaction, observing that, over time, telling a young child what to do is simultaneously telling him or her how to be. Our analysis is also consonant with the social ecological approach to clinical psychology of Smail (1984, 1987, 1993). These authors all imply that social practices, in which language is central, co-constitute subjectivity. We also use Damasio's (1994) 'somatic marker hypothesis' (a neurological account of brain mechanisms that may mediate aspects of emotionality and social decision making). Damasio

proposes that rationality gets consistently subverted by socially conditioned emotional structures, suggesting that neurologically substantiated, enculturated patterns of irrationality are the unintentional by-products of social interactions. Subjectivity, then, is the emergent, socially and discursively structured embodied product of activity within subcultural niches that we may not meaningfully choose to occupy.<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate, we will discuss the 1993 kidnap and murder of 3-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-old children, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. This crime crystallized or precipitated a shift in UK media representations of children: no longer just innocent victims, they also became dangerous savages (Franklin & Horwath, 1996; Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1993). Police investigating the case described Robert and Jon as 'evil' and 'freaks', comments seized upon gratefully by the media, whilst a senior judge suggested that their actions were essentially inexplicable (Jackson, 1995; Morrison, 1997). The trial judge suggested viewing violent videos was a possible causal factor (Franklin & Horwath, 1996),<sup>5</sup> a conjecture that fails to explain why child homicide is comparatively rare (Justice, 1996) given the widespread prevalence of children with similar viewing habits. Despite the apocalyptic tone of some commentators (e.g. Newson, 1994), we infer from the relative rarity of such crimes that other, more immediate social and material relations, events and resources are more significant than media images, both in this particular instance and more generally (Cumberbatch, 1994).

Included in these more immediate and direct influences are the relations of communication within and around the families of Robert and Jon. Robert's family 'were shunned by their local community, outcast, the butt of criticism' (Godsi, 1999, p. 119), whilst his relationship with his single-parent mother was 'bewilderingly inconsistent—either he was experiencing severe emotional neglect . . . getting shouted at and battered . . . or being treated "like a soft cuddly baby"' (p. 120). Jon's family life was characterized by domestic confusion and conflict. His parents' relationship was first extremely stormy, ended, then reconciled but continued across two separate houses. Godsi suggests that Jon 'must have spent those first years in an atmosphere of extreme emotional tension' (p. 121). Both boys had siblings: Robert was the fifth of seven boys, whilst Jon was the middle one of three children. Each of Robert's brothers was known to be abusive to those younger than him, whilst both of Jon's siblings had medical conditions and associated communication difficulties that fuelled the family's fraught emotional economy. Additionally, both families experienced various traumas that contributed to their problems. Robert's father left the family when he was 5, shortly after which their house burned down; Jon's family experienced a succession of problems including bereavement, unemployment, moving house, relationship breakdown and tense reconciliation. Clearly,

what is communicated to children growing up in such conditions, and hence what might come to discursively structure their emerging subjectivities, may differ somewhat from the communications most children experience.

Relations of power were also significant in the construction of the two boys' subjectivities. Both lived in a deprived area of Liverpool, UK, characterized by high long-term unemployment and the diverse social phenomena typically associated with persistent, widespread economic disadvantage. Robert's mother was alcohol-dependent, as a child her own father had physically abused her, and she had attempted suicide. Amongst Robert and his siblings there was theft and shoplifting, running away from home, sequential bullying and violence: 'Each of the boys was said to be frightened of the next, and it has been reported that each of them assaulted and tied their younger brothers up' (Godsi, 1999, p. 120). Morrison (1997, pp. 164–166) outlines evidence of continual, repetitive and extreme acts of violence in Robert's family, including biting, cigarette burns and use of weapons. Jon's family was less overtly violent but there is nevertheless evidence of violence, both between the siblings and by Jon's mother against the children (Morrison, 1997, p. 167). Jon's mother, too, had attempted suicide. Moreover, both the gendered, sexualized character of the murder and evidence that emerged during the investigation strongly suggests that one or both of the boys were sexually abused. Both Robert and Jon displayed extreme embarrassment and discomfort during questions about the condition of the body, and there was a precociously sexualized aspect to Robert's responses (misinterpreting a police question about 'dirty marks' on James' body as 'sex marks') that 'would be unusual in a ten year old who had not been exposed to sexual activity of some kind' (Jackson, 1995, p. 34).

These unusual and adverse relations of communication and power provided both social and material structures and relatively uncommon legitimated patterns of emotional transaction, from and within which Robert and Jon, through their activity, morphogenetically and incidentally constructed their subjectivities. Consequently, in the years before the murder, both boys displayed a range of emotional and behavioural disturbance at school: concentration difficulties, disruption, unusual and occasionally violent behaviour, extremes of mood veering from outward aggression to withdrawal and thumb sucking. Robert was known as a quietly devious child who lied, told tales on others, and stole things; Jon was said to rock in his seat making strange moaning noises. If chastised, Jon would bang his head on furniture; once, he deliberately cut himself with scissors. Damasio (1994) proposes that emotional repertoires moulded by patterns of enculturation covertly influence decision-making in social settings, often operating outside of consciousness to shape our activity. The evidence suggests that, long before their crime, Robert and Jon had already acquired relatively unusual emo-

tional repertoires, alongside similarly uncommon discursively structured webs of meaning. The two boys then formed a comparatively brief friendship, truanting together in 'a combined opposition to school routines and regulations . . . [wherein] they could explore the dangerous power of idealised fantasies, sparking off a different sense of themselves from being around each other' (Jackson 1995, p. 15). The violence, inconsistency and extremes of emotion that surrounded them had already been distilled and sedimented into their individual subjectivities; they were then concentrated in a relationship where each responded in kind to the scars of the other, intersubjectively calling out the worst from each boy—with tragic consequences.

Now, we acknowledge that other psychological theories would posit similar outcomes given such conditions (indeed, we take this correspondence as evidence for the utility of our account), but distinguish our analysis conceptually from these. The notion of embodied subjectivity we postulate is framed by a social constructionism that highlights the discursive co-constitution of individual subjectivity—both ontogenetically, and from moment to moment in situated interaction. It simultaneously unites constructionism with neuroscience, blending the biological and the social without falling prey to biological determinism. Thus we challenge both Cartesian and individual society dualisms in a politically progressive analysis that highlights the synergistic consequences of relative poverty and sexual, physical and emotional abuse—elements that Wolff and McCall-Smith (2000) say are common to the perpetrators of all crimes such as this. By suggesting how such influences become embodied within individuals, we acknowledge the need to redress the damage done to Robert and Jon so that their crime should not go unregarded. However, recognizing the individual sedimentation of social processes need not condemn adversely enculturated persons to a lifetime career of violence or incarceration. The social processes and biological mechanisms we highlight are not reversible, such that individuals always bear the impress of their experiences (see Smail, 1993). But neither are they exhaustible or fixed: the same mechanisms operating with alternative social processes enable transformation and amelioration (indeed, Robert and Jon were recently released from custody, no longer considered a risk to others). So, to summarize: a relatively unusual matrix of material and socio-emotional influences structured the subcultural niche the two boys inhabited. Elements of those structures were acted upon and chosen within by the boys for reasons now lost to the obscurity of ennui (reasons at least partially chaotic in nature, and unrelated to their retrospectively apparent outcome). Through this activity they acquired embodied emotional repertoires and discursively constituted meaning structures, which together co-constituted their subjectivities. Yet the morphogenetic character of this process, facilitated by the imperfect referentiality of the discursive

structures involved, suggests that its traumatic outcome could not have been anticipated.

## Conclusion

We began this paper by suggesting that constructionist claims regarding the social conventional nature of referentiality and objectivity are grounded in a flawed epistemology that, while offering a thoroughgoing critique of naïve realist and objectivist accounts of social and psychological reality, at best entails a limited and partial account, and at worst merely inverts the conceptual and theoretical problems associated with those positions it critiques. In short, while these accounts often acknowledge that ‘things’ exist, their demarcation, both from other ‘things’ and whatever we might take to be the backdrop against which these ‘things’ stand out, is postulated as nothing more than social convention; while their ‘nature’ is deemed unknowable (the ontological muteness of constructionism), insignificant or sufficiently overlaid by discursive practices to warrant no further investigation.

Instead, we propose a critical realist ontology wherein referentiality and objectivity are possible, though always partial, limited and necessarily dependent upon further empirical and discursive revision. What this permits is: first, a consideration of the ways in which the processes of social construction can be seen as constitutive or formative of the ontological, as well as the epistemological; and, second, a conceptual and theoretical framework within which the evaluation as to the accuracy of our accounts becomes possible. Our case study is illustrative of these points in that it demonstrates that constructionism can potentially elaborate the social, material and biological *processes* that shape our subjectivities rather than confine itself to an analysis of nothing more than the discursively available *outcomes* of such processes.

However, while we remain committed to a constructionist analysis, we recognize that the form of constructionism we propose here is radically incommensurable with those we critique. In particular, our claim that it is both necessary and possible to ground our analyses outwith language is a claim that is always already denied by, for example, Gergen’s epistemology—wherein language is *always* granted primacy. Nonetheless, our view is that the position we have presented here provides a preliminary sketch of one possible way in which constructionism might further develop so as to avoid the various pitfalls of both linguistic relativism *and* naïve realism and objectivity. In this sense, we view constructionism as an empirical programme of investigation that has the potential to incorporate and adequately theorize both the discursive and extra-discursive aspects of

our being while remaining grounded in a necessarily ‘partial’ and always revisable ontology.

### Notes

1. We are, of course, aware that this debate is more commonly referred to as the realism/relativism debate but here wish to acknowledge that those *we* might term relativists often appear uncomfortable with such a charge (e.g. Gergen, 2001, p. 423).
2. Also, see Edwards et al. (1995) for a comprehensive summary of this position and Potter (1996) for a summary of the disciplinary and theoretical antecedents of these arguments.
3. Sayer (2000, pp. 35–40) provides a more detailed and thorough exposition of the necessity to admit a troubled yet undeniable relationship between language and materiality.
4. Cromby and Standen (1999) provide some preliminary discussion that informs the notion of subjectivity being advanced here.
5. To some extent this conclusion was ordained by the vagaries of the British legal system, which meant that much of the evidence we sketch here was not presented at the trial.

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