

# Foundations of Social Science Research: CPT898

***Lecture 3: Case studies in  
causation, structure and  
agency 1:***  
*(a) Social constructionism,  
(b) Post positivism and critical  
realism*

# Lecture 3a

Social Constructionism: an  
insider's view on invisible colleges,  
*ionism* and *ivism* (*sic*)

# An introduction

The social constructionist perspective has focused attention on the way in which reality is the product of competing interests and the outcome of ideological or political conflict.

Thus, policy and problems are ***socially constructed*** through discourse, ritual and negotiations.

# Locating social constructionism

SUBJECTIVE REALITY

Social  
constructionism

Positivism,  
Critical realism

OBJECTIVE REALITY

[S]ocial constructionism ...has often been contrasted to, compared to, and seen as an alternative to, on the one hand, positivism, on the other hand, critical realism ... For social constructionists, reality ... is not something naturally given. The study of how reality is socially constructed therefore becomes crucial for social constructionists. (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p23)

# What are the big ideas?

- Opposed to objectivist ontologies and related epistemological perspectives such as positivism and critical realism.
- The debate about “reality” is at the heart of this.
- Think about how your research topic is socially constructed; how is it defined or delineated?, by whom, using what techniques?

# The social construction of social or policy problems

- Think about a policy problem or a social problem relevant to your own intended research or research in your field.
- (i) what is the problem?
- (ii) why do you think it is a problem?
- (iii) for whom is it a problem?
- (iv) is the problem defined in other ways by other people/agencies/organisations?

# A (self indulgent) quotation

[T]he social constructionist tradition can be defined as one which refutes positivist epistemologies in which social reality is an objective fact to argue that social reality is variable between social actors located in specific social contexts, times and places. The perspective suggests that people play an active role in constructing and enacting their own realities of the 'common-sense world of everyday life', (Garfinkel 1967: 35) and that the construction of this 'common-sense' stock of knowledge about everyday life is enabled through interaction with others in the form of talk, text, ritual, dress or negotiation. (Gurney 1999: 1708-1709)

# Whose Reality?

- Competing realities?
- Rejection of an objective reality
- Debates concerning shallow or weak constructionism versus deep or strong constructionism
- Debate with Critical Realism about “reality” and the importance of underlying structures
- NB distinction between **constructionism** and **constructivism** (different citation networks – focus on individual interpretations and learning rather than the understanding of phenomena per se)



# Oops! Constructionism/constructivism

Although it can be concluded that “constructivism” is now firmly established in this field, it is taking time to agree upon definitions and usage. This is evident in the way in which the material that was labelled “constructivist” in Brown and Brooks (1996) and is re-named “social constructionist” in Brown (2002). Meanwhile, according to Raskin (2002), “[o]ne comes across so many varieties of constructivist psychology that even the experts seem befuddled. Terms like ‘constructivism,’ ‘constructionism,’ and ‘constructive’ are employed so idiosyncratically and inconsistently that at times they seem to defy definition” (p. 2). (Young and Collin 2004 pp 375-376)

*Mea culpa* Gurney (1999)

# Get it right!

## **Constructivism**

- Mental construction of the world through cognitive processes which are internal to the individual
- Psychology, Education.
- Piaget, Vygotsky

## **Constructionism**

- Reality is constructed through social practices
- Sociology, Cultural studies
- Gergen, Berger and Luckman

# Social constructionist perspectives

- Key authors: Berger and Luckman (1967) - 'social construction of reality' – relationships and marriage
- but see also the collected works of Schutz and Strauss and introductory text by Burr
- Social reality only exists in terms of actions and thoughts, meanings and interpretations of individual actors - 'common sense' - reality is constructed not fixed.
- Creates a body of knowledge which defines and constructs the roles which people play - focuses attention on the nature of that knowledge and who lays claim to it.

# An invisible college: Social constructionism in housing research 1997-1999

- Analysis of discourse - relationship between language and power but also iconography, visual representations (Hastings 1998, 1999)
- Social interaction between agents - look at meetings, rituals, routines activities and the levels of experiencing a service (Franklin and Clapham 1997, Franklin, 1998)
- Negotiated order techniques - group interactions - micro-macro (Allen 1997 - multi-levels in community care)
- Metaphors and moral tales in the social construction of home ownership (Gurney, 1999a, 1999b)
- Haworth and Manzi (1999) on moral discourses of the underclass in housing management.
- An agreement that this perspective is useful and provides an insight but the debate focuses on the relative significance of discourse in shaping the world around us, but how important?

# The demise of the invisible college?

- Critical realist backlash (Sommerville and Bengtsson 2002)
- Caricatured research
- Neglect of structure

*But still of relevance (for me)*

- Social construction of property crash
- How are markets constructed?
- Importance of emotional discourses in constructing the collapse and attitudes towards the market
- Attempted linkage with behavioural economics

# Social constructionism and you: an activity

- What potential is there for a social constructionist approach to your topic?
- Using the example from the hand-out think about the use of metaphors and analogies in constructing common sense understandings of the world. How widespread, how significant and how fundamental are they to your topic/field?

In wishing to advocate some change for ourselves or for others, the usual foundation on which to base this is removed. How can we say, for example, that certain groups are oppressed, if these “groups” and their “oppression” are constructions which can have no greater claim to truth than any other? (Burr 1998: 14).

## Some implications for your research

- Focus on the “taken for granted”
- How is reality constructed and by whom?
- How are social problems constructed and by whom?
- Structure less significant than in other perspectives.
- How useful is it in delivering impact?
- Bottom-up perspective
- Qualitative methodology

# Lecture 3b

Post Positivism and Critical  
Realism



# Positivism

- Positivism: from the Latin *positivum*; meaning to put, set out or lay, Data is something that exists and is already there – the role of the researcher is to gather data and systematise it.
- *Logical positivism* dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until critiques by Kuhn, Feyerabend and others led to a reassessment in the 1960s.

# Criticisms of positivism

- Quantification may not explain anything, it may just *describe*
- Where do the hypotheses we test come from in the first place?
- The 'empirical' is not as simple as it seems, we need theory to break up reality into 'empirical data'
  - **The interdependence of concepts and data...**
- So, much depends on who you are, your culture, expectations, etc and this has been overlooked by the *naïve realism* of logical positivism.
- “scientific knowledge is historically and socially conditioned, and so is not absolutely true but relative in character” (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p 18)

# Post positivism

“The purpose of scientific activity no longer stands out as a statistical putting together of surface phenomena in an observed reality. The important thing rather becomes to conceive this reality as an expression for, or a sign of, deeper-lying processes”. (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p18)

- The positivists’ reduction to that which is observable (or even measurable) in reality is rejected.
- Why not consider the hidden patterns or underlying rule formations, which govern the observed parts of reality?
- An exploration of these can explain the observed parts.

# Post positivist research

“Rather than beginning with survey-based measurements of large amounts of empirical data, or with guesses of what the connections are between such data (both positivist approaches) another way becomes more reasonable: to carry out **intensive studies of a small number of cases** in order to retrieve, through analysis, **the underlying patterns** that are arguably reflected in the surface structures” (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p 19).

# Introducing critical realism: Ontology and epistemology

- Ontologically, critical realism refers to a position which maintains that the world exists independently of our thoughts and perception: that is, an objectivist view of the world.
- Realist epistemology supposes that because reality cannot be fully understood through perception, theory can help reveal what is not directly observable.

# Causality in Critical realism

“Unlike empiricist/positivist approaches which see causality in terms of correlation between events (whenever A occurs then so too does B), realist philosophy argues for a conception of causality in terms of **generative mechanisms**. Theoretical progress thus entails identification of the “necessary” mechanisms which tend to produce given tendencies. The fact that such tendencies may not become manifest in observation is due to the operation of contingent factors which obviously cannot be theorised but whose effects can be examined in given empirical cases.” (Saunders, 1986: 356)

# No unified “movement”

- There is no homogenous critical realist movement; but a “variety of realisms” (Lopez and Potter 2001: 19-75)
- Many criticisms and misinterpretations which can cause confusion; so what is it not?

# Critical Realism is not positivism

- Like social constructionism and feminism, CR emerged out of a critique of positivism. Bhaskar argues that believing that an event can be understood through repeated empirical observations is an *epistemic fallacy*. Positivism, he argues, confuses the ontological matters of what exists with the epistemological matter of how we can know it.

“The amount of times we can empirically observe an event does not help us understand what causes it”.  
(Sayer 2000: 14) or ....



“You can’t fatten a pig by weighing it”



# Critical Realism and scientific research

- It is possible, or desirable to study social phenomenon scientifically, but this belief is very different to positivism.
- Critical realists have an epistemological caution with regard to scientific knowledge not a fundamental rejection of it.

# Critical Realism and “Objective Truth”

- Does not claim unmediated access to an objective truth
- But, neither, (like Social constructionism or post-modernism) is it anti-foundationalist - not all accounts are equally valid
- Distorted perception: we can only know the world based upon available descriptions

# Critical Realism and reflexivity

“We do not see reflexivity as undermining researchers’ commitment to realism. In our view it only undermines naïve forms of realism which assume that knowledge must be based on some absolutely secure foundation”  
(Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 17)

“Realism does not require some kind of denial of subjective influences or standpoints and researcher’s social context. On the contrary, it requires us to examine those standpoints so as to guard against forms of projection and selection that misrepresent our objects. Realist social science requires reflexivity” (Sayer 2000: 53).

# Bhaskar's "three domains" (stratified ontology)

- ***The Empirical***
  - The only observable domain.
  - The events we actually experience
- ***The Actual***
  - The causal powers that are actually activated
- ***The Real***
  - where underlying structures and generative mechanisms reside.
  - Objects, (structures and powers that underpin the Actual and the Empirical - including *unrealised* powers, potentials)

# The stratification of reality: realist ontology revealed

- Causation via structures and mechanisms
- Refute positivists' simple linear model of causation
- Explain an event through underlying structures and mechanisms

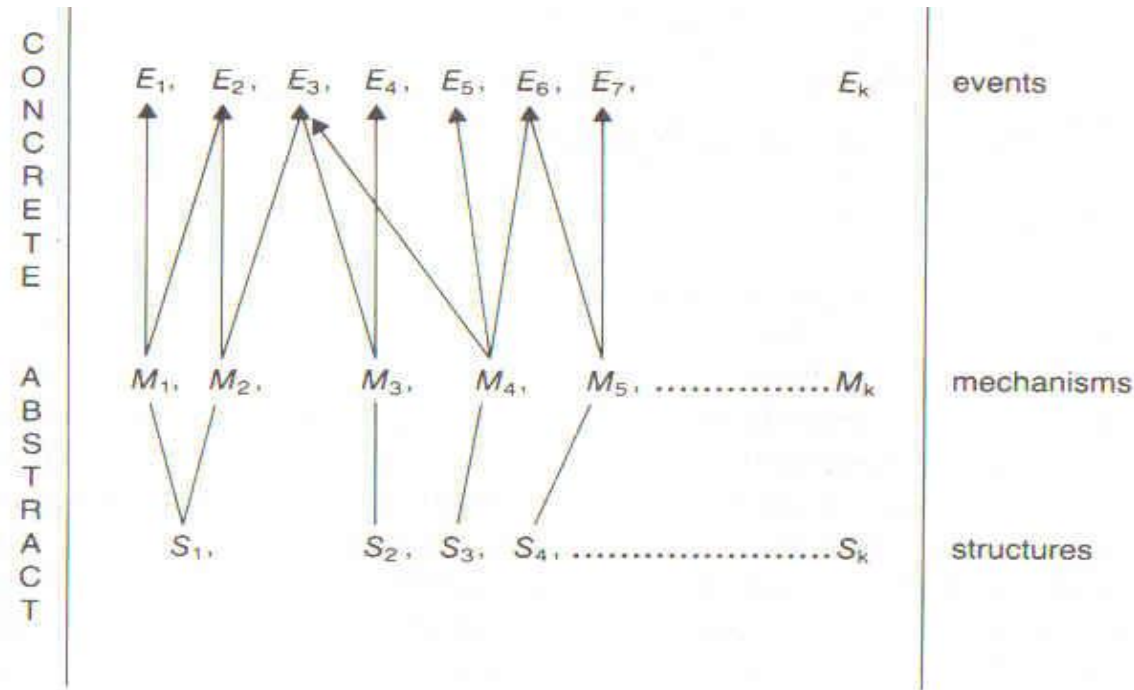


Figure 8 Structures, mechanisms and events

# Structures, mechanisms, events

- Structure and Mechanism – confusion
- Structure has causal powers, mechanism is a force that emerges from the structure to make something happen.
- A mechanism will exist whether it is triggered or not - but when it is triggered it gives rise to an event.

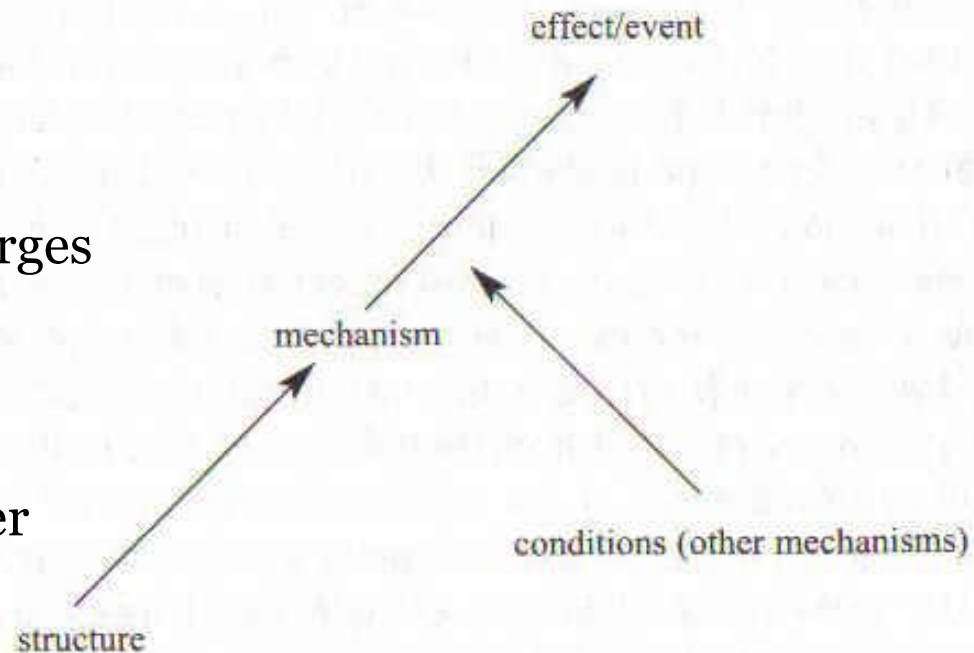


Figure 1.2 Critical realist view of causation

# An example: the social model of disability and the built environment

- McKechnie (2007: 53-54)
- **Mechanism** = building and street design based upon notions of the able-body
- Triggered when an individual falls outside of this notion and thus will give rise to the built environment being rendered inaccessible to a disabled individual (**effect/event**)
- McKechnie goes on to argue (p 66) that, in this example, the **structure** would include “physiology” (the nature of an individual’s impairment), “society” (the organisation of architecture and planning) and, surprisingly; “agency” (individual biography, motivation and identity etc.)

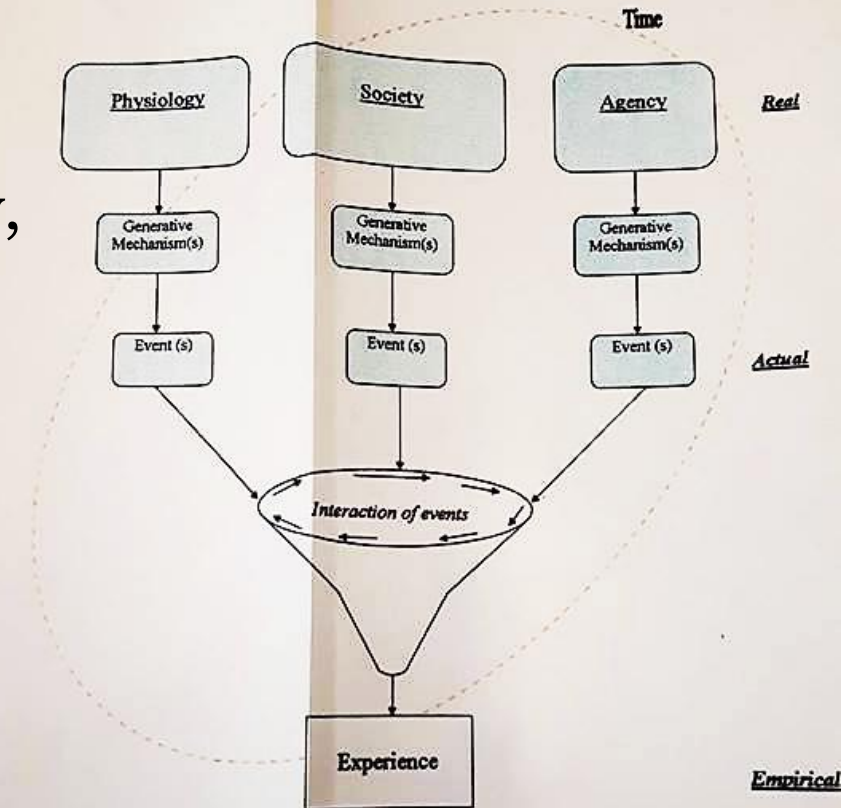
# How did McKechnie use this perspective?

- At the level of the **real**; physiology, society and agency each produce specific generative mechanisms.
- These mechanisms give rise to specific events at the level of the **actual**.
- The interaction of these events create and experience which can be measured at the **empirical** level.

## Appendix 2

### Three-dimensional framework

Diagrammatic representation of the three-dimensional framework:



Three dimensional framework for explanation of an experience over time.



# Critical realism and you: an activity

- Thinking about the idea of stratified reality (where the **empirical** is events or measurable data, the **actual** is causal powers which are triggered and the **real** is both the triggered mechanisms and the underlying structures) can you map these ideas on to phenomena researched in your field?
- Is there any evidence of Critical Realism being used in your field?

# What are the consequences of this for epistemology?

We can never know the real world directly.

But there is a 'real world' beyond the way we choose to describe it. Beyond the 'text' or the 'paradigm' or the 'construction'.

What makes us? Is it concepts **or** the world “out there” (Post-structurtalism v realism)

# What are the consequences of this for methodology?

- Clarity needed over the respective explanatory significance of
  - ‘events and their regularities’ (the empirical surface) and
  - ‘casual entities and their powers’ (the ‘underlying structures’)
- Recognise the distinctive potential contributions of ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ methodologies
- Link methodologies to research questions