The first in this year's CESR seminar series will be held on Friday 20th September 2013, 14:30-16:30 in Room 2D73 (EDC) with a presentation by:

Professor Steve Fleetwood

What is (and what isn't) critical realism?

Critical realism is a meta-theory for social sciences. It is concerned with aspects of the philosophy of science, ontology, epistemology, and aetiology, along with conceptions of what constitutes an explanation, a prediction, and what the objectives of social science ought to be.

The aim of this seminar is to explain what critical realism is, by clarifying what it isn't. It will compare and contrast critical realism with two other meta-theoretical perspectives, loosely referred to as 'positivism' and 'idealism' - with the distinction based upon three different ontologies. The consequences, in terms of epistemology, aetiology, explanation, prediction, the objectives of social science and other conceptions will then be traced out.

The seminar assumes no familiarity with critical realism and should be of use to anyone working in any social science discipline.

Professor Steve Fleetwood is a leading authority on critical realism in social science generally, and labour economics, work and employment studies, and organization and management studies in particular. He recently co-authored Explaining the Performance of Human Resource Management, Cambridge University Press, with Anthony Hesketh.

What is (and what isn´t) Critical Realism?

Steve Fleetwood

Department of HRM

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Centrality of ontology
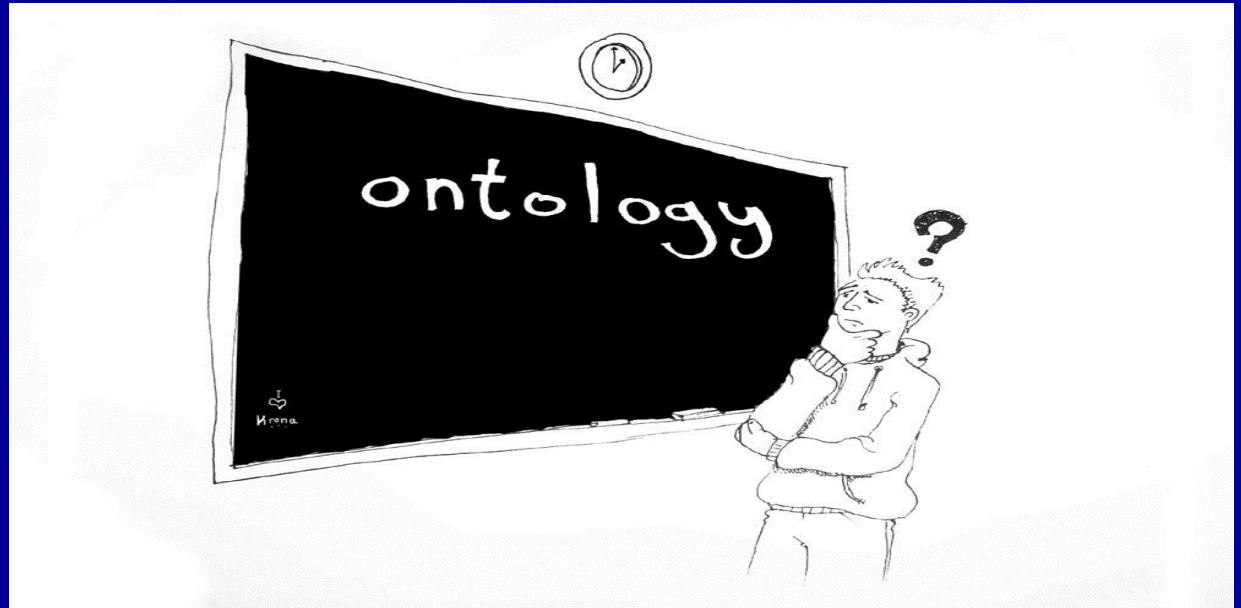
Ontology: the study of being, existence, or *the way the world is*

Epistemology: the study of how knowledge is possible

Ontology is ***non-optional***

A Hospice in Change

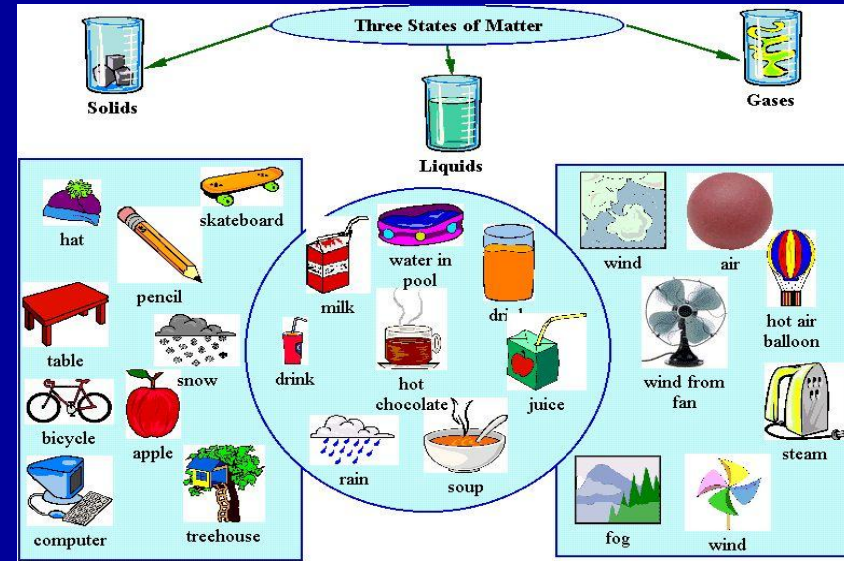Applied social realist theory

Martin Lipscomb

Centrality of ontology

Ontology does not refer just to material stuff

Anything is real if it has a *causal* effect

- Unicorns are *no*t real
- ***Concept or discourse*** of unicorn *is* real
- Ontology of ***conception/discourse*** of unicorns

Ontology of organizations

From ontology to a 'chain of meta-theoretical concepts'

- Aetiology

- Epistemology

- Methodology
- Research techniques

- Objectives
- Explanation

- Prediction

- Theory

- Mode of inference

`Chain of meta-theoretical concepts´

`Because I believe it is raining outside I will take an umbrella´

`Because I believe organisations are socially constructed via discourse (etc) I will use a method that deconstructs this discourse´.

- I don´t believe it is raining *because* I take an umbrella
- I don´t believe orgs are socially constructed *because* I employ this method
- They are consistent & intelligible beliefs *given my ontology*

Views, theories, models, approaches, perspectives

actor-network theory,
continental philosophy,
critical theory, empiricism,
ethnomethodology, functionalism,
grounded theory, hermeneutics,
humanism, interpretivism,
narratology, phenomenology,
postmodernism, poststructuralism,
relativism, social constructionism,
social constructivism, socio-
materialism, nominalism, structuralism,
structuration, subjectivism,
symbolic interactionism,
various `turns´ - e.g. linguistic cultural &
relativistic,

positivism/scientism, postpositivism,
postmodernism, poststructuralism,
pragmatism, various `realisms´ - e.g.
critical, empirical, scientific, structural &
relational

Marxist, Weberian, Foucauldian,
Habermasian

Paradigms

Burrell & Morgan (1979)
  4 Paradigms:
- Radical humanism
- Radical structuralism
- Functionalist sociology
- Interpretive sociology

  2 Approaches:
- Subjectivist approach - nominalist ontology, anti-positivist epistemology, voluntarist understanding of human nature and ideographic methodology.
- Objectivist approaches - realist ontology, positivist epistemology, deterministic understanding of human nature and nomothetic methodology.

Deetz (2000) 4 `discourses´:
- Dialogic (postmodern and deconstructionism)
- Critical (late modern, reformist)
- Normative (modern, progressive)
- Interpretive (premodern, traditional)

Guba & Lincoln (1994) 4 `basic belief systems´ vis-a-vis ontology, epistemology, methodology:
- Positivism
- Postpositivism
- Constructivism
- Critical theory *et al* – a `blanket term´ - e.g. neo-Marxism, feminism, materialism and participatory inquiry,divided into `post-structuralism, postmodernism and a blending of the two´

Paradigms: based on ontology

Idealism: primacy of ideas vis-à-vis discourse, language, signs - i.e. `*discourse (etc)´*.

Realism: 2 main strands:

- *Empirical realism* – incl. scientific & structural realism

- *Critical realism* – incl. relational & processual realism

1. *Idealist ontology*: entities are constituted entirely by discourse (etc)

2. *Empirical realist ontology*: entities are observed, atomistic events

3. *Critical realist ontology*: entities are stratified, emergent, transformational + relational & processual

	Empirical realist ontology of atomistic, observable events	Idealist ontology exhausted by discourse, language, signs, symbols, texts	Critical realist ontology of stratified, emergent & transformational entities, relations & processes
Associated meta-theory	Positivism or `scientism´	Various.	Critical realism.
Ontology	Atomistic, observable, events No recognition of social construction No agency-structure approach, only rational agents as individuals.	Entities cannot exist independently of their identification because all entities are constructed from discourse (etc). `Reality´ is entirely socially constructed. 'Reality' is problematised, doubted & sometimes denied. `Reality´ is multiple. `Reality´ is becoming & processual. Agents: decentred subjects constructed via discourse. No agency-structure approach	Some entities exist independently of their identification because not all are constructed from discourse – ie extra-discursive Single reality but multiple interpretations. Four modes of reality; materially, artefactually, ideally & socially Reality is stratified, emergent, transformational, systemically open, becoming, processual & often relational Agents & structures: distinct but related.: TMSA M-M
Scope of phil of science & meta-theory	Avoids virtually all discussion of meta-theory. Gets on with applying its method and `doing´ O&M science.	Replaces philosophy of science with socio-politics of science. Offers a socio-political critique of meta-theory. As yet little engagement with CR.	Explicitly reflects upon meta-theory. Engages with the other ontologies. Accepts socio-political critique of meta-theory. Retains both philosophy of science & socio-politics of science
Epistemology	Knowledge derives from (a) observing (b) event regularities. Truth established via testing hypotheses. Not relativist at all.	Primacy of epistemology over ontology Fudges or denies ontology-epistemology divide. Recognises the fragility of knowledge – for ontological reasons. `Truth´ (with capital `T´) is impossible for ontological reasons: it is socially constructed. Pragmatic notion of 'truth'. Epistemically & judgementally relativist.	Subordination of epistemology to ontology. Recognises the fragility of knowledge - for epistemological reasons. Knowledge derives from uncovering causal mechanisms. Truth (not with capital `T´) is difficult but not impossible. Epistemically but not judgementally relativist.
Aetiology	Humean: causality as event regularity. Laws, law-like relations & functional relations.	Reduces causality to Humean causality, rejects the latter, thereby rejecting the notion of causality.	Separates Humean causality from causality as powers & tendencies. Powers & tendencies replace laws, law-like & functional relations
Methodology	Covering law method. Explanation = prediction Laws or event regularities = closed systems.	Mainly deconstruction, genealogy, but other methods used.	Causal-explanatory. Explanation via uncovering & understanding causal mechs Deconstruction & genealogy accepted.
Research technique	Maths, stats & quantitative data. Regression, analysis of variance, correlation, structural equation modeling, factor analysis	Permissive. Avoids quantitative analysis.	Permissive Critical discourse analysis, action research, archaeology Mainly uses qualitative techniques: role of (some) quantitative techniques is debated.
Objective	Prediction. To construct & test predictions & hypotheses to establish whether claims are true or false.	Socio-political not meta-theoretical. Attempts to uncover power-knowledge & socio-political agendas & lend voice to relatively powerless.	Explanation. Accepts attempts to uncover power-knowledge & socio-political agendas & lend voice to relatively powerless.
Explanation	Explanation is `thin´. Explanation = prediction.	What is to be explained shifts from entity to its social construction. To explain is to provide a socio-political account of how `reality´ is socially constructed.	Explanation is `thick´ - operation of causal mechs. Not confused with prediction. Accepts a role for socio-political account.
Prediction	Prediction confused with explanation. Explanation based on inductive generalisations. Spurious precision.	Rejected as a naïve idea sought by positivists who accept the modernist idea that we can predict & control 'reality'.	Tendential prediction based on knowledge of causal mechanisms. Tendential prediction is not precise, but not spurious either.
Theory	Vehicle for delivering predictions	Unclear. Sceptical of the very idea of theory.	Vehicle for delivering causal-explanatory accounts.
Mode of	Deduction & induction	Unclear	Retroduction

CR Ontology: 4 modes of reality

Materially real

Oceans, weather systems, mountains, planets

Ideally real

Discourse, language, signs, symbols , ideas, beliefs, explanations, concepts, models, theories.

- *Nb. This is the only mode recognized by idealists*

Socially real

Market mechanism, organisations, class or gender structures, norms, rules, conventions.

Artefactually real

Buildings, tools, cosmetics, computers

Ontology: skill, gender & the pay-gap

Some female workers possess skills similar to (comparable) males.
Their skills are misinterpreted, and they are paid less

Discursive factors at work:

- Women´s skills are discursively downgraded
- The social construction of women´s skills
- Discursively downgraded female skills are ideally & socially real

*Some female workers **do not** possess skills similar to (comparable) males. Their skills are not misinterpreted, but they are paid less*

Extra-discursive factors at work:

- Restricted access to jobs where skill attainment is possible
  - Often caused by intermittent labour market activity
    - Often caused by:
      - Women being responsible for child/dependent care
      - Poor provision of state care for children/dependents
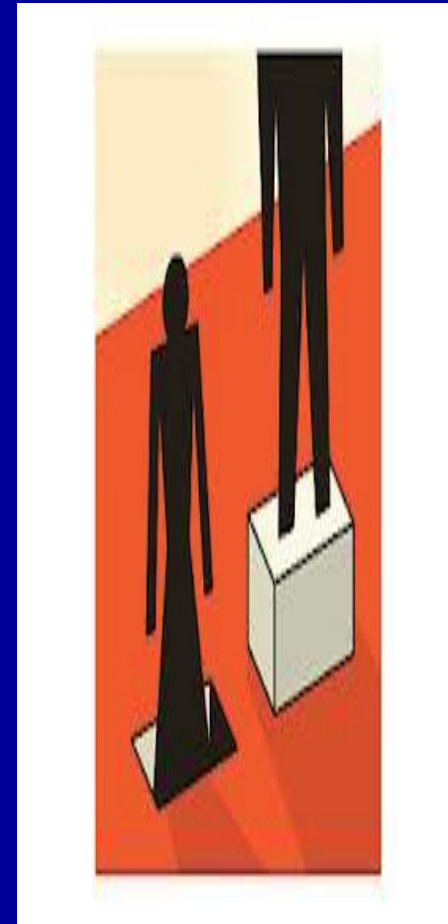
Ontology: agency and structure

David C Lane LSE, 2002

Two traditional problems

- Collapse of structure into agency – voluntarism.
- Collapse of agency into structure – structuralism
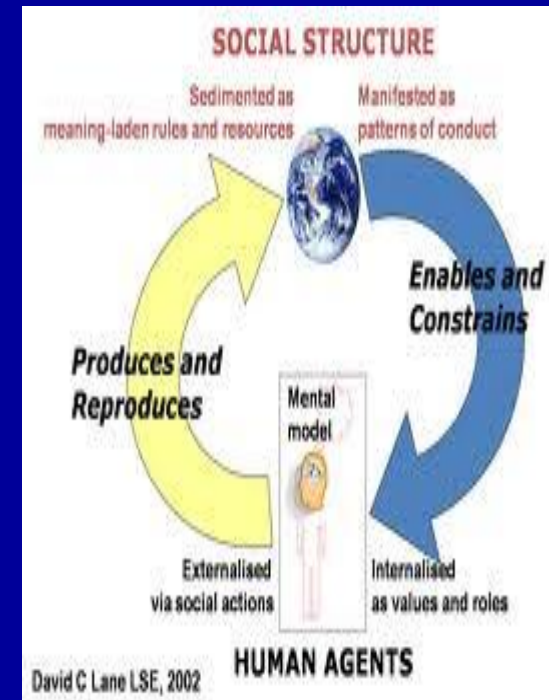- Central conflation – B&L´s `dialectical´ approach

Current problem

- Structures: `dustbin´ category
  - *Economics*: `institutions´
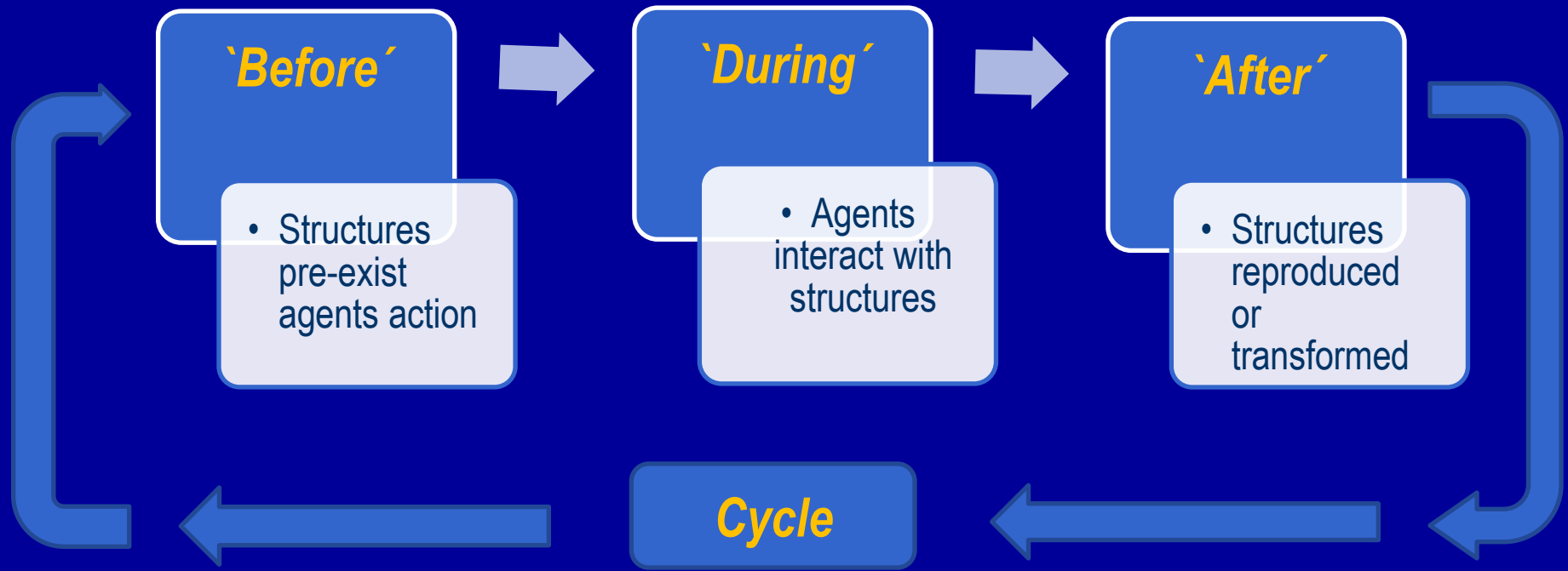 - *Social & managerial science*: `structures´ (&) `mechanisms´

Wider range of social phenomena:

Agreements, codes, customs, conventions, ~~habits~~, laws, mores, networks, norms, obligations, ~~practices~~, precedents, procedures, regulations, rituals, routines, rules, values + institutions, mechanisms, organizations, structures.

Stick with `structures´ for ease

Ontology: Morphogenetic-Morphostatic approach

`Before´
- Structures pre-exist agents action

`During´
- Agents interact with structures

`After´
- Structures reproduced or transformed

Cycle

➢ Agents, acting purposefully, consciously & unconsciously interact with, and thereby reproduce or transform, the structures that enable & constrain their actions

➢ Structures are the ever-present condition, and the continually reproduced or transformed outcome, of human agency

Ontology: stratified

Domain	Entity
Empirical	Experiences & perceptions
Actual	Events & actions
`Deep´	Agreements, codes, customs, conventions, laws, mores, networks, norms, obligations,, precedents, procedures, regulations, rituals, routines, rules, values + institutions, mechanisms, organizations, structures

- Knowledge derives from investigating causal phenomena in `deep´

- Causality is power/tendency

- Power/tendency as force not outcome qua events
- Law is law as power/tendency – i.e. Not event regularity

|	Empirical realist ontology of atomistic, observable events
Associated meta-theory	Positivism or `scientism´
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Aetiology	Humean: causality as event regularity. Laws, law-like relations & functional relations.
Methodology	Covering law method. Explanation = prediction Laws or event regularities = closed systems.
Research technique	Maths, stats & quantitative data. Regression, analysis of variance, correlation, structural equation modeling, factor analysis
Objective	Prediction. To construct & test predictions & hypotheses to establish whether claims are true or false.
Explanation	Explanation is `thin´. Explanation = prediction.
Prediction	Prediction confused with explanation. Explanation based on inductive generalisations. Spurious precision.
Theory	Vehicle for delivering predictions
Mode of inference	Deduction &/ induction

Empirical realist ontology (positivism/scientism)

Events: observable & atomistic
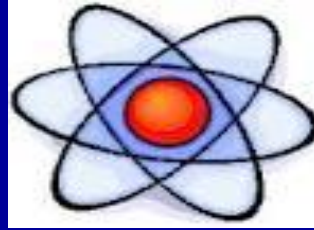
Knowledge derives from observing events & *event* **regularities**

Causality is event regularity – i.e. Humean

$$F_g = G\frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$
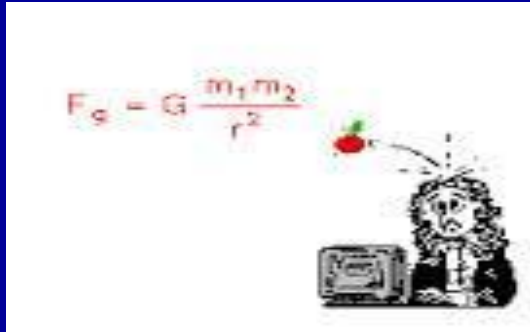
Law is law as event regularity – i.e. not tendency

Closed & open systems

Closed systems: event regularities

*Open* systems: **no** event regularities

- `Whenever mouse is clicked, screen changes'
- `Whenever $\triangle$Volts and $\triangle$Amps, then $\triangle$Ohms'

- 'Whenever wages rise, demand for labour falls'
- `Whenever PRP is introduced, productivity rises'

- `Whenever event x then event y'

- `Whenever event x_1, event x_2, and event x_3 then event y'

- $Y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3 \ldots x_n)$

Closed systems: deterministic & probabilistic

Deterministic closure

Exact value of x_1, x_2...x_3 *regularly* conjoined with **exact** value of y

   ➤ $y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3)$
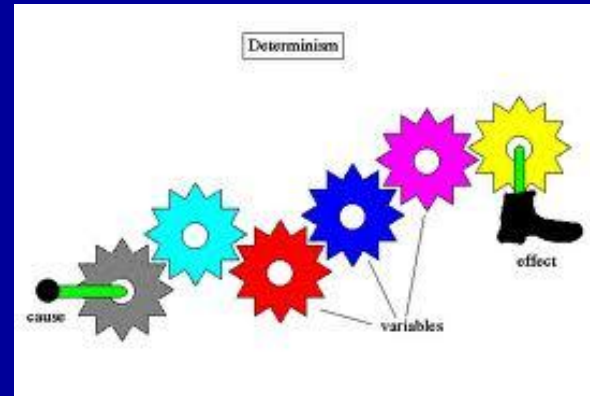
Stochastic or probabilistic closure

Mean value of x_1, x_2...x_n *regularly* conjoined with **mean** value of y

   ➤ $y = \alpha + \beta x_1, + \beta x_2, + \beta_3 + \varepsilon$

- Still about events & regularities
- Still about law-like relations – **D-N** to **I-S** model
- Event **regularity** still provides causality
- Stochastic closure is still closure
- Often (incorrectly) referred to as `**tendency**´ or `**tendential**´
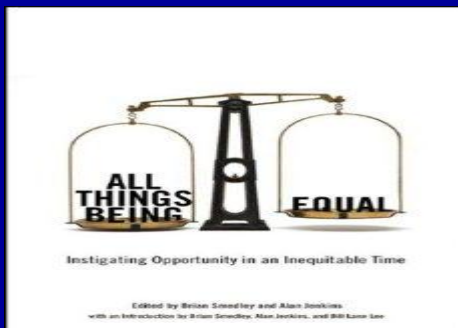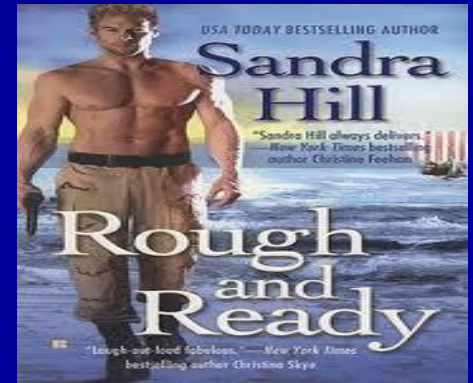
Misunderstanding tendency

Tendency as stochastic or probabilistic
Just a stochastic, probabilistic or statistical, law

Tendency as `rough & ready´ event regularity
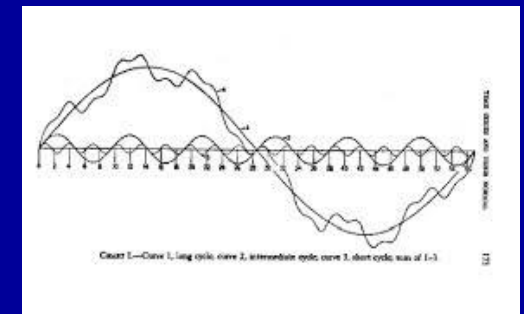Just a `rough & ready´ pattern in flux of events / law

Tendency as law + ceteris paribus clause
Just a law that might occur *ceteris paribus*

Tendency as trends or cycles
Just pattern in flux of events

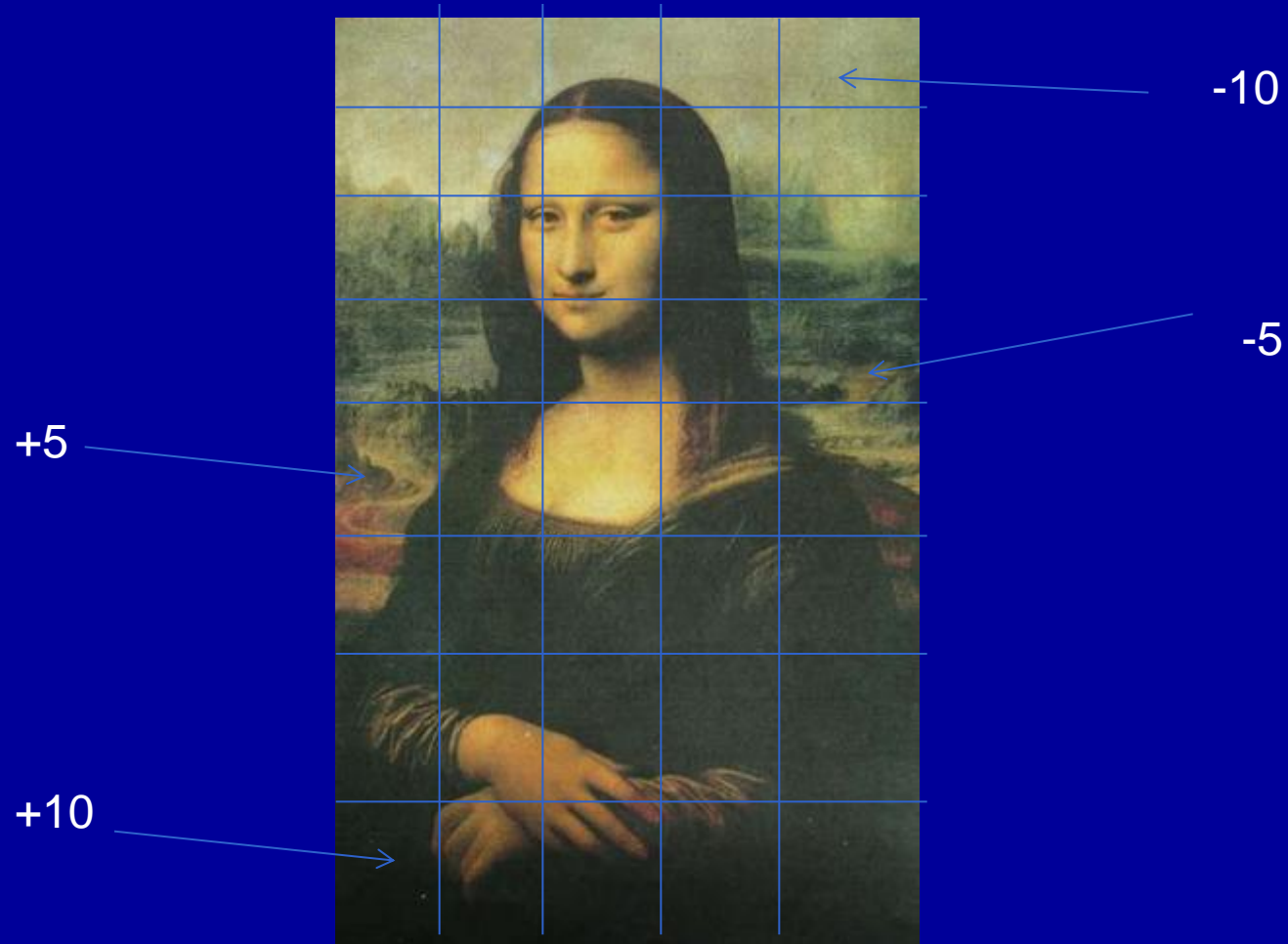# *Event regs, causality, prediction & hypothesis test*

➢ **Not**: event x_1 , event x_2 ...event x_n, *sometimes* occur with event y

➢ **Is**: event x_1 , event x_2 ...event x_n, *regularly* occur with event y

➢ If x_1 , x_2 ...x_n *regularly* occur with y, presumably x_1 , x_2 ...x_n *causes* y

➢ If x_1 , x_2 ...x_n causes y, we can *predict* y from x_1 , x_2 ...x_n

➢ Test the prediction as *hypothesis*:

➢ `Variables x_1 , x_2 ...x_n are associated with an change in variable y´

➢ `Variables  $x_1$ , $x_2$ ...$x_n$ are `*explanatory variables*´

Measurement of social phenomena

Meaningful measurement?

Anything can be measured, but.........

	Idealist ontology exhausted by discourse, language, signs, symbols, texts
Associated meta-theory	Various.
Ontology	Entities cannot exist independently of their identification because all entities are constructed from discourse`Reality´ is entirely socially constructed. 'Reality' is problematised, doubted & sometimes denied. `Reality´ is multiple. `Reality´ is becoming & processual. Agents: decentred subjects constructed via discourse. No agency-structure approach
Scope of philosophy of science & meta-theory	Replaces philosophy of science with socio-politics of science. Offers a socio-political critique of meta-theory. As yet little engagement with CR.
Epistemology	Primacy of epistemology over ontology Fudges or denies ontology-epistemology divide. Recognises the fragility of knowledge – for ontological reasons. `Truth´ (with capital `T´) is impossible for ontological reasons: it is socially constructed. Pragmatic notion of 'truth'. Epistemically & judgementally relativist.
Aetiology	Reduces causality to Humean causality, rejects the latter, thereby rejecting the notion of causality.
Methodology	Mainly deconstruction, genealogy, but other methods used.
Research technique	Permissive. Avoids quantitative analysis.
Objective	Socio-political not meta-theoretical. Attempts to uncover power-knowledge & socio-political agendas & lend voice to relatively powerless.
Explanation	What is to be explained shifts from entity to its social construction. To explain is to provide a socio-political account of how `reality´ is socially constructed.
Prediction	Rejected as a naïve idea sought by positivists who accept the modernist idea that we can predict & control 'reality'.
Theory	Unclear. Sceptical of the very idea of theory.
Mode of inference	Unclear

Idealist ontology

`Relativists´ is our catch-all term for….social constructionists and constructivists, deconstructionists, pragmatists, postmodernists, epistemological relativists, subjectivists, sceptics, interpretivists, reflexivists, and radical or extreme versions of any-of-the-above. The family resemblance is *a determined (or stubborn) anti-realism* (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter1995)

Poststructuralists conclude that there are no real structures that give order to human affairs, but that the construction of order (of sense making) by people is what gives rise to structure. Structure is the explanation itself, that which makes sense, not that which gives sense….[S]tructure cannot be seen as determining action because it is not real and transcendent, but a product of the human mind Carter & Jackson 2000: 41 & 43).

It is inappropriate to think of 'organizational discourse' as discourse *about* some pre-existing thing-like social object called 'the organization' (Chia 2000: 514).

Idealist ontology

Social constructionist writings invite alternative formulations, the creation of new and different realities…language for the postmodernist is not a reflection of a world, but is world constituting (Gergen & Thatchenkery 1998).

[P]ostmodernism emphasized the centrality of discourse - textuality - where the constitutive powers of language are emphasised and 'natural' objects are viewed as discursively produced (Alvesson & Deetz 1999).

Organization is a structure, but only when structure is recognized to be an effect of language (Westwood & Linstead 2001).

[Postmodernists] start with Saussure's demonstration that the point of view creates the object (*ibid*).

Idealist ontology & strong social constructionism

Ontology of discourse, language, signs – i.e. *discourse (etc)*

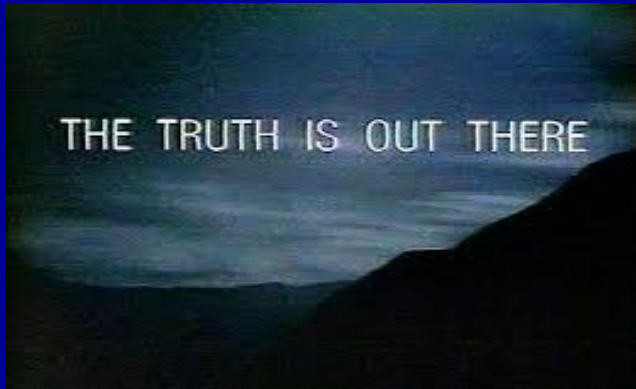The discourse or interpretation of `reality´ constructs `reality´

Multiple interpretation ➜ multiple 'realities'

`Multiple realities' ➜ judgemental relativism

Substitututes *sociology/politics of* science for *philosophy* of science

'THE truth' or just 'truth'

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

Degrees of truth?

6. Certain
5. Obvious
4. Evident
3. Beyond Reasonable Doubt
2. Epistemically in the Clear
1. Probable
0. Counterbalanced
-1. Probably false
-2. In the Clear to disbelieve
-3. Reasonable to disbelieve
-4. Evidently false
-5. Obviously false
-6. Certainly false

The 'foundationalist fallacy'

if we cannot have absolute untarnished access to knowledge, there can be no knowledge. This position is untenable and unnecessary. As William James has argued, 'when we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself' (White 2006: 54)
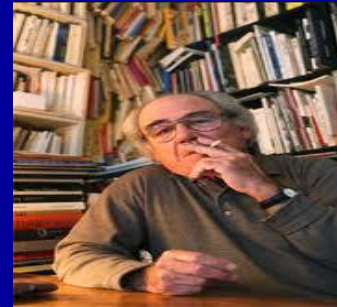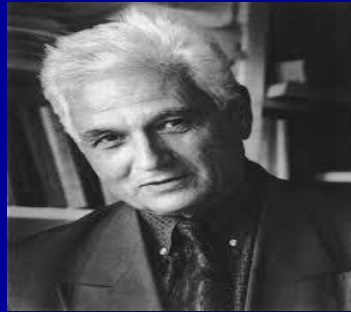
Postmodernism & poststructuralism ≠ idealism

This position is unacceptably idealist because it is understood to conflate discourse with an `extra-discursive´ realm, so that changing the world is conceived to be equivalent to changing the discourse. Such a position may be held by some, perhaps many, constructionist and discourse analysts (Willmott 2005

The constant tendency was that postmodernism was rendered as entailing a particular set of epistemological and ontological commitments. Postmodernism, *apparently*, holds a relativist or conventionalist epistemology and an antirealist or idealist ontology (Jones 2008).

Social constructionism could be placed close to critical realism. Although there are explicitly idealist strains within constructionism, the latter does not usually protest realism, but essentialism, the `things *per se*´, the world that does not need the work to exist in order to be real (Czarniawska 2003).

Implications of social world as open system

Prediction (*based on induction*) is impossible

Explanation is still possible

Explanation (not prediction) becomes the objective of social science

Method is **causal-explanatory**

- *'Explanatory'* because its objective is to *explain*

- *'Causal'* because it explains in terms of providing a *causal* account.

Tendential prediction (?)

Causal-explanatory account of commuting

- Commuter interact with *physical* structures to travel home -work

- Account of commuting *explains* how commuters interact with structures to reproduce or transform them – *and themselves as commuters*

- If an explanation is found, the account is complete

-

- We have a theory of how commuting is possible.

Causal-explanatory account of labour markets

- Employers & employees interact with *social* structures to be active in LM's

- Account of successful LM activity *explains* how agents interact with structures to reproduce or transform them - *and themselves as LM agents*

- If an explanation is found, the account is complete

- We have a theory of how LM activity is possible

Explanation is not explanation of variance or statistical association

the independent variables explained a significant degree of variance in the dependent variable [with] the explanatory variables explaining 58 percent of the variance in commitment, 53 percent of the variance in worker motivation, and 41 percent of the variation in respondent's desire to remain with the organization (Gould-Williams, & Davies 2005).

perceptions of supportive HR practices were consistently positively related to POS*. This adds to our understanding of the factors leading to the development of POS (Allen et al 2003)

*POS = perceived organisational support
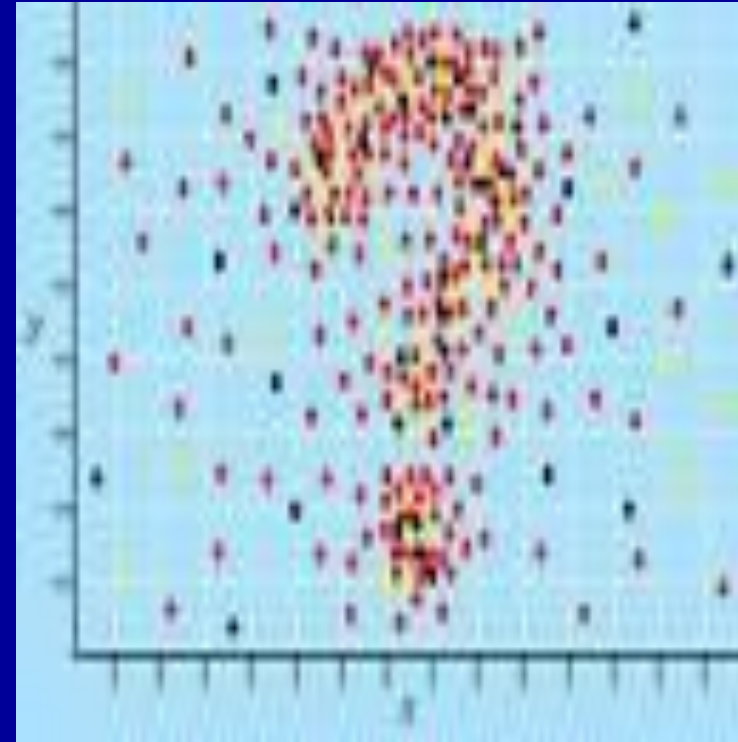
Explanation is not event regularity

We don´t explain why the bus is late today by stating that it is always, or regularly, late

We don´t explain why PRP causes an increase in performance by stating that PRP always, or regularly, causes such an increase

It is possible to provide an explanation of something that only happens once – doesn´t display regularity.
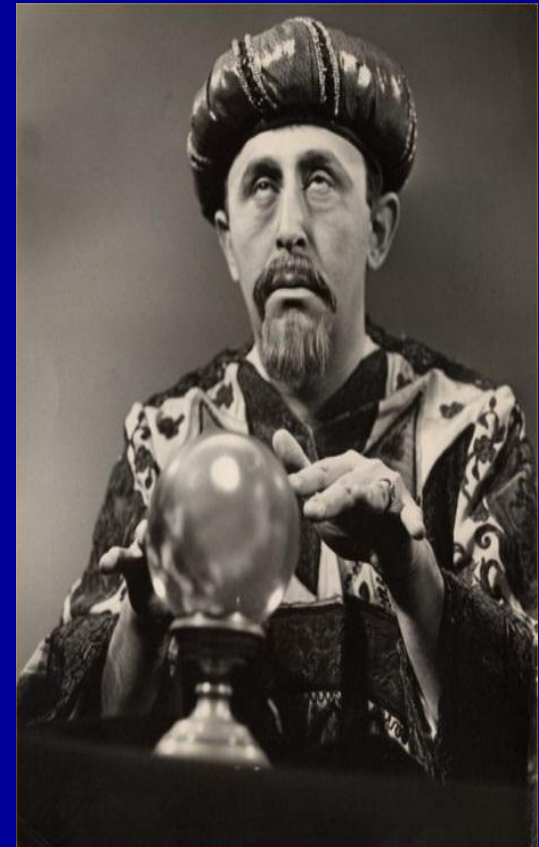
Explanation is not prediction

We can predict *without explaining anything at all*

Doctors predict the onset of measles following emergence of Koplic spots…but spots don´t explain measles.

Explanation of measles needs an account of underlying causal mechanisms –i.e. virus that causes spots & illness.

Suppose we can (accurately) predict that performance will increase following intro of PRP

This explains nothing: we would be left asking: Why?

Explanation is not about deconstruction to uncover regimes of truth

Deconstructing texts to see how 'reality' of PRP is socially constructed by power-knowledge discourses of *managers* or *social scientists,* is not an explanation of why PRP does / does not work.

Are you a positivist (scientism)?

- 'Events: observable & atomistic

- Knowledge derives from observing events & event regularities
- Causality is event regularity – i.e. Humean

- Law is law as event regularity – i.e. not tendency

- Closed systems – i.e. not open

- If laws, then prediction

- If prediction, then hypothesis testing

- Events are quantified – i.e. variables

- Use maths & statistics

Are you an idealist?

- ***Strong*** social constructionism

- Ontology consisting entirely of of discourse, language, signs
- Interpretation constructs or creates reality

- Multiple interpretation ➨ multiple 'realities'

- Relativism arising from 'multiple realities'

- Substitutes ***sociology/politics*** of science for ***philosophy*** of science.

If the answer to these questions is no……..

Then, be careful……..

……you may just be a critical realist!

Unpacking the term `social phenomena´ R&T by agents
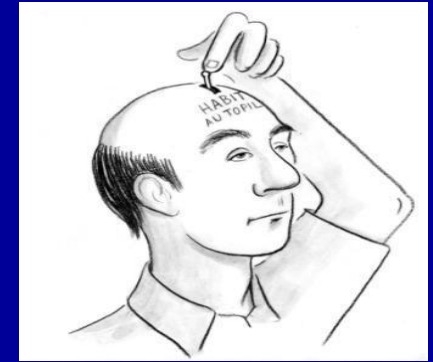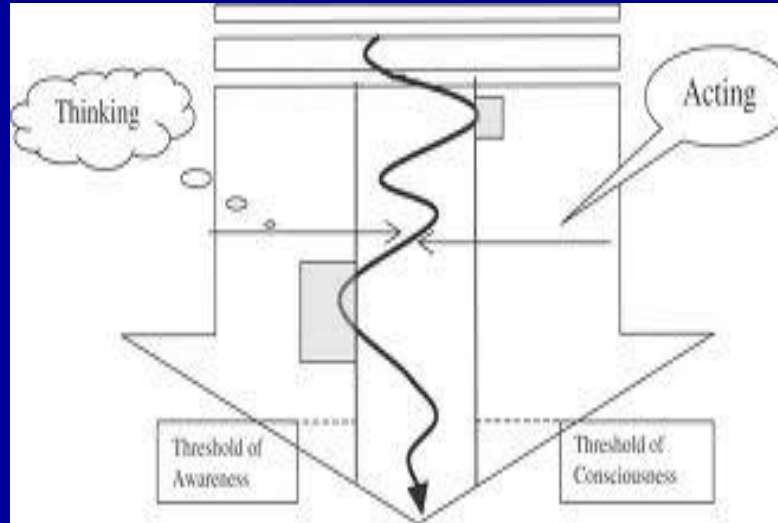
Agents *internalize & unconsciously* R/T:

- Mores, norms, rules, values

Agential properties
- Habits

Agents *consciously deliberate* over & R/T:

- Agreements, codes, conventions, laws, obligations, precedents, procedures, regulations

4 main social phenomena

- *Structure*: internal relations *consciously* entered into by agents

- *Institution*: *unconsciously* R&T social phenomena - e.g. rules, norms

- *Mechanism*: *consciously* (e.g. laws, regulations) & *unconsciously* R&T social phenomena

- *Organization*: *consciously & unconsciously* R&T social phenomena + *agents*

Ontological enquiry

Practice   Practice
  Empirics   Empirics
   Theory   Theory
    Methodology   Methodology
     Aetiology   Aetiology
      Epistemology   Epistemology
       Ontology   Ontology

`Ontological fix´