
14 Discourses of relations and relational processes

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Introduction

This is a story of relations and relating. There is no wolf, no Little Red Riding Hood; there are no bears, nor little piggies. It is not a heroic tale of how one particular discourse proves its superiority by vanquishing other discourses; it is not a tale told from behind the wings, the modernist author's pen, or the realist painter's brush. This story, like all stories, is told from a particular point of view or standpoint – one that I shall try to make explicit – one that I shall call 'critical relational constructionism' (CRC). From this standpoint I shall provide a schematic overview of different discourses of relations by discussing three 'intelligibility nuclei' (Gergen, 1995) in terms of their interrelated 'lines of distinction' (Deetz, 2000). I shall call these discourses (1) 'this and that thinking'; (2) constructivism; and (3) critical relational constructionism. In each case I shall focus on how relations and/or relating are understood – given the wider network of distinctions. Illustrations from the literatures of organization studies and, in particular, Fred Fiedler's theory of leadership effectiveness, will be outlined – not to position a particular study or approach to say what it is, but rather to illustrate abstract conceptions. The third discourse, critical relational constructionism, will receive the most detailed exploration. CRC presents a radically different discourse of relations – one that opens up new possibilities for relational theorizing, inquiry, change work and other kinds of practice.

This and that thinking

Objects with characteristics

The discourse with which I am concerned here includes themes that have been variously referred to as 'objectivism' (Hermans et al., 1992) and 'the received view of science' (Woolgar, 1996). Others, speaking of competing 'paradigms' in qualitative research, have referred to some of these themes as 'positivist' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) – a confusing simplification for those familiar with the philosophy of inquiry.

This and that thinking is reflected in narratives that for example distinguish between individuals and groups and more 'macro' units such as

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organizations and society in ways that are overly suggestive of concrete, separately existing objects with their own defining characteristics. For example from the 1960s onwards, management and organization studies were dominated by large-scale empirical studies and by what others have since seen as naive reifications of 'the' organization as the largely tacit and separate context for individual action, perceptions and satisfactions (for example Miner, 1980), and for groups, and inter-group relations (for example Child, 1977). Naive reifications treat someone or something as a unified, bounded and separate 'this or that' requiring its own explanatory theory. Speaking from within psychology, commentators reflected on what they saw as 'individualistic' and 'culturalist' fallacies (Allport, 1963). Other communities such as sociology and anthropology constructed the 'this and that' of individual action versus social structure, whilst the philosophy of social science distinguished 'individualism' and 'holism' (Hollis, 1994).

Language has a very particular role in this kind of thinking. In the words of Hermans and his colleagues, speaking of 'objectivism': 'language is needed to express concept mapped onto objects, properties and relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion'. So the scientist, as a language user capable of correct reasoning (see below), is able to describe what she or he discovers about an already existing and independent reality. In other words, it is assumed that language can provide a 'naive reflection' of the world. In this discourse, ontology and epistemology are separate but related. In this discourse, the 'context of discovery' (for example the province of social scientists) and the 'context of justification' (the province of philosophers) are kept separate (see Gergen, 1995; Hosking & Morley, 2004) such that what science says about itself can be held apart from what it says about other.

This brings us to the related issue of methodology, often characterized as empiricism. Fiedler's work provides a helpful illustration. Fiedler presented his work in a manner suggestive of a classical, empiricist methodology. For example it was through observations of leaders, groups and their performance outcomes, and subsequent application of 'the traditional empiricist principle' of induction (Hollis, 1994: 45) that he arrived at his contingency hypothesis (see Fiedler, 1967). He then conducted a series of empirical validation studies designed to test his hypothesis – following the hypothetico-deductive process (see for example Kerlinger, 1964; Gergen, 1995). Truth was operationalized in terms of a probability coefficient (arrived at through sample statistics) applied to numbers produced from empirical measures (claimed to be reliable and valid). Statistically significant results were presented as evidence that the null hypothesis (of no significant difference) could safely be rejected. Fiedler claimed that many empirical studies had tested and validated his hypothesis such that the basis had been provided for the prediction and control of leadership effectiveness.

Relations between 'this' and 'that'

When things are represented as unified, bounded, and separate then relations are understood as being between independently existing entities. This has been referred to as a 'subject-object' construction of relations (see for example Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fine, 1994; Harding, 1986; Hollis, 1994; Jaynes, 1976; Reeves Sanday, 1988). So for example, writings in organisational behaviour often discourse people as behaving in or on groups and organizations whilst writings in organisation studies often discourse the organization as acting on, and influencing, individual motives, satisfactions and actions. The discourse of subject-object (S-O) relations provides the backdrop against which an alternative discourse of relations will be identified when we come to explore relational constructionism. For this reason, it is worth giving it some more detailed attention.

First, and by definition, S-O discourses construct an 'active-passive binary' between an active and responsible agent (subject) and an acted upon other – as a passive object. For example, the received view of science (RVS) positions the scientist as the knowing subject (S) acting in relation to the knowable objects (O) of his research. The scientist, mobilizing the discourses of his scientific community, knows what he wants to find out (discover) and knows how to do it in ways that produce objective knowledge about other. Equally, many theories – claimed as scientific or not – do a similar job. For example Fiedler theorized the leader as active and 'the leadership situation' as passive, available to be known and acted upon by the leader.

Second, actions, relationships and outcomes are explained through reference to the assumed characteristics of entities. In 'this and that thinking' these characteristics include the physicalist attributes of material objects, the mentalistic characteristics of the mind, and a singular self. So we find the RVS positioning the scientist as a cognizing agent (Woolgar, 1996) who can know about self and other, and who can generate explanations in relation to some sort of story of causes. Similarly, theories in organization studies offer some sort of causal narrative about the characteristics of S and O and about the relations between these characteristics. So for example contingency theories of organization and of leadership discoursed characteristics of entities (organizations, leaders, leadership contexts) including goals, structures, cognitive capacities and leadership style and hypothesized causal relations between these characteristics and contingent variables such as effectiveness.

Third, the S-O construction positions the subject as active in building his individual knowledge. This is the Cartesian discourse of *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Knowledge is discoursed as an individual possession, a property of the rationalist mind; it is disembodied and divorced from history and culture, knowledge is objective or subjective, about the world 'as

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it really is' (accurate, true) or distorted and inaccurate. So in the RVS the scientist (S) is considered to build his individual knowledge using 'scientific methods' to produce objective knowledge of what is real – including other people's subjective knowledge claims. These 'lines of distinction' are found in 'more micro' theories where for example organizational leaders are storied as people who can and must build their knowledge about other in order to act rationally.

Fourth, the knowing subject is assumed to exercise his knowing mind in order to influence, form, or structure other as object. So for example the meta-theory of the RVS positions the scientist as one who may who may use his knowledge rationally to design and manipulate the inquiry process ('methodology'), testing theory, producing knowledge that provides the basis for prediction and control of nature, organization design, leadership effectiveness and so on. Arguments and data (validated knowledge claims) should convince the rational actor of the truth of things. Similarly, Fiedler's leader–subject has to achieve 'power over' other (Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995) – in this case, the leadership situation – either by selection (moving from one situation to another) or by re-forming it (for example by restructuring the group's task).

Fifth, the S–O construction turns relations into instrumentalities for S. Other is an instrument for the subject in the pursuit of supposedly rational and value-free purposes. So the RVS produces value-free knowledge about the world 'in its so being', whilst Fiedler's theory positions the group as the leader's instrument for achieving 'leadership effectiveness'.

In sum, 'this and that' thinking assumes (and sometimes prescribes) S–O relations. These may be constructed in relations between the scientist and his research object and in 'scientific' or 'lay' theories about relations between people and the world. As we shall see, this subject–object construction of relations is revised in the second discourse we shall explore (constructivism and individual knowledge), and radically reconstructed in the third and last discourse of 'critical relational constructionism'.

Blurred images: post 'this and that'?

Post-positivism The 'intelligibility nucleus' of the RVS embraces assumptions that have received much critical comment over the years. Criticisms include: the naive and simplistic assumption that linguistic categories represent 'innocent descriptions of segments of the natural world' (Danziger, 1997) – suggesting the need to reconceptualize the role of language; the assumption of causal relations: the relations between the independent variables caused the state of the dependent variable – inviting other ways of conceptualizing relations; the assumption of induction as a way to develop

theory; the logic of verification; the assumed independence of theory and data; the assumed independence of the observing subject from the observed object and so on (see for example Gergen, 1995).

Some of these criticisms have been to some extent addressed in the 'post-positivist', meta-theoretical shift from the naive realism of 'this and that thinking' to a discourse of critical realism. The latter largely involves shifts in epistemology – for example accepting that we cannot know the world as it really is, accepting a changed view of truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and shifting to talk of falsifying hypotheses rather than the language of 'brute facts' and proof. It is in this sense that all modern (and some would say 'modernist') Western psychology has long viewed its knowledge as constructed rather than straightforwardly representative (Hosking & Morley, 2004).

But the above shifts are accompanied by a continuing 'healthy respect for the "world as it is"' (Gergen, 1995: 67). The distinction between, and centring of, individual objective and subjective knowledge continues, even though it is recognized that objectivity is constrained. So too does the ontological construction of separate existences (this is independent of that). Equally, when it comes to the everyday practice of social science inquiry, the meta-theoretical shift to critical realism need not have major implications – particularly when the meta-theory keeps separate the contexts of justification and discovery. To do 'critical realist' science, the scientist must relate to other in ways that attempt to minimize contamination of the (out-*side*) knowledge he is able to build about other. The scientist must construct, as best he can, a methodology that will let him produce objective knowledge – knowledge that can be accepted¹ as justified true belief.

Constructivisms In Western psychology, constructivist themes are found in (early twentieth-century) shifts: (1) from talk of sensation to talk of perception; and (2) from talk of sense-taking to that of sense-making. These shifts echoed themes in earlier philosophical work such as the writings of Vico and Kant (see for example Hosking & Morley, 2004; Watzlawick, 1984). Constructivist approaches assume that individual minds process sense data to construct knowledge about the world (for example von Foerster, 1984; von Glaserfeld, 1984; Kelly, 1955; Mead, 1934; Neisser, 1969; Piaget, 1954; Watzlawick, 1984). The constructivist orientation says that people do not know, and cannot know the world as it really is. Rather the mind 'combines what is in the head, with what is in the world' so to speak. Social constructivist approaches amend and supplement this 'cognitivist' story by paying particular attention to social influences and the effects they have on our knowledge claims.

(Social) constructivisms have developed differently in different human science communities in relation to their varied histories and varied practical

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and theoretical concerns (see for example Danziger, 1997). In recent years, the language of (social) constructivism has become increasingly prominent in business and management studies. The areas of business strategy and marketing, to name only two, increasingly put to work variants of constructivist thinking joined, for example, with more or less individualistic² versions of cybernetic systems theory³ (see for example Stacey, 2003). At the same time, and as noted above, (social) constructivist thinking is neither new nor radical in much of contemporary Western psychology⁴ where behaviourism and the RVS have been replaced by the discourse of post-positivism, and where social influences on individual action and cognition are widely theorized.

Constructivist writings vary considerably in the particular S–O themes they blur. As far as meta-theoretical themes are concerned, the rationalist–empiricist construction remains part of the intelligibility nucleus but the dualist opposition is now collapsed.⁵ Equally, even though reality cannot be known ‘as it really is’, ‘external’ reality usually remains the focus of scientific interest in objective knowledge.⁶ These ontological and epistemological assumptions mean that talk of ‘construction’ is likely to be understood as talk about objective knowledge (now accepted as imperfect) or subjective knowledge. Should the constructivist writer seem immoderate for example in his critique of scientific practices, he will be supposed to be naive (of course we already know that knowledge is constructed). Equally, should the constructivist writer seem to go too far in his or her talk of construction, they will be thought foolish (daft enough to reject the assumption of an independently existing reality) – trapped in the relativist position that there are as many realities as there are knowing minds; trapped in the deeply problematic view that ‘anything goes’.

Constructivist inquiries often continue to be oriented around an interest in ‘aboutness knowledge’ and its (in)accuracy as a representation of an independently existing world. So for example constructs such as mind maps, schema, narratives and discourses are treated as characteristics of mind operations and are awarded a central role in the processing of sense data and the production of knowledge. Language continues to be given the role of representing some non-discursive world. Last, and consistent with my earlier reflections, constructivist interests are often pursued through some empiricist methodology. One major consequence of this is that post-positivist science continues to discourse other as irrational and to discourse self as able to produce objective knowledge, thus providing the basis for rational action. Reflexivity remains an individual act in which scientists evaluate the reliability and validity of their findings but do not reflect on or revise their meta-theoretical assumptions, that is, ‘the context of justification’ (for example Steier, 1991).

In sum, post 'this and that' thinking succeeds in blurring, but not abandoning, some S–O assumptions about relations and continues to prescribe S–O relations in the conduct of scientific inquiry. The characteristics attributed to the human subject include a singular self (*I think*), with a knowing mind (*I think*)⁷ and language ability, along with constructs such as motives and personality. The blurring of S–O is primarily epistemological and objective–subjective knowledge is about real objects, imperfectly knowable. A radical reconstruction of relations awaits our third discourse of relational constructionism.

Critical relational constructionism

Overview of premises

I want to use the term 'critical relational constructionism' to refer to an inter-related set of assumptions and interests that differ from post-positivism and constructivist thinking. Instead of centring mind and 'real' reality, RC centres language and discursive practices – and these are seen as constructing relational realities – including what is thought to be a person. This is not talk of subjective interpretations; this is not adopting idealism in place of realism. This is another 'map' about another 'territory' (to borrow freely from Korzybski) – where the objective–subjective, real–relativist dualisms are no longer relevant. This discourse centres the construction of objects (self and other) and relations, construction not discovery. So for example the positioning of post-positivism as a special scientific way of knowing⁸ can be treated as a particular language game with its related 'form of life' (Wittgenstein). The discourse of independently existing 'beings' can be set aside⁹ in favour of a discourse that centres language-based relational processes. Language and 'real' reality may be discoursed as inseparable by seeing 'textuality' as a defining characteristic of all phenomena and not just of written and spoken 'texts' (for example Stenner & Eccleston, 1994; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995; Hosking et al., 1995).¹⁰

The 'lines of distinction' that contribute to CRC have very long histories and come from many different communities of practice (see for example Danziger, 1997; Gergen, 1995; Hosking & Morley, 2004). Turning to relatively recent times, contributing arguments come from literatures such as feminism and feminist critiques of science, literary criticism, cognitive and social psychology, interactionist, cognitive and phenomenological sociologies, radical family therapy, critical social anthropology and some expressions of 'postmodernism' and post-structuralism (for example Latour, 1987; Foucault, 1980). Some postmodern and poststructuralist lines of distinction are embraced for example in the construction of self–other as a relational unity that is ongoing in relational processes – rather than as

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separately existing entities, subjectively or objectively knowing and known. The assumption of separately existing individuals in a S–O relation is itself viewed as a historical-cultural construction that can be otherwise. This is consistent with for example Foucault's critique of the Cartesian separation of epistemology and ontology. According to Foucault, 'we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what positions does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?'

The following seem to me to represent some of the key features of a relational constructionist orientation:

- Talk of the individual self, mind operations, and individual knowledge gives way to discourses of relational processes, viewed as language based interactions.
- Relational processes are seen as processes that (re)construct self–other realities as local ontologies or 'forms of life' (person-world making); and (re)construct mind – metaphorized for example – as an imaginal space in which self–other relations are discourses (for example Hermans et al., 1992; Jaynes, 1976).
- The unitary conception of self is replaced by a dialogical conception of self as multiple self–other relations such that other, including the body, is no longer discourses as 'outside'.¹¹
- Relational processes have a local cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing present.¹²
- Relational realities are viewed as constructions such that subject–object relations may be constructed in particular relations (for example in 'scientific' inquiry) – but do not have to be.
- Power is (re)constructed in relational processes, for example by being linked to talk of crediting and discrediting knowledge or identity claims, closing down or opening up possibilities, creating (more or less) local realities and relations between them.

Discoursing relational processes

A good deal of work emphasises the 'what' rather than the 'how' of relating (see Hosking, 1999; Pearce, 1992). I will finish by thickening some discourses of relational processes as multiple, simultaneous interactions and as local social-historical constructions of relational realities.

Multiple, simultaneous interactions Language is centred as the primary medium of relating. In this discourse, language derives its significance from

the ways it is used in human relationships and the forms of life it supports (Gergen, 1995). This is so whether the language game is called science or something else. Conceptual language is often given centred, although relating is also achieved non-verbal actions, and in coordinations of bodies, things and events (see for example Hodge & Kress, 1988; Latour, 1987). The literal–metaphoric distinction is no longer relevant, and all language is viewed as metaphorical.

A variety of linguistic tools are used for talking about relational processes including terms such as ‘act-supplement’ or ‘text-con-text’ (for example Gergen, 1995), or more everyday terms such as story-telling, conversation, performance, narrative or discourse. The most general point here is our focus on relating, regardless of what is being related with what. So for example relating goes on in the shaking of hands, in the telling of and listening to a story, in conversations about local markets and strategy, in playing and in listening to music.

Relational processes involve multiple, simultaneous, interrelated texts (con-texts). For example the process of relating to a painting such as Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* simultaneously implicates multiple inter-related texts which could include relating: the visual symbol with the written text below it; the written text with the French language; the written text with the Dutch language (!); narratives of earlier viewings, of what others have said about the painting, of what is appropriately called a ‘pipe’ and so on. And of course multiple constructions of ‘what it is’ are also possible, depending on the particular interrelating of con-texts: it’s a pipe, ‘it’s a painting of a pipe’, ‘it’s a paradox’, ‘it is a work of art’ and so on. The question ‘what is it’ is no longer meaningful; (il)legibility is a local-cultural-historical affair. In this discourse, action and language are joined, rather than separated through discourses of cognitive processes and representation. Relating (re)constructs the textuality of all phenomena.

Local-social-historical constructions Relating produces and reproduces stabilized patterns as some performances are supplemented in ways that socially certify them as real, relevant, perhaps helpful and/or true (Hosking & Morley, 1991), (un)ethical, and/or aesthetically (dis)pleasing. Ethical and aesthetic aspects have been relatively underexplored by constructionists – perhaps because of continuing and unrecognized attachments to the post-positivist intelligibility nucleus and its related interest in propositional knowledge. Stabilized effects or patterns include particular self–other relationship constructions, social conventions, musical forms, organizational and societal structures, technology, and (what some may call) ‘facts’ and ‘artefacts’ (for example Latour, 1987), (un)ethical behaviour and so on. But not all texts will be supplemented; some will go unheard, unseen,

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unnoticed. Equally, some will be discredited, certified as not science (art, music . . .), claimed as heretical or irrational.

Supplementing may play with conventions and possibilities: the proffered hand may not be grasped and shaken but spat in; the improvising actor or jazz musician may take a process off in new directions. Whilst possible supplements might be infinite, not all are equally probable because there are (social-historical) limits to what is likely to be socially certified as relevant, true or good. Once a particular performance becomes 'stabilized' for example a greeting convention, 'how we do things around here', the sonata form, what counts as middle C, other possibilities have to be improvised. And, as Beethoven discovered at one of his premiers, it may be harder to have some new form socially validated when what is 'real and good' is already established! Such difficulties are especially likely to be encountered when subject-object relations (implicating discourses of 'right' and 'wrong') are already stabilized (see for example Deetz, 2000).

This reference to local social-historical processes should be understood in contrasting relation to narratives of general (trans-contextual, trans-historical) knowledge about reality (as ontology). CRC speaks of social practices – including what some might construct as 'knowledge' – and emphasizes that what is socially validated or discredited is local to the ongoing practices that (re)construct a particular culture or 'community of practice' (for example Lave & Wenger, 1991) and so, particular self-other relationship constructions. This said, local could be as broad as Western, or post-enlightenment. The 'natural attitude' may mean that particular ways of 'going on' are taken for granted as 'how things really are'. However the present line of argument emphasizes the essential artfulness of these 'stabilized effects' and draws attention to the relational processes that make and remake them (for example Chia, 1995; Latour, 1987).

This reference to the historical quality of relational processes should not be understood to imply a linear and unidirectional story in which the present is a moment between (the now finished) past and the (yet to come) future. Rather, relational processes are always ongoing, bringing past structurings into the present (for example the convention of shaking hands) and anticipating possible futures (for example that a greeting will be successfully performed). Another way of saying this is that all texts supplement other texts and are available for possible supplementation and possible crediting. Interactions, and particularly regularly repeated ones, 'make history' so to speak and history is constantly being remade (Vico, 1774; Hora, 1966).

Relational realities Multiple, simultaneous, ongoing relatings (re)construct the textuality of people and worlds. The individual is not the agent of

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reality construction. In this view, identity and other assumed entity characteristics (such as personality, organizational goals and structures) are not singular and fixed and do not function as the necessary defining characteristic of someone or something. Rather identity, and other assumed characteristics become understood (1) as relational; and so (2) multiple and variable (for example different identities in different self–other relations); and (3) as performed, rather than possessed, in networks of ongoing relations. In sum, relational processes are reality-constituting practice(s) that construct markets, management, science, self–other – all textualities. These relational realities are multiple and local rather than singular and transcendent; they may be explored with a greater or lesser emphasis on inquiry or transformation in relation to for example their local-cultural aesthetic, ethical and pragmatic qualities.

In my view, the critical relational constructionist orientation is best viewed as a discourse or ‘intelligibility nucleus’ that emphasizes the historical-cultural rather than the natural-scientific whilst differing from contextualism. Theory, method and data are seen as interwoven¹³. Inquiry is opened up to a different range of interests. These include for example not to ‘tell it how it (probably) is’ – but to ‘tell how it might become’ that is, to be ‘world enlarging’ (see Harding, 1986). Similarly, interest might be directed to particular discursive practices to see what forms of life or ways of ‘going on’ are invited, supported or suppressed. The critical interest is in dissensus – exploring how power full processes construct dominance or facilitate openness and multiplicity – exploring how unitary constructions can be deconstructed and disrupted (for example Deetz, 2000). And last, inquiry can embrace its relational – constructive qualities by shifting emphasis – to ‘opening’ up new possible identities and (local) worlds – to transformation rather than simply ‘finding out’ (Hosking, 2004).

To conclude: I have attempted to distinguish different discourses of relational theory that are often confounded. In my view, it is only CRC that sets aside both *I think* (the individualistic self) and *I think* (the cognizing subject) (Hermans et al., 1992); only the CRC has room for useful fictions (Vaihinger, 1935) such as the three little piggies (I lied when I said there would be no piggies).

Notes

1. At least, by the scientific community.
2. And indeed, more or less realist or idealist, for example the radical constructivism of von Glaserfeld (1984) seems to adopt an idealist position by treating reality as an individual construction.
3. Wholistic developments such as for example in cybernetic systems theory, complexity and chaos theories – in danger of continuing to reproduce some crucial S–O themes that is, science, systems, talk of processes, failing to get to grips with somatic life, emptiness and space, reflexivity and openness.

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4. Although countries clearly vary in how much they are committed to strong versions of empiricism.
5. As it has been in the thought styles and practices of many who would now be called scientists including Galileo and Newton.
6. Although not of all, the radical constructivists shift their attention to the individual observer as one who participates in self-reflexive constructions of reality.
7. See Hermans et al. (1992) for an excellent discussion of this.
8. That is, one that can know about other ways of knowing and one that has the *unique* quality of self correction (see Kerlinger, 1964: 7).
9. Set aside, not rejected – as others have said – this discourse is ‘ontologically mute’ (Gergen, 1995).
10. Of course supporters of the RVS would regard many of these moves as constructing something that was ‘not science’ – but the definition of science is itself a contested terrain and its ‘essence’ undecidable.
11. ‘Inside-outside’ is now viewed as a discursive construction – and not one that CRC needs to make.
12. And so, contrary to analytic philosophy, the distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification is dropped (see Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Hosking and Morley, 2004).
13. For this reason, theorists will probably not use terms such as ‘data’ (it is too suggestive of a view of facts as independent of theory and methods) or ‘method’ (too suggestive of a technique that is theory-free).

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