Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique
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**Abstract**

This paper explores the epistemological assumptions of three discursive research strategies and their implications for organisational action. Drawing on examples from the literature on group dynamics in multidisciplinary health care I argue that effective change is based on the most valid and accurate account available, and that both standard hermeneutic strategies, which emphasise the descriptive aspects of discourse, and the more radical social constructivist approach, that focuses on the performative functions of discourse, militate against this. In their place I advocate a critical realist epistemology coupled with a theory of action methodology. This critical discursive approach integrates both the performative and descriptive functions of discourse and enables a deeper and more accurate understanding that can rationally ground the organisational action.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, critical perspectives on organisational communication, critical research philosophies and methods, theory of action, hermeneutics, social constructivism

Since J.L. Austin (1962) made his famous distinction between the performative and descriptive functions of sentences social researchers have had to take into account that language was not merely about the world, that words did things. When a manager says "How did that meeting go?" she may be asking for information, or she may be attempting to elicit self-criticism from her subordinate. When the subordinate replies "Those meetings aren't worth preparing for" he might be describing the actual value of the meetings, or he might be deflecting anticipated criticism. Or both. How well a manager or change agent can untangle these intertwined aspects of discourse, the descriptive and the performative, determines how well she can develop an accurate and complete understanding of the present state of affairs and the underlying dynamics. The better she understands these the more likely the actions she initiates will be beneficial.
The same goes for researchers of organisational change. The various epistemological positions they take, either explicitly or implicitly, determines how they deal with these aspects of discourse. Hermeneutic approaches are primarily concerned with the descriptive role discourse plays in an effort to empathise with their research participants. Social constructivists, with a focus on contested issues, concentrate on the performative functions of discourse. Both, it is argued here, seriously limit our understanding of problems of concern and provide misleading prescriptions for change. In their place I propose a theory of action methodology grounded in a critical realist epistemology. This critical discursive approach is concerned with the causal role played by the performative aspects of discourse in facilitating or impeding the validity of descriptive discourse. Only a critical discursive response, such as the one outlined here, can acknowledge the social construction of actions and events and ground rational choice between competing accounts.

The setting for these philosophical and empirical arguments is the arena of multidisciplinary teams in community health care. These teams routinely face difficult problems, from internecine internal conflict to difficulty in allocating roles and tension over aims (e.g. Jones Elwyn, Rapport, & Kinnersley, 1998; Lankshear, 2003). I begin by outlining and critiquing the change implications of two studies, one hermeneutic and the other social constructivist. After presenting the critical realist/theory of action alternative we will return to these studies and offer alternative readings that demonstrate the analytic and practical advantages of the critical discursive approach advocated here.

**Hermeneutic approaches**

Hermeneutics is concerned principally with meaning and agency, how agents make sense of their world and the social rules that bound meaningful acts (Crotty, 1998; Heil 2010). Hermeneutic researchers have traditionally opposed empiricist (or positivist) attempts to decontextualise social action in order to establish laws in the mode of the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1998b; Greenwood, 1989; Thompson, 1981). Social life, according to the hermeneuticist, is not about variable conjunction, as the positivists would
have it, but about intelligible connections. Ryan (1970) provides the prototypical example: a driver does not pause at a stop light because the light provides ontologically sufficient conditions in the form of a necessary correlation, but because the driver understands the *meaning* of a red traffic light.

The researcher in the hermeneutic tradition aims to build a "thick description" (Ryle, 1949) based on the avowals and observed actions of the agents, being careful to heed "the old hermeneutic dictum that meaning must be read out of, not into, a text" (Bhaskar, 1998b, p.157). Essentially the researcher seeks to make sense of the world as the agents experience it, and given this must work with agents' interpretations as the primary material.

The researcher's interpretation, then, can only be considered adequate with respect to its explication of the understanding of the participants in their social setting. Consequently, the subjective understandings of the participants exhausts the subject matter of the hermeneutic investigation (Bhaskar, 1998b). In this sense a hermeneutic investigation is necessarily neutral with respect to the interpretations of the subjects of the investigation, whose descriptions, because they are constitutive of the phenomena of interest, are in principle incorrigible (Bhaskar, 1982, 1998b).

**Empirical example**

The most thorough hermeneutic attempt to understand the dynamics of multidisciplinary groups is Peter Reason's Co-operative Inquiry [1] investigation of a group of general practitioners (GPs) and complementary practitioners (CPs) (Reason, 1991, 1999). The CPs consisted of a homeopath, an osteopath, a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), a psychotherapist and a masseuse. With Reason acting as facilitator the group met for a seven month period, engaging in cycles of action and reflection focussing on issues that arose in attempting to create and maintain a multidisciplinary practice.
Reason (1991) explores the so-called "paradigmatic power struggle" (p. 148) that bedevils the group. This dynamic is set in train when the clinicians of various hues consent to the suggestion of the GP who founded the clinic to empower the patients by allowing them greater say in the treatment approach chosen, tapping into "their own subjective wisdom" (p.145). As it turns out, however, the complementary therapists come to see this strategy as disempowering them:

   CP1: …on a fundamental level (it's) about safety…(to GP) Do you have an agenda about making us feel unsafe…?
   CP2: (amid laughter) You like to make us squirm!
   CP1: …If that is part of the experimental model, let's get it on the table! You want to empower the patients and disempower the practitioners. I think you can empower the patients without disempowering the practitioners. I think there has to be a balance struck, or else the dynamic of this meeting will always be difficult…

(Reason, 1991, p.145)

Analysis

Reason concludes that the different interpretations the various practitioners bring to the clinic sets up a power struggle as there is no framework for agreement. In turn, Reason suggests, this triggers interpersonal disagreements and a vague sense that "something else is around" (p. 148). He assigns this the term "paradigmatic power struggle" (p. 148, italics in original). Power imbalances, Reason believes, must be managed carefully because they may exacerbate differences that already exist within the group.

Prescription for action

Reason posits two strategies to address this problem. The first, "realistic strategy" (p. 149) involves accepting these conflicts around power will exist and have an impact on the workings of the group. The group members should then become aware of this impact and attempt to ameliorate its effects, particularly the possibility that members will attribute their differences to "personal or professional pathology" with the result that "the complementary practitioners […] may be seen as too difficult to manage by those who hold formal power" (p. 149). The second "idealistic strategy" (p. 149) prescribes the removal of power differences and the creation of open relationships. This would be facilitated by the exploration of
Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique

paradigm differences through meditative and other mindfulness exercises that would in turn create analogic understandings beyond those available through discourse.

As a preliminary to the later critique, note that these prescriptions are based on the adequacy of the CP's diagnosis. The validit of the participants' diagnosis is presupposed by the epistemology: hermeneutic research, being interested in the empathic understanding of group members, treats discourse as a transparent window onto the social situation of interest. That is, it pays close attention to the descriptive aspects of discourse as members of the group account for events and actions. Awkwardly for the hermeneutic researcher this means that, when issues are contested, they must privilege some accounts and not others (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) yet have no objective grounds for this analytic choice. The doctors in Reason's research, for example, presumably don't believe they are attempting to disempower the CPs, since the very reason all these diverse practitioners formed this group was to try to overcome their differences and develop a shared practice.

Social constructivism
Drawing on poststructuralist and postmodern thought the social constructivists [2] (e.g. Gergen, 2001) have sought to turn these apparent epistemological impediments of the hermeneutic approach to their advantage. For the social constructivist the social, and even physical, world are constructed in and through discourse. Since all versions of a social episode are social constructions, there are no objective (i.e. extra-discursive) grounds for accepting one account over another (Edwards, Middleton, & Potter, 1992; Edwards & Potter, 1992).

There is, then, no imperative for the researcher to justify the accounts of the research participants; there cannot be because accounts are not treated as a window on the world or a dispassionate interpretation of how things actually are. Rather, they are competing interpretations offered by motivated agents as they contest their versions of the social and physical world. According to the social constructivist, the
Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique

A hermeneutic researcher is bound to encounter difficulties when issues are contested because descriptive discourse is not reflective of an underlying reality but a version of the world worked up to appear descriptive while performing the function of categorising, persuading, defending etc. The social constructivist is not interested, then, in the hermeneutic analyst’s fiction of a correct or even better interpretation, but with documenting the performative strategies used to socially construct an ostensibly factual account (Edwards, Middleton, & Potter, 1992; Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Empirical example

Middleton (1997) was interested in the way members of a multidisciplinary team in neonatal intensive care use remembering as a way of establishing certain events and actions as collectively relevant. In particular he wished to demonstrate how uncertainty was used as an organisational resource in teamwork, rather than an indication of an actual cognitive gap. Take the following discourse from a team meeting (I have retained the conventions around punctuation from the original):

Nurse Educator: so the baby's come down here for us to baby-sit while mum goes home overnight =

Sister (senior nurse): and when we'd got the baby down dad's only words were (.) I'm going to feed her can you warm the bottles first please' (??::tuhh)) and I said well we do: (0.5) and Karen said good-bye well see you all tomorrow and they just all walked out and ignored her (.) there was mum (.) dad and someone else

Registrar (middle-grade doctor): yes it's funny this though (.) because I don't know because I don't know the baby that well but on Monday Rebecca did the high round yeh? (.) ([S:] um) so I (.) I only heard the bit about the baby when Dr. Jones did his round and then I was handing over to Valerie = because I baby-sat until Valerie got back from her interview (.) that was about 7 = 7:30 at night and I was just giving her the briefest of = I think you were there (.) weren't you? = anyway I was just giving the briefest of handovers and I got to baby Lucy and I said = dad was there feeding her and a few other people were around = and I just said this is Lucy (.) I couldn't remember I couldn't remember much about the history actually which is my fault = but I just said there's no particular problems here she's just um being observed and left it at that and walked away and mum and dad were both looking at me = a:nd (.) I glanced backward and they were both looking like you know = who the bloody hell does she think she is sort of thing ([?:] hhh) you know and I thought we::ll I'm away for the next 2 days at interviews I won't go back and say anything (.) you know its not appropriate I'll leave it (.) and then later that same evening dad came up to the nursing station and ga:ve the = you know the name that sits in front of the = on the top of the cot? ([?:] umm) and somebody had put 1991 for the da::te of bi::rth
Nurse Educator: oh:: typical (.) isn't it
Registrar: and he was reasonably pleasant, actually (. ) he brought it up = I can't remember which nurse it was but it was somebody sitting at the desk and he gave this thing to her and said I didn't know my daughter was 2 years old (. ) in a half joking sort of way (1.0) [beep] it just makes you wonder doesn't it? I mean he didn't think much of me = he probably didn't think much of Valerie because that was my fault (. ) he didn't think we were very good because we didn't put the right date of birth o:n
(Middleton, 1997, Findings, Remembering and forgetting the past: interdependencies of individual and collective experience, example 1)

Analysis
Middleton argues that these discursive forays provide interpretations that account for the uncertainties of the parents' responses. In the first incident the nurse deflects the implied doubt about the unit's professionalism by stating that they always warm the milk. The latter incident concerning the father's presenting the mistake on his daughter's age "I didn't know my daughter was 2 years old" is relevant precisely because it taps into presumed levels of competence, linking it to previous discursive contributions on the same topic.

The participants to the discourse are, according to Middleton, working up a shared understanding. In this understanding the parents are constructed as displeased, with various implications left for others as to their character "they just all walked out and ignored her", along with some situational constraints "I don't know because I don't know the baby that well". The staff are thus constructed as misunderstood rather than incompetent, a potential concern these accounts buffer them against.

Prescription for action
Middleton recommends that the team retain progress review meetings and the like because they provide a forum for the discussion of uncertainty. This is important because it helps the organisation's flexibility in the face of changing circumstances and retains knowledge and continuities. However, to again presage the critique offered later, the only aspect illustrated in the paper is the retention of continuity: the way the staff reinforce their world view and defend their current understanding of themselves and their
Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique

competence. It is not surprising that this recommendation is not really about change at all, but about maintaining the status quo. Social constructivism, despite its rhetoric to the contrary (e.g. Gergen, 2001), is inherently reactionary. The idea that any position is empirically equivalent to any other means, in practice, that existing arrangements are reinforced, for no discursive account could ever demonstrate actual inadequacies, injustices or mistaken understandings. There are simply no objectively compelling grounds on which a manager or change agent can base their decision for organisational action.

Critical realism and the theory of action

Critical realism is an ontological reconfiguration within the philosophy of science with epistemological consequences that have a particular bearing on these issues of interpretation and the adjudication of competing accounts. Ontologically, critical realism posits a real world, made up of things, powers, actions and events. Epistemologically it sees agents' accounts as corrigible descriptions of this actual world (Bhaskar, 1998a). This distinction allows us to steer between naïve descriptive accounts that assume that agents are aware of the factors that impinge upon their actions and wishes and sceptical accounts that that tend toward a relativism where all discourse is performative and there are never grounds for the objective adjudication of competing versions of reality. From the critical realist point of view, just as scientists can propose hypotheses and theories that don't pan out when tested against reality, so agents can be mistaken in their accounts. The fact that agents can be mistaken, and the possibility that these errors might arise systemically from a particular source, means the social sciences are considered to be potentially emancipatory in a manner consistent with the critical theory associated with the thought of Habermas (Bhaskar, 1982; Outhwaite, 1987).

The problem for critical realists has been in locating actual theories and practices, especially with respect to discursive strategies, that illustrate how such a critical social science would proceed (Sayer, 2000). The theory of action represents, I contend, a highly suitable candidate for organisational research (for a similar position from a Habermasian perspective see Bokeno, 2003a; Bokeno, 2003b. Other approaches consistent
with a critical realist perspective are canvassed by Fariclough, 2005). It accepts that much of social discourse is aimed at particular outcomes and that these are often implicit or disguised (Argyris, 2004; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). It focuses, in other words, on the performative aspects of discourse and treats those aspects as real and causal (Argyris, 1982; Argyris, 1993). It also supposes that there is an actual social reality and that agents can develop tests of their descriptions of that reality that will allow them to choose between competing accounts. In particular, the theory of action is adept at helping agents move between the performative and descriptive aspects of language. The outcome is that agents develop an understanding of the relevant circumstances and the causal factors that systemically combine to produce and maintain problems in their situated practice. Given a valid 'map' of their problem they are in a better position to develop actions that are effective (Argyris, 1993).

The theory of action is essentially a theory of interpersonal competence (Argyris, 1982; Argyris & Schon, 1974). The core claim of the theory is that people will tend to use defensive and anti-learning discursive strategies in situations that call into question fundamental individual and organisational assumptions. Specifically, they will tend to design their discursive interventions consistently with a constellation of tacit norms, called 'model I theory-in-use', which are geared towards unilateral control and self-protection (Argyris, 1982, 2000; Argyris & Schon, 1974). Groups in which the members adhere to these norms are hypothesised to act ineffectively in setting and solving problems. This is because the use of these tacit norms will tend to confine the group to solving 'single-loop' problems, where the problem is easily identified and a simple means-ends solution is available. Dealing with 'double-loop' problems, where the underlying causes of the problem are contentious and complex, is hamstrung because model I predisposes people to act unilaterally, disguise or omit information, act as if they are not doing so and cover-up the act. Specifically, people utilise discursive strategies such as advocating their position without inviting inquiry, treating untested assumptions as concrete facts, and relying on inferences that are highly abstract. These strategies tend to invoke reciprocal strategies from others, leading to defensive group dynamics and a lack
of awareness that one’s own strategies might be involved in the defensiveness that evolves (Argyris, 1982; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Argyris & Schon, 1996).

To counteract the effects of model I Argyris and Schon claim that agents need to develop and internalise an alternative theory-in-use that minimises these threats to valid information. One such theory-in-use developed by Argyris and Schon (1974), called model II, aims at creating a behavioural world where people can exchange valid (explicit and disconfirmable) information, even about difficult or threatening issues. Model II norms specify a commitment to a free and informed choice based on valid information and feelings. To develop such learning oriented norms in the face of the tacit, automatic and ubiquitous nature of model I norms is a difficult task, a fact Argyris and Schon readily acknowledge (Argyris, 1993; Schon, 1987).

**Reanalysing Reason and Middleton from a critical realist, theory of action perspective**

Recall that Reason derives the diagnosis of paradigmatic power struggle primarily from the complementary practitioners (CPs) reaction to the case clinics which were intended to be empowering for the patient. Instead, the CPs felt they were disempowering for them (the CPs) and that this suited the general practitioners (GPs). The first point to note about the CPs dialogue is that it falls into the category of high advocacy/low inquiry. The CPs were advocating abstract (distant from the data) inferences that were attributions of bad motives on the part of the GPs. For example, "you like to make us squirm!" and "If that's part of the experimental model, let's get it on the table". This is likely to be experienced by the GPs as unfair and trigger their defenses, leading to a win/lose interaction. Secondly, the CPs used these untested attributions to build their causal explanation of the difficulty of the meetings and, therefore to rationalise their current intervention: if you GPs are disempowering us then the dynamic of the meetings will always be difficult, and we need to challenge you. Thirdly, the CPs do not explore the possibility that they are implicated. They do not, in other words, examine the interactions in the clinic or their own responses. Since Reason (1991, p.145) describes the CPs difficulties in the clinic meetings as feeling
unsure of their ground, being uncertain of how to describe the benefits of their therapy and not wanting to appear to be criticising the GPs treatment strategy, there seems ample room for inquiry. These three points above describe, of course, model I with its attendant anti-learning consequences.

The operation of model I suggests an explanation for much of the phenomena described. For example, it is understandable that the CPs did not feel comfortable disagreeing with the GPs in front of the patients. What doesn't make immediate sense is why any of the practitioners would think their differences could wait until then. Possibly this was in response to two wishes, to empower the patient and to allow the patient to choose amongst the competing frameworks on offer since the practitioners couldn't themselves (Reason, 1991, p.145). In other words, since the practitioners did not have a model II theory-in-use or equivalent that would encourage the testing of competing accounts, including underlying norms and values, the single-loop solution to this double-loop problem was to get the patients to resolve it. Apart from being a rather Utopian expectation it likely had paradoxical outcomes, such as making the clinics competitive rather than collaborative, as any doubts the GPs had about the CP's diagnoses may have subtly leaked out. In this sense they may indeed have, even if unintentionally, used their formal power as well as the aura of their profession to lead the clinic.

Without access to the conversations of this clinic this remains entirely hypothetical, but certainly plausible. But if it is accepted, for the sake of the argument, then Reason's realistic and idealistic remedies are largely beside the point. The GP's and CP's would not need to accept the power differential and guard against it, whatever that entails, or engage in meditation etc., but diagnose the role the theories-in-use of all the participants to the discourse play in circumventing inquiry. When the agents are capable of engaging these defensive strategies they can then build a richer and more valid account of the underlying dynamics, which may, for example, follow the hypothetical diagnosis in the previous paragraph.
Middleton's analysis is also limited, from the critical discursive perspective of the theory of action. Rather than passively note the rhetorical strategies and their effects, the theory of action researcher would be interested in understanding the reasoning the nurses and doctors brought to this episode. For example, given the parents were thought to be making the performative point in their discourse and actions that the staff were not competent, what prevented the staff from inquiring into the parents' reasoning at the time, and what leads the staff now, in their meeting, to avoid exploring the defensive role the performative aspects of their descriptions play? That is, as each staff member puts forward their belief that the parents were dissatisfied and that this dissatisfaction was either trivial (the age of their daughter being wrong) or mistaken (milk is always warmed), other staff members collude to bolster this account. Given this strategy, are the staff creating a norm in which the ‘face’ of the members takes precedence over the effectiveness of the team? Rather than suggesting that organisational meetings should be preserved, which is Middleton's rather superficial conclusion, this analysis would suggest that the norms which operate in such meetings should be examined for their possible role in perpetuating error.

**Conclusion**

Clearly discourse cannot be treated as a neutral description of the world. But equally it is not plausible to suppose that descriptive discourse is only performative. To use an everyday example, the performative power of statements like 'I have a headache' to excuse presupposes their potential descriptive adequacy (Greenwood, 1992). These functions are inextricably linked in language, as Austin argued long ago.

The hermeneuticists are right, that participants' subjective grasp of their social world is the condition of investigation. As social scientists we are interested in social phenomena as agents experience it. But this is only our starting point. When this exhausts the investigation it privileges agent accounts, or the researcher's interpretation of the agents' accounts. The focus then falls heavily, if not exclusively, on the descriptive aspect of discourse and ignores the contestation of meanings.
Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique

The social constructivists are in turn correct to point out to hermeneuticists that, given they have no concept of a world external to the 'text' of the discourse, there is no objective resolution of problems of interpretation. They are right also to focus on the ways in which accounts are structured to achieve aims, such that purportedly descriptive accounts are in fact performative. But their commitment to a relativist ontology and consequent disavowal of descriptive accuracy means that in principle no account can be superior to any other. From the hermeneutic incorrigibility of agent accounts we move to the complete corrigibility of all accounts. No manager can accept this because it means all designed change is arbitrary. Academics who recommend social constructivism (e.g. Westrup, 1998) need to be wary of these implications.

Critical realism claims that we have fallible knowledge of actual objects and events. It accepts both the primacy of the hermeneutic moment and the corrigibility of agent accounts. Whatever difficulties these givens in social life present, they do not entail that social life is impenetrable to objective analysis. On the contrary, according to the theory of action analysis presented here there is the real possibility of objectively grounding the adjudication of competing accounts through examining and changing the performative structures of discourse complicit in occluding descriptive accuracy. As participants come to untangle the effects of discursive strategies that emphasise control and self-protection they are better able to grasp deeper and more complex stories that explain their current predicament, rather than merely interpret it.

References


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Epistemological assumptions and discursive methodologies: a realist critique


1 Reason may not consider himself part of the hermeneutic tradition. He suggests at times he uses a realist ontology with a relativist epistemology (Reason, 1998)—which would place him close to critical realism—but refers the reader to Heron (1996) for details. Here it gets confusing, because Heron appears at times to echo these thoughts, but on another occasion states “according to the relativist ontology presented in this book” (p. 115). Whatever the case may be generally, the analysis that follows demonstrates that in the study referred to here Reason is conducting hermeneutic research as I have just defined it.

2 There are various research strands associated with the term ‘social constructivism’. Here I am aiming my critique at the sociologists of knowledge (e.g. Mulkay & Gilbert, 1985; Potter, 1984), discursive psychologists (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Edwards, 2001) and the 'social constructionism' associated with Kenneth Gergen (Gergen, 1985; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). They all assume that the social world is given in, that is constructed in, discourse, and that there is no access to an extra-discursive reality. They are, then, relativists of a 'local' kind (Greenwood, 1989), which means they believe there are no objective criteria for choosing between competing accounts or theories.