**Constructivism and Positivism: Either/Or versus Both/And?**

In discussions of PCP on INTERNET constructivism is sometimes contrasted with positivism, the latter generally being referred to in derogatory terms. A clear example of seeing these as opposed poles is provided by Devi Jankowicz’ poll, featuring a scale from 1 to 7 where no one seemed to question the underlying premise of exclusiveness.

A hallmark of criticism against positivism is that it is usually generally stated, long on inventive and short on logical analyses. What I particularly find lacking is a recognition that the most searching criticism of early positivism, or rather logical empiricism, has come from within the movement– notably the Vienna group– and a closer look at the movement reveals pronounced disagreements within the movement.

**Correspondence versus Coherence**

As an example consider the early emphasis on the correspondence theory of truth, emphasizing fit between beliefs and an external reality. One of the criteria which are brought forth to distinguish between constructivism and positivism, is the distinction between a correspondence and coherence theory of “truth”. This distinction also features in Neimeyer’s (1995, p.14) contrast between ‘objectivist’ (presumably closely related to ‘positivist’) and constructivist approaches to psychology.

Perhaps the most prominent positivist, Carnap, developed specially constructed languages to clarify the notion of verifiability, central to the positivist view of “meaning”. Carnap’s pupil Quine, however, in a famous and much quoted essay from 1951 argued for a holistic coherence theory:

"What are the alternatives for the postmodernists except a jaded recognition that some stories might be less interesting than others?"

Personalistically I like to think that there are pragmatic reasons for on occasion thinking in terms of a “correspondence goal of science”. For one thing a thoroughlygoing relativism– scorning any possibility of approaching truth– as might be found in some sociological constructions of “science”, may undermine curiosity. I am also afraid of the postmodern emphasis of the idea that we cannot transcend “local narratives”. Such attitudes run counter to what I find a basic (though unfortunately not too frequently honored) value in science: the ability to not only acknowledge errors, but also delight in the ensuing feeling of progress. This was highly characteristic of Carnap, but rare to observe among constructivists, except perhaps for Kelly when he acknowledged that his theory might turn out to be nonsense. What are the
alternatives for the postmodernists except a jaded recognition that some stories might be less interesting than others?

The theme of combining correspondence and coherence is also evident in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who give a searching critique of the "myth of objectivism" which they find all too prominent in Western philosophy. They contrast "objectivism versus subjectivism", and their treatment of objectivism captures what many constructivists feel is "wrong" with positivism, viz. the belief in inherent properties of objects out there, that objects have fixed relations, that true statements can be made independent of a particular point of view etc.

For our purposes, however, it is important to note that while very critical of objectivism (and positivism) as a "true model", Lakoff and Johnson do not on the other hand find it without merit; they point out that it is an appropriate model when dealing with the physical world, and it may simplify life by making for consistent predictions (p. 220).

**Constructivism versus Objectivism**

Consider now a more controversial example of applying an "objectivist model", namely medical diagnoses (e.g. DSM-IV). This is a favorite topic when we lament the ways of the "bad positivists", and Kelly insistently warned against preemptive diagnosis, and argued for a "... survey of pathways along which the subject is free to move" versus to "fix the position." (p. 203). The latter is clearly akin to regarding a person as an object with inherent properties.

But is this all there is to be said? There are more overriding considerations in Kelly's theory—closer to Lakoff and Johnson's more conciliatory stance—namely the injunction to use propositional versus preemptive ways of thinking. To rule standard diagnostic terms permanently out of court seems to me exactly to epitomize preemptive thinking. On the other hand, a truly propositional approach would acknowledge that there also may be occasions when there is a place for applying standard diagnostic terms. I would of course not insist that such diagnoses do not reflect a "true" state of affairs. (If we allowed propositionality to imply its converse this might be related to the kind of paradoxes Devi Jankowicz is struggling with.)

In the present context I take propositionality to be a highly superordinate value, subsuming the possibility of a timebound, "objectivistic" diagnosis, pragmatically motivated. I believe there are occasions when a person has frightening experiences, defying explanations, and where a diagnosis might provide a welcome moratorium. This should of course preferably be followed by exploring pathways of healthy movement! The literature gives examples where a person "inexplicably" has e.g. put the house on fire, and "explanations" in terms of "illness" have provided relief for the family, allowing a subsequent reconstruction of life. (We should not neglect an insistent search for meaning; in many cases persons with highly unpleasant, but "non-standard symptoms" relish diagnoses, as for instance "fibromyalgia". But (ideally!) this should be but a temporary label.)

I am weary of superordinate constructs which are used in clearly evaluative and constractive ways, (as generally seems to be the case when constructivists discuss "constructivism versus objectivism (positivism)"). Kelly warned against "pyramiding our constructs" and preferred "penetrating them with insights".

This has further been brought home to me when discussing hundreds of grids (in small groups). Students have provided their own constructs for describing important "situations" in their life (a broad definition of "situations" has been provided, including hobbies, relations with others etc.). Two major types of constructs may readily be identified: evaluative and non-evaluative. Examples of the former: "close-distant", "intimacy-superficiality", "exciting boring", "free-constrained", "pleasure-sadness"; whereas "safety vs. future oriented", "receive vs. give care", "relaxed-active", "just being-exploring", "easy-challenging" are examples of non-evaluative constructs. Consider now that the situations being described are current ones, and (mostly) important ones. Discussions have clearly emphasized that where a dominant "good bad" dimension runs through the situations life is less satisfying than for persons who construe non-evaluative axes to describe important aspects of their lives.

When discussing strongly "evaluative grids" it has often been an important challenge for the students to construe "good" aspects of what at first blush was "distant", "superficial" etc. Why not try to discover interesting aspects in what at first blush seems to epitomise "positivistic" research?
Occasionally I have to read student essays strongly criticizing “conventional approaches” to diagnosis. I then wonder how life will turn cut for these students if they have to take jobs in psychiatric hospitals where DSM is the order of the day...

**Universality versus Pluralism**

We now turn to “search for universal laws” (cf. the logical empiricists’ program of “unity of science”) versus “a pluralist creation of local knowledges”. This is another central feature in Neimeyer’s (1995) contrast between objectivism and constructivism.

I can not understand why this contrast should be considered to point at exclusive paradigms. Obviously many aspects of our sensory apparatus are universal, and the arguments for universal aspects of e.g. color perception (despite differences in description of colors in languages) seem quite strong, cf. Lakoff (1987). As another example consider the topic of “universal emotions” – why not have an empirical attitude and cherish a lively debate (cf. Ekman, 1994)? The constructivist insistence on local knowledge strikes me as a new dogmatism which may foreclose such issues.

Granted, however, that we should not look at laws as ironclad but rather as dominant possibilities. Whenever anything is stated as an universal law it should be a fruitful challenge to look for “deviant cases” – and unravel overlooked variables which serve to make the exceptions possible. Galtung (1977) gives several examples of “social science invariances, and how to break them up.” This strategy may be seen to epitomize Habermas’ plea for a “liberating” social science.

Why the necessity for constructivists to construe a monolithic enemy? To define oneself in opposition to something else? Could the reason be to gloss over lack of accomplishments as suggested by Paul Meehl? Granted: many constructivists live in environments where significant investigation of human life gets short shrift. All too often empirical studies are characterized by trivial investigations of insignificant issues. This may reveal limited conceptions of what science really is, but “positivism” might not necessarily be the appropriate target. The challenge for the constructivists is to do more significant research!

We live in a world where objectivist philosophy has strong footholds. From what we know in social psychology sharp criticism is not the way to win friends and influence people; rather it may serve to further exacerbate divisive splits. An openness to what our “opponents” may offer could provide a starting point for fruitful dialogues.

A final point worth mentioning is that the now derided positivists were the most staunch opponents against fascist ideology before the second World War. This can not be said about all adherents of e.g. “holistic ideologies” (cf. Harrington, 1995). The strong insistence on clear procedures for deciding “meaning” might be seen as one way to fight dangerous obscurantistic ideologies like Fascism. Clear thinking one way of fighting dangerous political systems like Nazism.

And the adherents of logical positivism deserve admiration and emulation for their strong insistence on clear and penetrating arguments—interestingly, thus serving to bring about their own downfall!

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**References**


