

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST AND POSITIVIST  
APPROACHES TO SOCIAL ENQUIRY : SOME  
COMMENTS**

*Introduction*

There has been contrasting epistemological claims between social constructionist and positivist approaches to social enquiry. Social constructionists hold the view that "there are several different but equally valid explanations, rationalities, logics, ethics"; while positivists on the other hand argue very strongly that 'there is a single truth.'

Social constructionists developed the ontological argument that all phenomena, irrespective of their form, are socially determined. They believe that our beliefs, traditions, attitudes, norms, sagas etc , which form the artefacts of our culture gives form and meaning to all matter or activities in the social world. The social constructionist position is based on the view that social and cultural norms determine all situations and guide the actor in constructing situations. This view has also been discussed extensively by scholars (Shott 1979; Hochschild, 1979) on the sociology of emotions. The positivists, on the other hand, maintain that for us 'to explain and predict what happens in the social world in our search for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements', we should adopt the traditional research approaches that are common in the natural sciences. The adoption of these approaches assists the researcher to be involved

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in the real experimental situations. Positivists believe that the adoption of these approaches would take us closer to the 'truth'.

The ontological and epistemological basis of the arguments presented above have been exhaustively discussed by Ahiauzu (1982) Gellner (1974 p. 129-56); Winch (1970 p. 78-111); Lukes (1973 p. 230-248). The debate on social constructionists and positivists in their analyses of the social world is not new. These concepts have re-echoed several times in well informed discussions. Our focus in this paper, therefore, is to discuss assumptions made by social constructionists and positivists about the social world, nature of the social world and the place of value-freedom in social enquiry. We shall also examine areas of conceptual clarification in social constructionists and positivists understanding of the social world. Our final task in this paper is an attempt at bridge-building by synthesising social constructionists and positivists views about the social world.

#### *Assumptions About the Social world*

To understand the contrasting arguments of the social constructionist and positivist in their search for the explanation of the truth, it is necessary to examine the issue of the social world based on four sets of assumptions (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The first concerns assumptions which are of ontological nature. Ontological assumptions enable us to understand the *raison detre* or the very essence of the phenomena we are studying. These ontological assumptions sensitize the individual to ask relevant questions about the entity or phenomena under investigation. Ontological assumptions raise questions as to whether the phenomena under investigation is concrete or real by stimulating individuals to believe whether the social world around us is 'real and of an objective nature.

Beyond the ontological question are associated assumptions of the social world which are basically epistemological. The epistemological assumptions which we make centre on the basis for the rationalisation of knowledge. In other words, the premise or grounds on which knowledge is understood and communicated to people in intelligible form. The epistemological question does not just terminate with the understanding of the grounds of knowledge and how to communicate this to people in intelligible form, but how one can discriminate between what is to be regarded as 'true' from what is to be regarded as 'false'. The ability to discriminate between these parameters is what determines the frame of reference of each individual. In fact, Burrell and Morgan (1979) have argued that the "dichotomy of 'true' and 'false' itself presupposes a certain epistemological stance". This statement seems to be an attempt which questions the epistemological basis for the correct interpretation of the nature of knowledge and how it could be understood and communicated as a phenomenon which is concrete and identifiable or whether knowledge is something which is not of an objective form but something more subjective which is based on past experience.

Closely related to both the ontological and epistemological questions according to Burrell and Morgan (1979), is a third set of assumptions which border on 'human nature'. The primary focus of the third set of assumptions is the examination of the relationship between human beings and the environment in which they are a part. Burrell and Morgan (1979) have forcefully developed the argument that there cannot be a debate of any meaningful kind if the nature of human beings is excluded from discussions in all social science. We cannot agree more with this view, since the object and subject of enquiry in all social science is man

The three sets of assumptions discussed above, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979), 'have direct implications of a methodological nature'. They go further to argue that :

"each one has important consequences for the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain 'knowledge' about the social world. Different ontologies, epistemologies and models of human nature are likely to incline social scientists towards different methodologies. The possible range is indeed so large that what is regarded as science by the traditional 'natural scientist' covers but a small range of options. It is possible, for example, to identify methodologies employed in social science research which treat the social world like the natural world, as being hard, real and external to the individual, and others which view it as being of a much softer, personal and more subjective quality".  
p. 2.

The issue raised by Burrell and Morgan here is the identification of the appropriate methodological stance, while making assumptions about the social world. In the literature, there exists the subjectivist-objectivist dimension, which explains that there are two theoretical and methodological approaches in social research—the ideographic and nomothetic theory. The two theoretical and methodological approaches will be discussed later.

In spite of the ontological, epistemological, human and methodological questions which dominate approaches to social science, there still exist every obvious rival claims made by social constructionists and positivists in their attempt to advance the inevitability of a single true explanation. The basis of this contention both by social constructionists and positivists rests on the implicit claim that both groups could logically explain or prove to satisfaction of all "reasonable men" that there is a

single true explanation about the social world. Ahiauzu (1982), re-echoing the ideas of Winch, has argued that if social constructionist and positivist positions are accepted in their entirety, then we can conclude that "sickness may be explained by witchcraft or by medical science". Developing the logic further, Ahiauzu has argued that :

" The physical sciences may be viewed as advancing towards the truth, or as having a discontinuous development with one paradigm replacing another but with no implication that later paradigms are nearer to the truth. On this latter view, Einstein's theories, for example, might be seen only as better at solving puzzles than Newtonian mechanics. A similar analysis has been applied to economics, where Smithian (*laissez-faire*), Jevonian (utility) and Keynesian (macro-economic) revolutions have been identified. Within political science, the relativistic/absolutistic question could be applied to the conflict and to the consensus theories of the state in capitalist society."

Taking a cue from the statement presented above, we can conclusively say that the debate or rival claims between social constructionists and positivists has had a long standing history and tradition in which each group claiming to be able to logically analyse all social phenomena. For example, the social constructionist position is strongly supported by Shot (1979 p. 1320), Hochschild (1979) and Averill (1990), whereas the positivist stance is supported by Kemper (1978a 1978b; 1980, 1981) in the sociology of emotions. In order to explore the social world and to understand both the social constructionist logics, ethics and rationalities and the positivist position in understanding and interpreting the social world it is necessary to briefly discuss the nature of the social world.

*The nature of the Social world*

Irrespective of the ontological nature of the social world, the argument has been advanced by Berger and Luckmann (1967) that :

“ reality is socially constructed... (defining) ‘ reality ’ as a quality appertaining to phenomenon that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition .. (but that) despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it.”

A close examination of the ideas advanced by Berger and Luckmann (1967) shows that society should be :

“ understood in terms of an on-going dialectic process composed of the three moments of externalisation, objectivation and internalisation.”

If we rest our case on the points raised above, we can possibly argue that the first of the three moments see society as a construction of man, with all the ‘ social institutions such as the state and other sub-institutional entities within society as products of the effort of man. The second strand ‘ sees society as an objective reality antedating and external to individuals’. But the objectivation process should be such that its products do not relegate the place of man in society. Abiauzu (1982) has succinctly argued that “ Alienation may occur where the objectivated product as a repugnant power set over and against people.” However, the process of objectivation should not be over-stretched, otherwise this may lead to reification of the natural world as man-made. This, according to Berger and Luckmann, could lead to a situation whereby the natural world may

"become fixated as a non-human, non-humanisable, inert facticity" The third and final 'moment sees man as a social product'. Seen in this light, the process of socialisation across institutions results in the transmission of knowledge. The social world, seen in the context of the three moments discussed above can be explained through both social constructionist and positivist epistemologies.

*Observing And Interpreting The Social World :*

*The Place Of Value-Free Enquiry*

One vexed issue which had gained some prominence both in critical sociology and the social sciences generally is the 'ideal of value-freedom'. The 'classic case for the ideal of value-freedom in social science' was developed by Weber (1949). Weber has argued that in all social enquiry, what is necessary is the selection of appropriate topics for investigation. And that, if this was done, the question of 'value-relevance nor value-judgements' becomes irrelevant in all social enquiry. Abiauzu (1982) has argued that 'Weber's view has been challenged from both Marxist and non-Marxist perspectives by those who argue that a value-free stance is both logically and morally wrong.' Keat and Urry (1975) Gouldner (1973) also argued that a value-free stance has no place in social enquiry. This view was also advanced earlier by Hanson (1958) when he discussed the critical nature of the cognitive ability of human beings. Hanson went further to say that, "people, not their eyes, see. Cameras and eyeballs, are blind."

This means that social theorists should, as a matter of culture and tradition, highlight their value position in social research. Myrdal (1961) and Watson (1977) have also highlighted the importance and place of value-relevance in sociological

orthodoxy. Myrdal went as far as arguing that theoretical issues which we discuss are denoted in concepts which are "spaces into which reality is fitted by analysis". However, Hyman and Burough (1977) have warned that in an attempt to adopt value-position in our analyses of social phenomena, we must avoid the danger of reification in which "the irrational consequences of a specific form of social organisation are regarded as natural and inevitable".

From the views expressed above, it has become evident that both in critical theory and reflexive sociology, any attempt at positivism, is to be rejected. While we do not completely ignore positivism, particularly in the physical sciences, what we stand to question and reject is 'easy' positivism in social research.

*Social Constructionist And Positivist Approaches To Social Enquiry: Areas Of Conceptual Clarification*

There are great strands of controversy between social constructionist and positivist views as it pertains to the exploration and interpretation of the social world. One of the major areas of conceptual divergence between social constructionist and positivist approaches to social enquiry lie on the grounds of ontology. The social constructionist position builds on the ontological 'assumption that the social world external to individual cognition is made up of nothing more than names, concepts and labels which are used to structure reality'. Social constructionists do not agree or believe that there are any 'real' structures in the world which these names, concepts and labels actually assist us to describe. The social constructionist view is that the names which we use in describing certain phenomena should be seen merely as artificial creations of individuals to enable them negotiate and ascribe meaning to the external world. However, the adoption of an extreme form of social constructionist position is what Kolakowski (1972 pp. 12-16) would



refer to as solipsism. The solipsist position does not acknowledge the fact that there exists any world 'outside the realm of individual consciousness'. He believes very strongly that, out there, nothing exists, and the social world is regarded simply as a creation of human mind. The solipsist view, therefore, is a relativistic epistemology which occupies an extreme position on the subjective-objective dimension of Burrell and Morgan's analytical framework.

The positivist ontological stance, on the other hand, stresses the fact that the social world 'external to individual cognition is a real world made up of hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures'. The positivist position, unlike the social constructionists who create names, form concepts and use labels to make sense out of the social world, does not believe that names, concepts and labels are sufficient to explain or make sense out of the social world. It is the view of the positivist that whether we name, perceive or label structures or entities around us, 'they still exist as empirical entities'. The positivists further advance the notion that we may not, in some cases, be aware of the existence of some of these structures, and, therefore, may not have appropriate 'names or concepts to articulate them'. Positivist ontology adopts the realist approach by positing that the social world exists, out there, as a hard and objective entity, independent of the appreciation and perception of the individual. Burrell and Morgan argue that 'the individual is seen as being born into and living within a social world which has a reality of its own'. It follows, therefore, that the social world is not the creation of human beings but exists 'out there' as a tangible entity possessing all the traits and characteristics of a natural phenomenon. Burrell and Morgan, therefore, highlighted the positivist argument that, ontologically, reality 'is prior to existence and consciousness of any single human being'. Keat

and Urry (1975) went as far as arguing that 'the social world has an existence which is as hard and concrete as the natural world'. This argument seems to be at the opposite end of the solipsist conception of the social world.

Another area of importance that attracts conceptual clarification between social constructionist and positivist approaches to social studies is their epistemological stand-points. The epistemology of social constructionist rests on a continual search and use of laws or regularities to explain the social world. The social constructionist adopts a relativistic epistemology because he sees or believes that to understand and explain the social world requires the direct involvement of individuals in the 'activities which are studied'. Social constructionists reject the positivist epistemology or 'stand-point' of the 'observer' as reliable and a useful matrix for 'understanding human activities'. Social constructionists advance the notion that it is only possible to 'understand' social phenomena by occupying the frame of reference of the participant in action. In other words, one has to understand the behaviour of the phenomenon 'from the inside rather than the outside'. The social constructionist epistemology of social research, therefore, confirms the fact that all social enquiry is essentially subjective as opposed to the objectivist stance associated with positivism as enunciated by Burrell and Morgan (1979 p. 3) in their analytical framework. Douglas (1970 b pp. 3-44) has also forcefully advanced the argument that science cannot possibly generate knowledge which in its true form can be described as absolutely objective.

Positivism as an epistemology attempts 'to explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and caused relationships between its constituent elements'. The epistemology of positivism relies on the traditional approaches

adopted in the study of natural sciences. However, in terms of details and essentials, positivists, too, do differ in their approach. One group of positivist scholars believe that 'hypothesised regularities can be verified by an adequate experimental programme'. A second group within the positivist rubric believes that "hypotheses can only be falsified and demonstrated to be 'true'". But amongst both 'verificationists' and 'falsificationists' there seems to be an area of conceptual convergence. They both believe that 'knowledge' is continually growing; therefore, the cumulative process of knowledge does create room for obsolete knowledge to be discarded and new knowledge added to existing 'stock of knowledge'. This process, albeit, presupposes the elimination of false hypotheses.

There are, in fact, two rival claims or paradigms in all social science that identify the behaviours and responses of human beings to situation. The first view of human nature in any social scientific theory is the social constructionist position. Social constructionist conception of society is that 'man makes the social world'. The belief of the social constructionist is that the existence of society depends purely on the continuous confirmation of the actions of its members. Social structure, according to social constructionist :

'has no reality except a human one. It is not characterisable as being a thing able to stand on its own and exists only in so far and as long as human-beings realise it as part of their world' (Berger and Pullerg, 1966, p. 63).

The view expressed above suggests that human actions and the meaning they impute to these actions is what underscores the social constructionist position. Social constructionists argue that human-beings create, re-create, enact and re-enact their environments; they, therefore, explore their environments with

unqualified control. Social constructionist view of the nature of human-beings seems to agree with the 'liberating thesis' developed by social psychologists Katona (1940), Piaget (1968) and Chomsky (1966) who argue that human-beings create and master their environments through the process of learning and acculturation. Because human-beings create and master their environments, they are generative, and therefore, transform their habitats through their cognitive maps. Instead of being held captives in their environments, human-beings make attempts to liberate themselves by domesticating their environments. This view of human-beings would appear to be revolutionary because it challenges the existing structure of society. All be it, social constructionists believe that because man has superintendence over the social world, he interpretes it through his stream of consciousness. Social constructionists, in their attempt to interpret their environments, adopt a phenomenological appropch while constructing and reconstructing social reality through their 'finite provinces of meaning.'

The second view of the nature of human-beings is the positivist position. The positivist view of human-beings is that they are 'mechanistic'. Positivism holds that human-beings are controlled, conditioned and governed by environmental influences. The social world makes man. The positivist conception of the social world seems to have some form of symbiotic relationship with the 'enslaving thesis' developed by learning theorists Illich (1971) Freire (1970 a) and Freire (1970 b) who argue that human-beings allow themselves to be domesticated. Therefore, they are captives of their environments. This is because, they become 'conditioned to perform imposed behaviours.' The positivist ontology, epistemology and above all, his view of human nature, all seem to rest on the implicit dremise of objectivity associated with the scientific expert who

quantifies social action by asserting a position of determinacy and law-governed behaviour of human-beings.

In exploring and explaining the social world, social constructionists and positivists have both adopted different methodologies. While social constructionists favour the ideographic approach in analysing the social world, positivists insist in adopting a nomothetic method.

The ideographic approach to social enquiry locates its premise of argument on the fact that an understanding of the social world can only be made possible 'by obtaining first-hand knowledge of the subject under investigation'. This requires the person who is attempting to investigate the social phenomenon to have a close and proximate distance of his subject so as to understand all facets of the entity under investigation. This approach offers the investigator the opportunity to examine items such as 'diaries biographies and journalistic records'. The ideographic approach, because it affords the researcher the opportunity of examining his subject at close range, permits 'one's subject unfold its nature and characteristic during the process of investigation' (Blumer 1969).

The second method, the nomothetic approach to social enquiry, emphasises the systematic collection and analysis of data. This approach focuses on the collection of research data and the subjection of the data to the canons of scientific rigour through the formulation and testing hypotheses. This approach favours methods employed in investigations in the natural sciences. It sees the validity and reliability of research investigations through the adoption of quantitative methods to analyse data. Burrell and Morgan argue that the tools which make-up

nomothetic methodology are "surveys, questionnaires, personality tests and standardised research instruments of all kinds" (p 7).

*Social Constructionist and Positivist Approaches to Social Enquiry—Attempts at Conceptual Bridge-Building*

Any attempt at conceptual convergence between social constructionist and positivist approaches to social enquiry cannot be a straight forward academic and intellectual exercise. This difficulty seems to have stemmed essentially from the bipolar epistemological assumptions made by scholars of the two schools of thought. While social constructionists insist that their own approach to the study of the social world is the most viable option, positivists, on the other hand, have strongly argued that it is fatally wrong to compare two approaches that are not the same. Be that as it may. The exploration of the social world via any of the two methodologies point to the fact that both social constructionists and positivists have the same goal of analysing and interpreting the social world. However, one fact that comes out clearly from the various views and arguments developed by social constructionists and positivists is that both have the same goal but different methodologies at arriving at their goals.

The ontological debate between the approaches adopted by social constructionist and positivist understanding of the social world has been amply discussed. While social constructionists adopt ideographic methods in their enquiry, positivists adopt nomothetic methods via the performance of laboratory experiments, formulation of *a priori* hypotheses for testing and the quantification of facts. Silverman (1978) seems to offer a very useful analytical insight in this matter. He has argued that:

"The behaviour of matter may be regarded as a necessary reaction to a stimulus. Matter itself does not understand its own behaviour. It is literally meaningless until the

scientist imposes his frame of reference upon it. There is no possibility of apprehending its subjective intentions, and the logic of its behaviour may be understood solely by observation of the behaviour itself. The action of men, on the other hand, is meaningful to them" ( p. 127 ).

Attempts at establishing a conceptual bridge between social constructionists and positivists approaches to social enquiry became the preoccupation of early writers such as Dilthey (1976) and Weber (1949). They were particularly concerned in bridging the conceptual gap between social constructionists who believe in German idealism, coupled with their great plasticity and positivists whose law-governed position is based on their much avowed 'indeterminacy principle.' From his writings, Weber was apparently standing between the gulf that divides social constructionists position and positivism. In fact, Hughes (1958) and Runciman (1972) referred to Weber as fighting a war from two fronts This is because 'Weber was dissatisfied with the superficialities which he regarded as characterising positivist explanations of society, and also greatly concerned with the subjective and 'unscientific' nature of idealist thought'. Weber's dissatisfaction with the two polar positions of positivism and anti-positivism led him to adopt a unifying stance in his methodological writings, in which he developed the argument that all matters relating to social affairs can only be explained adequately 'on the level of meaning,' and that the essential function of social science is to be 'interpretive,' that is, to understand the subjective meaning of social action.

What Weber seems to imply in the above statement is that any attempt at bridge-building between social constructionists and positivists must necessarily start the process of abstraction from the understanding of the subjective meaning of social action. The theoretical or disciplinary plank on which this can

be done is through interpretive sociology. Interpretive sociology enables the acting individual to create subjective meaning to social action in order to 'arrive at a causal explanation of its courses and effects.' Weber (1947) defines sociology as :

' a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its courses and effects... Action in so far as, by virtue of the acting individual ( or individuals ), it takes account of the behaviour of others, and is thereby oriented in course ' ( p 88 ).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) have argued that the above definition, with its emphasis on interpretive sociology, is an attempt by Weber in introducing ' fusion of idealist and positivist perspectives '. Weber supports this view because it provides ' causal explanations of social phenomena but insists that such explanations must be reduced to the level of the individual '. This has led Schutz to argue that :

' Weber reduces all kinds of social relationships and structures, all cultural objectifications, all realms of mind, to the most elementary forms of individual behaviour ' ( Schutz, 1967, p. ).

The above statement clearly shows that Weber's interpretive sociology is concerned with the provision of causal explanations of social phenomena. However, in doing this, he avoids the problems of reification. Weber's focus, according to Burrell and Morgan, builds ' an objective science of sociology upon the foundations of subjective meaning and individual action ' But this is problematic. Weber has therefore gone further to say that the development of objectivity in the social sciences is only ' possible through the use of ideal types, which allow for the



ordering of elements of reality'. Ideal types are simply constructs which, for analytical purposes, were created by Weber to introduce some form of unity while analysing social phenomenon. Through the use of ideal types, Weber was able to 'incorporate the 'spirit' which characterises individual phenomena into a wider generalised whole'.

From the analysis presented above, Weber seems to have made very serious attempts to reconcile the potentially divergent perspectives of idealism and positivism. Weber, while emphasizing 'the importance of subjective meaning in explanations of social affairs, at the same time seeks to contain and limit the role of these objective factors'. Weber attempts to classify human action in different behaviour types such as 'rationally purposive', 'rationally value-oriented', 'emotional' and 'traditional' as a necessary honey-comb to assist him move towards conceptual convergence; but this does not completely remove the problems associated with the use of methodologies in two conceptually separate areas that have different ontologies, epistemologies, models of human nature and methodologies.

In an attempt to draw closer social constructionists and positivists in their understanding of the social world, Dilthey developed hermeneutics. In the words of Burrell and Morgan :

'Hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting and understanding the products of the human mind which characterise the social and cultural world' (p. 236).

Dilthey believes that human-beings through time, 'externalise the internal processes of their minds through the creation of cultural artifacts which attain an objective character'. Examples of such cultural artifacts are 'institutions, works of art, literature, languages, religions' and other forms of symbolic expression of human thought. Dilthey's hermeneutics ontologically

appears to come fairly close to the objectification process, associated with solipsism. He asserts that through hermeneutics it is possible 'the subject of study is needed to relive in the subjective life of the observer'. He goes further to say that 'social phenomena of all kinds should be analysed in detail, and interpreted as texts, to reveal their essential meaning and significance'. While the methodology of the social constructionist in the investigation of the social world is basically ideographic, that of the positivist is nomothetic. These two methodological approaches stand at two extremes of a continuum, but the method of hermeneutics attempts at unifying or obliterating them. Hermeneutics involves a situation whereby 'human scientists' adopt 'the style of literary analysts rather than that of natural scientists'. Instead of the traditional search for general scientific laws, hermeneutics explores the phenomenon or phenomena through textual analysis of meaning. This involves defining clearly the basic rules of hermeneutics, 'so that the insights of interpreters of rare genius could be utilised by others'. Through this process, it has been argued that 'objective knowledge' about human-beings could be obtained.

Dilthey's pioneering works to hermeneutics were made more clearly and illustrated through the introduction of the concept of 'hermeneutic circle'. Dilthey saw the difficulty in isolating the total whole from its parts. He believes that an understanding of the whole cannot be independent from its parts, and *vice versa*. It, therefore, follows that an understanding and interpretation of social reality requires that a body of general laws should apply both to the whole and parts of the whole. This part-whole relationship becomes a characteristic of the social world, and, therefore, poses a very serious epistemological problem. Dilthey, therefore, saw the need for a systematic

approach to resolving this problem. However, Rickman (1976) has argued that :

‘ there are no absolute starting points, no self-evident, self-contained certainties on which we can build, because we always find ourselves in the middle of complex situations which we try to disentangle by making, then revising, provisional assumptions ’ (p. 11).

The above statement clearly shows that the ‘ methodological rules of hermeneutics ’ do not move in one identifiable direction but follow an interactive and circular pattern ‘ towards an increased understanding of the objectifications of mind ’.

In, recent times, Dilthey’s hermeneutic tradition appears to have given way to newer insights developed by Gadamer (1965). Gadamer argues that Dilthey’s hermeneutic tradition has methodological flaws because he does not think that we can relate ‘ to a historic tradition as if it existed as an object apart from us, since there is an interplay between the movement of tradition and the interpreter ’. Gadamer concluded by saying that, ‘ in order to understand social or cultural phenomena, the observer must enter into a dialogue with the subject of study ’. Giddens (1976 p. 56) supported Gadamer’s contention and argued that for us to correctly understand and interpret historical material, the material must not be different from other historical accounts which are part of our culture, or not too remote from our historical past, otherwise we may end up enriching our knowledge through the historical past of others, which may not portray the correct situation. Giddens, therefore, argues that instead of ‘ placing oneself “ inside ” the subjective experience of a texts ’ author, but in understanding literary art through grasping ’, we should see ourselves as ‘ the “ form of life ” which

gives meaning'. The tool which serves in the process both as mediator and modulator is language.

From the foregoing, it seems Giddens' 'new hermeneutics', which takes its original source from Dilthey's 'early hermeneutics', has introduced a new dimension, which borders essentially both on epistemology and methodology. While Dilthey focuses his attention on how man re-lives and reconstructs the past through various cultural artifacts exemplified in the form of objective reality, Giddens' 'new hermeneutics' does not believe that we can reconstruct the past correctly by simply re-creating and reliving through an alien mode of existence. Giddens' was 'more concerned with appreciating the inter-change of the frames of reference of the observer and the observed'. The mechanism for appreciating the interchange process is facilitated by language. Hermeneutics, seen in the light in which Gadamer and Giddens sees it, 'becomes relevant to all areas of enquiry: a universal mode of philosophy' and 'not just a methodological foundation for the cultural sciences'.

### *Conclusion*

Social constructionist and positivist explanations of the social world rest on their conception of the nature of the social world and the place of value-freedom in social analyses. Social constructionists and positivists have had long tradition of disagreements on issues which loom largely on ontology, epistemology, models of human nature and methodology. Because social constructionists and positivists see the social world from two contrasting view-points, it has always been difficult to harmonise these views. While social constructionists favour pluralistic and relativistic approach, positivists insist on monistic approach and unity of truth.

Since we think that the explanation of social phenomena via any explicit conceptual rubric conflates rather than clarifies issues, in our view adoption of a stance of a middle-of-the-road is likely to lead us to less fatal philosophical polemics in social enquiry. This leads us to accept Weber's view of the adoption of interpretive sociology, which enables the acting individual to create subjective meaning to social action. The use of interpretive sociology in social analysis allows the acting individual to 'arrive at a causal explanation of its courses and effects. If we understand the relationship between cause and effect, then we shall be able to interpret human actions more appropriately, using the canons of sociological paradigms.

Another attempt at narrowing the divide between social constructionists and positivists perspectives in their understanding of the social world is the adoption of Dilthey's traditional hermeneutics, and Gadamer and Giddens' 'new hermeneutics'. The first level of (Dilthey's) hermeneutics assists us to externalise the internal processes of our minds through the creation of cultural artifacts. We go beyond Dilthey's early hermeneutics and adopt Gadamer and Giddens' 'new hermeneutics' by introducing mechanisms where we can appreciate the interchange of the frames of reference of the observer and the observed. The most potent vehicle for both the mediation and modulation' of the inter-change process is language.

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