

# Everything is relative in social psychology essay sample



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This essay explores the claim that everything is relative in social psychology. The claim derives from an ontological position which states that we can never know the true nature of the world, that all we have is accounts of what this is, and that, at least epistemologically, these accounts are all theoretically equal. The essay begins by outlining the differing dialectics for different arguments about what exists and about what we know. This argument over what is real will be developed in 3 areas; the experimentalism position of no-nonsense realism, the social constructivism of relativism and the new realism which relies on the arguments of the transcendental and pragmatic.

The essay then argues that really, social psychology is best viewed as realist and relativist, depending on the aspect of behaviour, by looking at the social interaction of groups. This then brings us neatly onto the implications of research methods that social psychology adopts, the identities, social issues and the evidence derived from. In exploring these issues, the essay endorses the concept of a reality that can be uncovered is obviously central to all scientific inquiry and that advocates of science have argued that the more every field of science advances, the closer it gets to uncovering and understanding the reality that underlies the phenomena they are investigating.

Relativism refers to the belief that there is simply no single way of deciding what is real. Conversely realism is the unquestioning faith in the reality one perceives. So what do we mean when we talk about everything is relative? If we take the opinion of Gergen he rejects the idea that any knowledge can represent some fundamental or finite understanding of reality. In his view, <https://assignbuster.com/everything-is-relative-in-social-psychology-essay-sample/>

perspectives in psychology should be seen as entries in the discursive practices of the world (Gergen 1991, pp. 103) optimal forms of discourse needing to be evaluated juxtaposed to other discourses such as: literature, politics or the views of the people in society. Brewster Smith sees post modern stance of the natural sciences have achieved and although he accepts the effect of meaning and values one must not lose sight of the role of science in our search for what is real, with emphasis on empiricism.

One factor that affects how people know and what people know as discussed, is perception. Take the current crisis in Lebanon this will be perceived far differently in Beirut, than in Telaviv. Two people involved in a domestic dispute may have differing opinions on what precipitated the argument initially. In these cases we begin to doubt that there is any one universal reality underlying the different descriptors, or we may come back to think that if there is a reality then the best we can do is develop an approximate version of its nature. (Wetherell and Still, 1996, pp. 99)

So let's us firstly explore the social constructionist biggest challenge; realism there are no underlying standards and some realities are preferable. Rogers says that we experience a world with ourselves at the centre and react according to how we perceive, through a series of tested hypothesis that give us security. One thing he does argue is " whether he thinks we can have access to an independently existing reality in the right conditions or whether all we have is reality as it appears to us". (Wetherell and Still, 1996 pp. 101). Hume 1771-1776 reinforces this point by saying that all we know for sure are things as they appear, a world constructed based on our previous experience

and that the shadow world of experience appears solid, due to ' custom and habit'.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) acquiesced Hume's sceptical arguments but rejected Hume's conclusions. He developed a transcendental argument to explain why our own experience of the world is both constructed and solid (Wetherell and Still 1996 pp. 105). Therefore, mental structures are presupposed by human experience. Hume challenged his readers to show him the reality behind experience, and naturally enough nobody has yet met this challenge, for a direct encounter with reality becomes by definition, part of the shadow world of experience (Wetherell and Still, 1996 pp. 105). Kant went onto to explain that we use the mediums of time, which subjected to causation and effect, categorise the perceived world, as this is the configuration of how our minds are organised.

We mentioned early of the no-nonsense view of realism, developed by Dr Johnstone he believed in reality and the power of science to discover the truth supported by procedural consistencies and from that scientists are in fact investigating an ultimate reality, not a construction of their own making. This line of argument traces back to the sceptical posture of Hume who retorted all we have to access are the shadows of what he labelled impressions however the immediate experience is what we should focus on.

But can we access an independent existing reality? The investigation of social psychology can be measure against a scientific baseline providing truth and validity.. It is not just the constructs from introspection and observation but the scientific investigation. There are real states of pain,

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anxiety, humour and memory. Some argue that as science has evolved through social construction and that there are differing levels of reality. Others argue that there are no guarantees of the underlying mechanics that have been discovered, a concrete (bang on a table) reality can be directly accessed through differing senses producing a discovery leading to its measurement, quantifying and that scientists, hold this view. Therefore scientific records are progressive leading to greater accuracy and the only reliable means to determine and discover reality.

So what is the relativism position? This is mostly associated with the social constructionist perspective. Unlike trimodal theory, with the diversity of perspectives, it doesn't try to deal with these. None of the perspectives are the truth and it is up to the individual how they construct the view of each one in turn.

Jerome Bruner (1990) Quoted ' In most human interaction " realities" are the result of prolonged and intricate processes of construction and negotiation deeply embedded in culture'. Through differing cultures and classes different realities are experienced.

Take the discovery of a new land we know as New Zealand before discovery it was a solid coastline that ships sighted and came ashore onto. Maori groups saw the island as a spiritual base and were more animated about its discovery. British settlers descendents of Capt Cook were more interested in the agricultural viability (sheep per acre and yields of grain). Today New Zealand is now contending as a tourist resort recrafting its agricultural land under the demands of novel initiatives and tourist demands.

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However the social constructionists are not suggesting therefore that if someone thinks a piece of physical geography like New Zealand does not exist, it does not, nor that all there is to the real world is ideas. New Zealand is no less real for being constituted through human construction (Wetherell and Still 1996 pp. 109).

As we can see differing cultures experience differing perspectives leading to differing realities. If there are differing realities there is no single truth hence this is relativism. Also knowledge is partial we can have misconceptions, illusions, biases it is the schemata's in our minds that shape our perception and hence sometimes science can get it wrong. Previously reference was made to states such as pain etc these may not exist why is it some people can be seriously affected by Post Traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and some don't even recognise it. At the turn of the century WW1 PTSD was associated with cowardice and you were shot. So what is reality just stories and narrative about society if these are deeply embedded within our own cultures and social strata's how can we make sense of reality. Since there cannot be a truth it appears that only through reflexivity, triangulation, reflection and transparency can we ever begin to construct truths so there is little point in trying to find it.

New realism relies on transcendental (Kant) and the pragmatic position of (James). Roy Bhaskar (1978) wrote that scientific knowledge is a social product like transitive objects of knowledge ;(cars, books and furniture) Items not produced by man are intransitive however would still produce sound if no one heard it. In fact ZEN KOAN quotes if a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it does it make a sound It is the existence of intransitive  
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objects which makes the possibility of science plausible. Hence social psychology can only be science if it can and prove the existence of intransitive objects. Therefore realism is a precondition for science to be possible.

Most psychologists agree that people's perceptions about the world can be distorted at times for various reasons, including, for instance, the limitations of human memory. However, this idea that knowledge of the reality is only partially existent and correct implies that there is an underlying universal reality (realism).

However, others argue that reality is only based on the perceptions of the individual, and that there is no such thing as a universal reality (relativism).

In individual therapy, for instance, a therapist with a belief in realism would suggest that the patient's views of reality are distorted and need adjusting, whereas one with a belief in relativism would suggest that the patient's views of reality are valid and the patient should focus on defining their future direction in such a way that allows for the most enjoyable life possible for the patient.

Another example of why the concept of reality is an issue in psychology is that for instance, in the case of groups, one could argue that the concept of reality is relative and differs in various cultures. How, then, can one study the real underlying reality of groups?

From a social constructionist approach if we consider that access is through human-made interpretations, objects are not independent therefore human

constructs equate to components of the world through the lens of differing perspectives of culture.

Most social psychologists naturally believe in the reality of what they are studying (which implies realism), and are therefore faced with arguments against realism. Researchers tend to believe that reality is not based on their own mental constructions, that science investigates reality, and that observations and experiments will eventually uncover the one universal reality that underlies all things. This obviously implies that there is a reality that can be uncovered (realism).

However, other scientists and researchers acknowledge that there are different levels of reality (for instance, theory and investigation), but still maintain the integrity of science. These researchers focus on the importance of observation to uncover reality, and therefore still believe in realism.

However, this gives rise to another problem, namely do observations of various situations actually uncover the underlying processes and reality, or are they also just at the mercy of relative situations and observations?

The concept of a reality that can be uncovered is obviously central to all scientific inquiry. Many advocates of science have argued that the more every field of science (including social psychology, of course) advances, the closer it gets to uncovering and understanding the reality that underlies the phenomena they are investigating.

Realism maintains the concept of the multiple nature of reality, and this concept is often found in social constructionism. In this case one would argue that all scientific observations are nevertheless always relative and largely  
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dependent upon context and perspective. From this point of view, any knowledge, including that of reality, is constructed in the human mind. One could therefore even go so far as to argue that things do not exist unless they are/have been discovered.

Edwards et al (1995) have defended relativisms by arguing that believing that reality is relative does not stop someone from forming opinions, defending them and arguing the opinions of others, instead, it gives people even more reason to do so (since there is no one reality). The question then is all about personal values, and not about what is correct and incorrect.

There are also social constructionists who nevertheless maintain a belief in realism. These people accept all the concepts of relativism, but add to them. For instance, they would say that it may seem that things do not exist until they are discovered, but that there is nevertheless a reality, and that things have already existed and are just waiting to be discovered.

Certain arguments used to show that even social constructionism underlies a reality, which is, of course, against the concepts of relativism. One of these arguments is to say that just because nobody is present to witness it, this does not mean that things are not physically there or not happening.

Secondly, one could argue that whilst certain phenomena (the example of emotions is used in the book) are constructed socially, but that does not imply that they do not refer to real processes after all.

Whilst this is another issue that people (including psychologists) have strong opinions about, there is no one to say that either realism or relativism is the correct approach.