Social Constructionism

Second Edition

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Preface

Since the publication of *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* in 1995 I have been delighted by and grateful for the many messages of appreciation I have received from readers. In preparing this book I have tried to remain faithful to the intentions of the original while aiming to reflect the growing complexity and richness of social constructionism. As in the earlier publication, I have generally adopted the position of the advocate, so that my overall strategy has been to persuade the reader of the advantages of a social constructionist approach. However, this is not an uncritical advocacy and I have also discussed the weaknesses and inadequacies of social constructionism and indicated the areas where I believe it needs to be developed. I hope that, whether social constructionist territory is already familiar to you or you are a new and curious explorer, you will enjoy this book.

Chapter 1

What is social constructionism?

Over the last twenty years or so, students of the social sciences in Britain and North America have witnessed the gradual emergence of a number of alternative approaches to the study of human beings as social animals. These approaches have appeared under a variety of rubrics, such as 'critical psychology', 'discursive psychology', 'discourse analysis', 'deconstruction' and 'poststructuralism'. What many of these approaches have in common, however, is what is now often referred to as 'social constructionism'. Social constructionism can be thought of as a theoretical orientation which to a greater or lesser degree underpins all of these newer approaches, which are currently offering radical and critical alternatives in psychology and social psychology, as well as in other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Social constructionism, as it has been taken up by psychology and social psychology, is the focus of this book, and my aim is to introduce the reader to some of its major features, while also elaborating upon the implications it holds for how we are to understand human beings, and for the discipline of psychology itself.

In this introductory chapter, my first task will be to say what kinds of writing and research I include within the term 'social constructionism' and why. This will not necessarily be where others would draw the boundary, but it will serve as an initial orientation for the reader, giving some indication of what it means to take a social constructionist approach. I will say something about the contributors to the field, and why I have included them as social constructionists. It is quite possible that I will be guilty of labelling as 'social constructionist' writers who would not wish to be labelled as such, and vice versa. I apologise in advance to those who feel uncomfortable with my description of them, but must adopt the rationale which appears to me to make sense of the area. I will then go on to outline something of the history of the social constructionist movement, especially as it has been taken up by social psychology. As we shall see, social constructionism as an approach to the social sciences draws its influences from a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology and linguistics, making it multidisciplinary in nature. Finally, I shall raise the major issues that will be addressed by this book, indicating the chapters where they will be dealt with.

Is there a definition of social constructionism?

First of all, I would like to point out that social constructionism is a term that is used almost exclusively by psychologists. As Craib (1997) points out, many of its basic assumptions are actually fundamental to one of its disciplinary cousins, sociology, and it is a measure of the unhelpful separation of the disciplines of sociology and psychology since the early 20th century that psychologists are only just 'discovering' social constructionist ideas. There is no single description, which would be adequate for all the different kinds of writers whom I shall refer to as social constructionist. This is because, although different writers may share some characteristics with others, there isn't really anything that they all have in common. What links them all together is a kind of 'family resemblance'. Members of the same family differ in the family characteristics that they share. There is no one characteristic borne by all members of a family, but there are enough recurrent features shared amongst different family members to identify the people as basically belonging to the same family group. This is the model I shall adopt for social constructionism. There is no one feature, which could be said to identify a social constructionist position. Instead, we might loosely think of as social constructionist any approach which has at its foundation one or more of the following key assumptions (from Gergen, 1985). You might think of these as something like 'things you would absolutely have to believe in order to be a social constructionist'.

A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves. It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It is therefore in opposition to what is referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science – the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. This means that the categories with which we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions. For example, just because we think of some music as 'classical' and some as 'pop' does not mean we should assume that there is anything in the nature of the music itself that means it has to be divided up in that particular way. A more radical example is that of gender and sex. Our observations of the world suggest to us that there are two categories of human being, men and women. Social constructionism bids us to seriously question whether the categories 'man' and 'woman' are simply a reflection of naturally occurring distinct types of human being. This may seem a bizarre idea at first, and of course differences in reproductive organs are present in many species. But we become aware of the greyness of such categories when we look at practices such as gender reassignment surgery and the surrounding debate about how to classify people as unambiguously male or female. We can thus begin to consider that these seemingly natural categories may be inevitably bound up with gender, the normative prescriptions of masculinity and femininity in a culture, so that that whole categories of personhood, that is all the things it means to be a man or a woman, have been built upon them. Social constructionism would suggest that we might equally well, and just as absurdly, have divided people up into tall and short, or those with ear lobes and those without. Social constructionism's critical stance is particularly adopted toward mainstream psychology and social psychology, generating radically different accounts of many psychological and social phenomena.

Historical and cultural specificity

The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. Whether one understands the world in terms of men and women, pop music and classical music, urban life and rural life, past and future etc. depends upon where and when in the world one lives. For example, the notion of childhood has undergone tremendous change over the centuries. What it has been thought 'natural' for children to do has changed, as well as what parents were expected to do for their children (e.g. Aries, 1962). It is only in relatively recent historical times that children have ceased to be simply small adults in all but their legal rights. And we only have to look as far back as the writings of Dickens to remind ourselves that the idea of children as innocents in need of adult protection is a very recent one indeed. We can see changes even within the timespan of the last fifty years or so, with radical consequences for how parents are advised to bring up their children.

This means that all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative. Not only are they specific to particular cultures and periods of history, they are seen as products of that culture and history, and are dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time. The particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are therefore artefacts of it, and we should not assume that *our* ways of understanding are necessarily any better, in terms of being any nearer the truth, than other ways.

Knowledge is sustained by social processes

If our knowledge of the world, our common ways of understanding it, is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is, where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language, is of great interest to social constructionists. The goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed. For example what we understand as dyslexia is a phenomenon that has come into being through the exchanges between those who have difficulties with reading and writing and others who may teach them or offer them diagnostic tests. Therefore what we regard as truth, which of course varies historically and cross-culturally, may be thought of as our current accepted ways of understanding the world. These are a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other.

Knowledge and social action go together

These negotiated understandings could take a wide variety of different forms, and we can therefore talk of numerous possible social constructions of the world. But each different construction also brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from human beings. For example, before the Temperance movement, drunks were seen as entirely responsible for their behaviour, and therefore blameworthy. A typical response was therefore imprisonment. However, there has been a move away from seeing drunkenness as a crime towards thinking of it as a sickness, a kind of addiction. The alcoholic is not seen as totally responsible for their behaviour, since they are the victims of a kind of drug addiction. The social action appropriate to understanding drunkenness in this way is to offer medical and psychological treatment, not imprisonment. Descriptions or constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefore bound up with power relations because they have implications for what it is permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat others.

How is social constructionism different from traditional psychology?

If we look closely at the four broad social constructionist tenets outlined above, we can see that they contain a number of features which are in quite stark contrast to most traditional psychology and social psychology, and are therefore worth spelling out.

Anti-essentialism

Since the social world, including ourselves as people, is the product of social processes, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature to the world or people. There are no essences inside things or people that make them what they are. Although some kinds of traditional psychology, such as behaviourism, would constructionism therefore heralds a radically different model of what it could mean to do social science. The social constructionist critique of the realist philosophy of much traditional psychology focuses upon psychology's denial that its own grasp on the word must itself be partial. It is partial both in the sense of being only one way of seeing the world among many potential ways and in the sense of reflecting vested interests. Although social constructionism is generally suspicious of realist claims, some social constructionists embrace a form of realism known as critical realism (see below).

Historical and cultural specificity of knowledge

If all forms of knowledge are historically and culturally specific, this must include the knowledge generated by the social sciences. The theories and explanations of psychology thus become time- and culture-bound and cannot be taken as once-and-for-all descriptions of human nature. Stearns (1995) notes that there are numerous emotional states recognised and clearly experienced by people in non-western cultures that just do not translate into western terms. For example, for the Japanese, *amae* refers to a 'feeling of sweet dependence on another person' (p. 42). The disciplines of psychology and social psychology can therefore no longer be aimed at discovering the true nature of people and social life. They must instead turn their attention to a historical study of the emergence of current forms of psychological and social life, and to the social practices by which they are created. Social constructionism criticises traditional psychology for adopting an implicit or explicit imperialism and colonialism in which western ways of seeing the world are automatically assumed to be the right ways, which it then attempts to impose on others.

Language as a pre-condition for thought

Our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present. We are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the people in our culture already exist. We do not each conveniently happen to find existing categories of thought appropriate for the expression of our experiences. For example, if I say that I prefer to wear clothes that are fashionable rather than out-dated, it is the concept of fashion that provides the basis for my experienced preference. Concepts and categories are acquired by each person as they develop the use of language and are thus reproduced every day by everyone who shares a culture and a language. This means that the way a person thinks, the very categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning for them, are provided by the language that they use. Language therefore is a necessary pre-condition for thought as we know it. The relationship between thought and language has been the focus of a long-standing debate in psychology, with a number of different conceptualisations of this relationship being offered. A significant difference for our purposes exists between the positions adopted by Piaget and by Whorf (1941). Piaget believed that the child must develop concepts to some degree before verbal tags could be given to them, but Whorf argued that a person's native language determines the way they think and perceive the world. Most of traditional psychology at least holds the tacit assumption that language is a more or less straightforward expression of thought, rather than a pre-condition of it.

Language as a form of social action

By placing centre-stage the everyday interactions between people and seeing these as actively producing the forms of knowledge we take for granted and their associated social phenomena, it follows that language too has to be more than simply a way of expressing ourselves. When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed. Our use of language can therefore be thought of as a form of action, and some social constructionists take this 'performative' role of language as their focus of interest. As pointed out above, traditional psychology has typically regarded language as the passive vehicle for our thoughts and emotions. Social constructionism challenges this, because language has practical consequences for people that should be acknowledged. For example, when a judge says, 'I sentence you to four years' imprisonment', or when a priest says, 'I pronounce you man and wife', certain practical consequences, restrictions and obligations ensue.

A focus on interaction and social practices

Traditional psychology looks for explanations of social phenomena inside the person, for example by hypothesising the existence of attitudes, motivations, cognitions and so on. These entities are held to be responsible for what individual people do and say, as well as for wider social phenomena such as prejudice and delinquency. Sociology has traditionally countered this with the view that it is social structures, such as the economy, or the major institutions such as marriage and the family, that give rise to the social phenomena that we see. Social constructionism regards as the proper focus of our enquiry the social practices engaged in by people, and their interactions with each other. For example, a child with a learning difficulty is pathologised by traditional psychology by locating the difficulty within the psychology of the child. The social constructionist would challenge this by looking at how the learning difficulty is a construction that emerges through the interactions between the child, its teachers and others. Similarly, a person with a physical disability can only be seen as such when we take into account the fact that this person must inhabit a world in which social practices, for example driving long distances to the workplace and playing sports at the weekend, and material facilities, for example the standard height of kitchen units, are geared to the capabilities of the majority. Social constructionism therefore relocates problems away from the pathologised, essentialist sphere of traditional psychology.

A focus on processes

While most traditional psychology and sociology has put forward explanations in terms of entities, such as personality traits, economic structures, models of memory and so on, the explanations offered by social constructionists are more often in terms of the dynamics of social interaction. The emphasis is thus more on processes than structures. The aim of social enquiry is removed from questions about the nature of people or society towards a consideration of how certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are achieved by people in interaction. Knowledge is therefore seen not as something that a person has or doesn't have, but as something that people do together.

Where did social constructionism come from?

Social constructionism as it is now infiltrating British and North American psychology and social psychology cannot be traced back to a single source. It has emerged from the combined influences of a number of North American, British and continental writers dating back more than thirty years. These in turn are rooted in philosophical developments that began two to three hundred years ago. I shall describe here what may be considered an outline of its history and major influences, bearing in mind that this history itself is only one of many possible constructions of the events!

The Enlightenment, modernism and postmodernism

The cultural and intellectual backcloth against which social constructionism has taken shape, and which to some extent gives it its particular flavour, is what is usually referred to as postmodernism (see Hollinger, 1994 for a discussion of postmodernism in the social sciences). Postmodernism as an intellectual movement has its centre of gravity not in the social sciences but in art and architecture, literature and cultural studies. It represents a questioning of and rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism, the intellectual movement which preceded it and exists alongside it, generating much argument and debate. In many ways it embodies the assumptions underlying intellectual and artistic life that have been around since the time of the Enlightenment, which dates from about the mid-eighteenth century.

The Enlightenment project was to search for truth, to understand the true nature of reality, through the application of reason and rationality. This is in sharp contrast to the mediaeval period, in which the church was the sole arbiter of truth, and in which it was not the responsibility of individual human beings to discover the truth about life or to make decisions about the nature of morality. Science, as the antidote to the dogma of the mediaeval period, was born in the Enlightenment period. The philosopher Emmanuel Kant was an advocate of 'Enlightenment', and saw the motto of this project as *sapere aude*! – have courage to use your own understanding. He argued that all matters should be subject to publicity and debate. The individual person, rather than God and the church, became the focus for issues of truth and morality. It was now up to individuals to make judgements, based on objective, scientific evidence, about what reality was like and therefore what were appropriate moral rules for humans to live by.

The Modern movement in the artistic world took up its own search for truth. This generated much debate and argument about, for example, the value of different ways of painting (was the Impressionist way better than the pre-Raphaelite way, or the Expressionist way?) This search for truth was often based upon the idea that there were rules or structures underlying the surface features of the world, and there was a belief in a 'right' way of doing things, which could be discovered. The classical architecture of the Romans and Greeks was based upon the use of particular mathematical proportions, like the 'golden section', which were thought to lie at the heart of beautiful forms and Modern architecture too embodied the assumption that a good design in some way expressed the underlying function of the building.

In sociology, the search for rules and structure was exemplified by Marx, who explained social phenomena in terms of the underlying economic structure, and psychologists such as Freud and Piaget each postulated the existence of underlying psychic structures to account for psychological phenomena. In each case the hidden structure or rule is seen as the deeper reality underlying the surface features of the world, so that the truth about the world could be revealed by analysing these underlying structures. Theories in the social sciences and humanities which postulate such structures are known as 'structuralist'. The later rejection of the notion of rules and structures underlying forms in the real world is thus known as 'poststructuralism', and the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postructuralism' are sometimes used interchangeably. The common feature to all of these theories is that they constitute what are often called 'metanarratives' or grand theories. They offered a way of understanding the entire social world in terms of one all-embracing principle; for example, for Marx it was class relations. And therefore recommendations for social change were based upon this principle, in this case revolution by the working class.

But the Enlightenment also had its critics in the counter-Enlightenment movement. The philosopher Nietzsche claimed that it had in fact turned science, reason and progress into its own dogmas. He took the more nihilistic view that history and human life are not progressing, that there is no grand purpose, grand narrative or meaning to be discerned from history. We see the beginnings of postmodernism here. Postmodernism is a rejection of both the idea that there can be an ultimate truth and of structuralism, the idea that the world as we see it is the result of hidden structures. In architecture, it is exemplified by the design of buildings, which appear to disregard the accepted wisdoms of good design. In art and literature it is seen in the denial that some artistic or literary forms are necessarily better than others, so that Pop art claimed a status for itself and the objects it represented equal to that of, say, the works of Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. In literary criticism, it also led to the idea that there could be no 'true' reading of a poem or novel, that each person's interpretation was necessarily as good as the next, and the meanings that the original author might have intended were therefore irrelevant.

Postmodernism rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories or metanarratives, and emphasises instead the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ways of life. This is sometimes referred to as pluralism. It argues that we in the west are now living in a postmodern world, a world that can no longer be understood by appeal to one over-arching system of knowledge, for example a religion. Developments in technology, in media and mass communications means that we are now living in a condition where there are available to us many different kinds of knowledge. There are a variety of natural and social scientific disciplines, many religions, alternative medicines, a choice of lifestyles and so on, each of them operating as a relatively self-contained system of knowledge which we can dip in and out of as we please. Postmodernism thus rejects the notion that social change is a matter of discovering and changing the underlying structures of social life through the application of a grand theory or metanarrative. In fact, the very word 'discover' presupposes an existing, stable reality that can be revealed by observation and analysis, an idea quite opposed to social constructionism.

Sociological influences

Despite their differences, Kant, Nietzsche and Marx held in common the view that knowledge is at least in part a product of human thought rather than grounded in an external reality. A number of sociologists took up this theme in the early twentieth century in the form of the sociology of knowledge. This was concerned with how sociocultural forces construct knowledge and with the kind of knowledge they construct, and was initially focused on concepts such as ideology and false consciousness.

But a major and more recent contribution having its roots in the sociology of knowledge is Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book *The Social Construction of Reality*. This book draws on the sub-discipline of symbolic interactionism, which began with the work of Mead (1934) at the University of Chicago. Fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the view that as people we construct our own and each other's identities through our everyday encounters with each other in social interaction. In line with this way of thinking, the sociological sub-discipline of ethnomethodology, which grew up in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, tried to understand the processes by which ordinary people construct social life and make sense of it to themselves and each other.

Berger and Luckmann's anti-essentialist account of social life argues that human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices. They see three fundamental processes as responsible for this: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. Berger and Luckmann show how the world can be socially constructed by the social practices of people but at the same time experienced by them as if the nature of their world is pre-given and fixed (see Chapter 9 for more details of Berger and Luckmann's theory). We could say that social constructionism itself has now achieved the status of an object. In writing this book and ostensibly describing it I am contributing to its objectivation in the world. And in the future, students who read this and other books about social constructionism will tend to think of it as an area of knowledge that has been discovered rather than as an effect of social processes. In writing this book, then, I am contributing to what might be called 'the social construction of social constructionism'.

The turn to language and the 'crisis' in social psychology

In psychology, the emergence of social constructionism is usually dated from Gergen's (1973) paper 'Social psychology as history' in which he argues that all knowledge, including psychological knowledge, is historically and culturally specific, and that we therefore must extend our enquiries beyond the individual into social, political and economic realms for a proper understanding of the evolution of present-day psychology and social life. In addition, he argues that there is no point in looking for once-and-for-all descriptions of people or society, since the only abiding feature of social life is that it is continually changing. Social psychology thus becomes a form of historical undertaking, since all we can ever do is to try to understand and account for how the world appears to be at the present time. In this paper can be seen the beginnings of Gergen's later work on social psychology, history and narrative.

Gergen's paper was written at the time of what is often referred to as 'the crisis in social psychology' (e.g. see Armistead, 1974) Social psychology as a discipline can be said to have emerged from the attempts by psychologists to provide the US and British governments during the Second World War with knowledge that could be used for propaganda and the manipulation of people. It grew out of questions like 'How can we keep up the morale of troops?' and 'How can we encourage people to eat unpopular foods?' It also grew up at a time when its parent discipline of psychology was carving out a name for itself by adopting the positivist methods of the natural sciences. Social psychology as a discipline therefore emerged as an empiricist, laboratory-based science that had habitually served, and was paid for by, those in positions of power, both in government and in industry.

Social psychologists in the 1960s and early 1970s were becoming increasingly worried by the way that the discipline implicitly promoted the values of dominant groups. The 'voice' of ordinary people was seen as absent from its research practices, which, in their concentration on de-contextualised laboratory behaviour, ignored the real-world contexts which give human action its meaning. A number of books were published, each in their own way trying to redress the balance, by proposing alternatives to positivist science and focusing upon the accounts of ordinary people and by challenging the oppressive and ideological uses of psychology (e.g. Brown, 1973; Armistead, 1974).

While Gergen was writing in America, in the UK Harré and Secord (1972) were arguing for a new vision of the science of psychology, based upon the view that people are 'conscious social actors, capable of controlling their performances and commenting intelligently upon them' (preface). They therefore opposed the positivist, experimentalist tradition in social psychology and saw people as skilled social practitioners who are able to monitor and comment upon their own activity. The importance of language as something other than a way of describing things – as a social resource for constructing different accounts of the world and events – is implicit in these works as it is in that of Berger and Luckmann.

These concerns are clearly apparent today in the work of social psychologists in social constructionism. Its multidisciplinary background means that it has drawn its ideas from a number of sources, and where it has drawn on work in the humanities and literary criticism, its influences are often those of French intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Its cultural backdrop is postmodernism, but it has its own intellectual roots in earlier sociological writing and in the concerns of the crisis in social psychology. Social constructionism is therefore a movement which has arisen from and is influenced by a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions.

What kinds of psychology can be called social constructionist?

One of the biggest difficulties in presenting an account of varieties of social constructionism is the wide range of terms that are used by writers and researchers to describe their theoretical and methodological positions. By and large, this reflects the fact that there are a great many commonalities and differences in the field, so that it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that there exist coherent and identifiable types of social constructionism. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter some broad-brush characterisations are necessary. In the following account I have chosen terms which some may feel are misleading, but I have tried to explain, where appropriate, the reasons for my choice.

Critical psychology/critical social psychology

As Danziger (1997) points out, the most obvious feature of the relationship between social constructionism and mainstream psychology is that social constructionism functions as critique. This critique encompasses the questions that psychology chooses to ask about human beings and the methods it adopts to investigate these as well as the answers it has traditionally provided, and is therefore in part a continuation of the 'crisis' debates in social psychology. Some writers and researchers have focused upon this critical approach, and there is now a considerable literature that has come to be termed critical psychology (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Sloan, 2000; Stainton Rogers et al., 1995) and critical social psychology (Gough and McFadden, 2001; Ibáñez and Iñiguez, 1997). Critical psychology looks at how the individual is located within society in relation to difference, inequality and power and has provided alternative readings of a range of psychological phenomena, such as mental illness, intelligence, personality theory, aggression and sexuality. However, although some critical psychologists build their critique upon social constructionist principles, others have arrived at critical psychology through other theoretical routes and may draw more upon ideology, Marxism or various forms of feminism. So that although much critical psychology can be said to be social constructionist in spirit, some critical psychologists would not necessarily refer to themselves as social constructionists. Critical social psychologists may also adopt a political stance, but for some the political agenda is less explicit and they are critical in the sense of raising awareness of the assumptions underlying the theory and practice of social psychology. Since there is no reason to make a distinction between the terms here, I shall refer to all such work as critical psychology.

Discursive psychology

The focus on social interaction and language as a form of social action that are characteristic features of social constructionism have been placed centre-stage by a number of theorists and researchers. This work has more recently come to be termed 'discursive psychology' (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Harré and Stearns, 1995). Discursive psychology has been self-adopted as the preferred term to describe the work of a number of researchers whose work is now widely known, and I have therefore chosen to use this generic title here. Discursive psychology also shares the radically anti-essentialist view of the person of social constructionism, and in particular it denies that language is a representation of, or route to, internal mental states or cognitions such as attitudes, beliefs, emotions and memories (e.g. Harré and Gillett, 1994; Harré, 1995a). Discursive psychology does not necessarily try to deny the existence of such cognitions; discursive psychologists, rather than debating the existence or nature of things, 'bracket' this issue. Potter says:

> . . . I am certainly not trying to answer ontological questions about what sort of things exist. The focus is upon the way people construct descriptions as factual, and how others

> undermine those constructions. This does not require an answer to the philosophical question of what factuality is.
> (Potter, 1996a: 6)

The particular concern of discursive psychology is to study how people use language in their everyday interactions, their 'discourse' with each other, and how they are adept at putting their linguistic skills to use in building specific accounts of events, accounts which may have powerful implications for the interactants themselves. It is therefore primarily concerned with the performative functions of language as outlined above.

Discursive psychologists have applied this understanding of the constructive, performative use of language to a number of psychological phenomena, thereby challenging the mainstream understanding of these. Examples include memory (Edwards and Potter, 1995), emotion (Edwards, 1997), attribution (Edwards and Potter, 1993) and learning disability (Mehan, 1996/2001). The action orientation of discursive psychology therefore transforms traditional psychology's concern with the nature of phenomena such as memory and emotion into a concern with how these are *performed* by people. Thus memory, emotion and other psychological phenomena become things we do rather than things we have. Some psychologists taking a discursive approach have gone beyond analysing the accounting practices of interactants to an examination of how these may be intimately related to the power of ideologies in contemporary society, for example sexism (Edley and Wetherell, 1995) and nationalism (Billig, 1995).

Deconstructionism and Foucauldian discourse analysis

Discursive psychology, which emphasises the constructive work that people do in building accounts of events, can be contrasted with deconstructionism. This draws on the work of poststructuralist French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the term 'deconstruction' was introduced by Derrida. Deconstructionism emphasises the constructive power of language as a system of signs rather than the constructive work of the individual person. It is concerned with how the human subject becomes constructed through the structures of language and through ideology. The central concept here is the 'text',

> A text is any printed, visual, oral or auditory production that is available for reading, viewing or hearing (for example, an article, a film, a painting, a song). Readers create texts as they interpret and interact with them. The meaning of a text is always indeterminate, open-ended and interactional. Deconstruction is the critical analysis of texts.
>
> (Denzin, 1995: 52)

In terms of the features of social constructionism outlined above, its focus is upon the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge and the relationship between such knowledge and the possibilities for social action and power. The varieties of approaches that share this broad concern really don't appear under a generic title in the literature that you may encounter. Although deconstruction as a method of analysis is often associated with the historical development of discursive psychology (see Potter, 1996a), its research application today often appears under the rubric of 'Foucauldian discourse analysis' and is often associated with a concern to identify the ideological and power effects of discourse.

Foucault argued that the way people talk about and think about, for example, sexuality and mental illness – in other words the way these things are widely represented in society – brings with it implications for the way we treat people. Our representations entail particular kinds of power relations. For example, as a society we think of people who hear voices as mentally ill and refer them to psychiatrists and psychologists who then have power over many aspects of their lives. Foucault referred to such representations as 'discourses', since he saw them as constituted by and operating through language and other symbolic systems. Our ways of talking about and representing the world through written texts, pictures and images all constitute the discourses through which we experience the world. Deconstructionism is therefore an axiomatic example of social constructionism, since it is the structures of our socially shared language that are seen as producing phenomena at both the social and personal levels. The way that discourses construct our experience can be examined by 'deconstructing' these texts, taking them apart and showing how they work to present us with a particular vision of the world, and thus enabling us to challenge it. Examples of the critical use of deconstruction include Parker et al. (1995), Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network (1999) and Wodak (1996).

Constructivisms

Readers may become confused by the fact that the term 'constructivism' is sometimes used to refer to theoretical approaches that seem to share fundamental assumptions with social constructionism. This is becoming less of a problem, as writers and researchers have clarified some of their similarities and differences. I shall use the term social constructionism, rather than constructivism, throughout this book.

Constructivism is sometimes used to refer to Piagetian theory and to a particular kind of perceptual theory, but in the current context readers may encounter it in the form of perspectives that, in one form or another, see the person as actively engaged in the creation of their own phenomenal world. The contrast being made by such approaches is usually with the view that things and events have an essential nature or meaning that then impacts upon the person in some predictable manner, and that perception is ideally a matter of internalising a truthful representation of the world. Much of traditional psychology fits this description, including behaviourism, psychoanalytic theory and evolutionary psychology. Constructivist psychologies, by contrast, argue that each person perceives the world differently and actively creates their own meanings from events. The 'real' world is therefore a different place for each of us. This is the stance of 'radical constructivism' (von Glasersfeld, 1981), which assumes a Kantian distinction between an individualised phenomenal world and an unknowable real world.

A similar position is espoused by Kelly (1955) in his personal construct psychology (PCP). Kelly argues that each of us develops a system of dimensions of meaning, which he calls 'constructs'. We perceive the world in terms of these constructs and our actions, although never predictable, can be understood in the light of our construal of the world. Everyone construes the world differently, so in this sense we each inhabit different worlds, although it is possible for us to gain some appreciation of others' constructions, and Kelly termed this 'sociality'. The power of Kelly's constructivist position is that we have the capacity to change our own constructions of the world and thereby to create new possibilities for our own action. Likewise, narrative psychology (Gergen and Gergen, 1984, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Crossley, 2000) argues that we tell each other and ourselves stories that powerfully shape our possibilities.

The essential difference between such constructivisms and socia constructionism are twofold: in the extent to which the individua is seen as an agent who is in control of this construction process and in the extent to which our constructions are the product of social forces, either structural or interactional. However, given the obvious points of agreement between constructivism and social constructionism, some writers have tried to bring them together in a synthesis. (e.g. Botella, 1995; Burr and Butt, 2000).

Differences and debates in social constructionism

I present here a very brief outline of some of the major differences and debates in the field, and these will be further elaborated in later chapters.

Critique

As Danziger (1997) points out, one thing that seems to unite different forms of social constructionism is their role in forming a radical critique of mainstream psychology. But he cautions that in this sense social constructionism therefore paradoxically 'needs' the mainstream. There is therefore something of a tension in the field around the extent to which social constructionist theory and research is able to generate its own theoretical and research programmes, as opposed to maintaining a kind of guerrilla warfare upon mainstream psychology from the margins of the discipline. For some (e.g. Parker, 1999; Parker et al., 1995) the primary aim is to use social constructionism to subvert the more damaging or oppressive aspects of mainstream psychology. Social constructionist theory and research has been taken up in a variety of ways by those wishing to challenge oppressive and discriminatory practices, for example in the areas of gender and sexuality, disability and race.

Research focus

As indicated above, there exist at present two broad, major forms of social constructionist theory and research, the first focusing upon the micro structures of language use in interaction and the second focusing upon the role of more macro linguistic and social structures in framing our social and psychological life. Danziger

(1997) characterises the difference in focus as 'light' and 'dark' social constructionism, emphasising the more 'hopeful' message implicit in the idea that people construct themselves and each other during interaction (rather than being outcomes of 'dark' social forces). These terms may be seen as preferable to, for example, 'strong' and 'weak' constructionism, which may imply that one form is more fragile. However, it has been argued that 'dark' and 'light' also carry negative connotations (Burman, 1999). At the risk of introducing further confusion into the literature, I am going to adopt the terms 'micro' and 'macro' social constructionism to refer to these two broad approaches. The most prominent representatives of micro and macro social constructionism may be said to be discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis respectively. Confusingly, both kinds of research may be referred to as 'discourse analysis'.

Micro social constructionism

This sees social construction taking place within everyday discourse between people in interaction. It includes those who refer to themselves as discourse psychologists. For micro social constructionism, multiple versions of the world are potentially available through this discursive, constructive work, and there is no sense in which one can be said to be more real or true than others: the text of this discourse is the only reality we have access to – we cannot make claims about a real world that exists beyond our descriptions of it. All truth claims are thus undermined, giving rise to a keen scepticism in line with the first of the definitive characteristics of social constructionism outlined above. If power is referred to, it is seen as an effect of discourse, an effect of being able to 'warrant voice' (Gergen, 1989) in interaction. Micro social constructionism includes, in the USA, the work of Kenneth Gergen and of John Shotter. Gergen focuses upon the constructive force of interaction, stressing the relational embeddedness of individual thought and action (Gergen, 1994, 1999). Shotter takes the conversation as his model, emphasising the dynamic, interpersonal processes of construction, which he calls 'joint action' (Shotter, 1993a, 1993b), a term borrowed from the symbolic interactionist Blumer. In the UK, those sharing this emphasis on discourse in interaction include Jonathan Potter, Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, Margaret Wetherell, Rom Harré and Michael Billig, although Billig's work

goes somewhat beyond a concern with micro processes, as
incorporates the concept of ideology. Some of these writers cu
rently work together at the University of Loughborough.

Macro social constructionism

Macro social constructionism acknowledges the constructive pow
of language but sees this as derived from, or at least related t
material or social structures, social relations and institutionalis
practices. The concept of power is therefore at the heart of th
form of social constructionism, which includes the deconstru
tionist approach outlined above. Macro social constructionism
particularly influenced by the work of Foucault (1972, 1976, 1979
It informs the critical realism of Parker (1992, 1999) and Will
(1997, 1999a) in the UK, and has been successfully adopted in th
USA by Rose (1989, 1990) to show how notions such as 'scienc
and 'the individual' have been socially constructed. Macro soci
constructionism has also been attractive to some writers intereste
in feminist analyses of power, for example Hollway (1984, 1989
Kitzinger (1987, 1989), Burman (e.g. Burman, 1990) and Ussh
(2000). Since their focus is on issues of power, macro soci
constructionists are especially interested in analysing various form
of social inequality, such as gender, race and ethnicity, disabilit
and mental health, with a view to challenging these throug
research and practice.

Macro and micro versions of social constructionism should n
be seen as mutually exclusive. There is no reason in principle wh
they should not be brought together in a synthesis of micro an
macro approaches. Danziger feels that this is where most furthe
reflection is needed in social constructionism, and some writer
have attempted such syntheses (e.g. Burkitt, 1999; Burr and Butt
2000; Davies and Harré, 1990). Wetherell (1998) also calls for
synthesis of the two 'versions' of discourse analysis, arguing tha
we need to take account of both the situated nature of accounts a
well as the institutional practices and social structures within whic
they are constructed.

The realism/relativism debate

This is not so much a debate as a locking of horns between som
social constructionists. Realism asserts that an external world exist

independently of our representations of it. Representations include perceptions, thoughts, language and material images such as pictures. Realism claims that our representations are underpinned by this reality, although they are not necessarily simply accurate reflections of it, and that we can at least in principle gain knowledge about this reality. Relativism, by contrast, argues that, even if such a reality exists, it is inaccessible to us. The only things we have access to are our various representations of the world, and these therefore cannot be judged against 'reality' for their truthfulness or accuracy. Relativists therefore cannot prefer one account to another on the basis of its veridicality.

Although the tenets of social constructionism appear to lead automatically to a relativist position, some, usually critical, social constructionists have resisted this and have maintained some concept of a reality existing outside of discourse and texts (e.g. Cromby and Nightingale, 1999; Willig, 1999a). One reason for this has been the problematic nature of morality and political action that ensues from a relativist position. If all accounts of the world are equally valid, then we appear deprived of defensible grounds for our moral choices and political allegiances. Other reasons include the inadequacy of discursive accounts of the material body and embodied subjectivity (e.g. Harré, 1995b; Burr, 1999; Nightingale, 1999). Those taking up a relativist stance as well as those adopting a more critical realist viewpoint have both made defensible arguments regarding the moral and political implications of these positions, and these will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5.

Agency and determinism

More or less mapping on to the distinction between micro and macro versions of social constructionism is the issue of personal agency. The emphasis upon the constructive work of individuals in interaction that is the focus of the micro approach implicitly affords us personal agency. Accounts must be constructed to suit occasions and are crafted in such a way as to further the speaker's current agenda. Macro social constructionism tends toward the 'death of the subject' where the person can be conceptualised only as the outcome of discursive and societal structures. The implication of this latter view is that individual persons, either alone or collectively, have no capacity to bring about change. However, it is also true that neither form of constructionism allows the vision c personal agency seen in mainstream psychology, since both woul deny that structures such as beliefs, values or attitudes exist as pa of our intra-psychic make-up, forming the basis for our action.

Research methods

All the forms of social constructionism outlined above take th constructive force of language as a principal assumption, and it i therefore the analysis of language and other symbolic forms that i at the heart of social constructionist research methods. It would b a mistake to suggest that there are particular research method that are intrinsically social constructionist; social constructionis research simply makes different assumptions about its aims an about the nature and status of the data collected. However, th insistence of social constructionism upon the importance of th social meaning of accounts and discourses often leads logically t the use of qualitative methods as the research tools of choice. I practice this has often been the analysis of interview transcripts an written texts of other kinds. But the specific requirements of social constructionist approach to such work has led to the development of a range of methods of analysis referred to as discours analysis. Confusingly, exactly what is meant by discourse analysi depends upon the particular theoretical and research orientatio of the writer. I will elaborate on some of these differences i Chapter 8.

Plan of the book

In Chapter 2 I will use the examples of personality, health an illness, and sexuality to flesh out some of the main features o social constructionism and to make a case for social constructionism as an alternative way of understanding the world. Althoug social constructionism may initially seem counter-intuitive, b appealing to everyday experiences I will explain why we should fin it persuasive.

Chapter 3 deals with the claim that it is language that provide the framework for the kinds of thought that are possible for us and with the performative role of language. I will explore the vie that our descriptions and accounts of events have consequences i the world and that language is therefore a site of struggle. I will look at the view of language within deconstruction before going on to take a closer look at discursive psychology's understanding of discourse.

In Chapter 4, I look at the Foucauldian concept of discourse and the relationship between discourse, knowledge and power. Discourses make it possible for us to see the world in a certain way, producing our 'knowledge' of the world, which has power implications because it brings with it particular possibilities for acting in the world. I will look at Foucault's notion of 'disciplinary power', in which we are thought to be effectively controlled through our own self-monitoring processes, and its implications for traditional psychology.

The problematic nature of 'truth' and 'reality' is explored in Chapter 5. The claim that 'nothing exists outside the text' often provokes the reaction that social constructionism is clearly fanciful. Such questions go right to the heart of current debates in social constructionism about the status of the real and the material world and in this chapter I outline the nature of the issues that have fuelled the realism–relativism debate and indicate the extent to which I think the disagreements are capable of resolution. The heat in the debate between realism and relativism has largely been generated by concern over morality and politics. I explore the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the debate with respect to these, as well as looking briefly at the possibilities for theoretical progress lying in some accounts that have tried to re-write the terms of the debate.

In the following two chapters, I address the problem of the psychological subject. Social constructionism takes us so far from psychology's traditional understanding of what constitutes a person that we must begin to rebuild ourselves according to a different model, and the first step in doing this is to work out the implications that the various forms of social constructionism have for us as persons. I discuss the psychological subject as it appears in both micro and macro forms of social constructionism, including issues of identity, agency and change, and explore some of the conceptual tools that social constructionists have developed for the task of re-writing the psychological subject.

Chapter 8 looks at some of the research approaches developed and adopted in social constructionist research. After examining theoretical and methodological issues, such as objectivity, valuefreedom and reflexivity, I go on to describe some of the metho that have been used. Using brief examples of real research studies, look at the aims and something of the method of analysis of fo approaches: conversation analysis, discursive psychology, inte pretative repertoires and Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Although throughout the book I will point out some of th limitations of and difficulties with different forms of social co structionism, it is in the final chapter that I take a more critic stance and explore in depth my own arguments with social co structionism. This focuses upon the nature of subjectivity, th psychology of the person and the need for a concept of self, as we as the need to transcend the various dualisms that have haunte both mainstream psychology and social constructionism.

A word about words

Perhaps more so than other areas of social science, social constru tionism abounds with words and phrases that may be unfamilia and their meaning may be hard to grasp at first. In reading mo advanced social constructionist material, students are ofte confused by the terms they meet and some of what is written is, would argue, unnecessarily difficult and obscure. To make matte worse, the same terms are often used by different writers to mea different things, so that it is sometimes impossible to come up wit a definitive account of what a term means. This is partly because, a work in this field has accumulated and progressed, lines of theor and research have splintered and the thinking of individu theorists and researchers has also changed over time. Gergen (198 wrote about 'social constructionism', but Potter and Wethere (1987) took up the spirit of these ideas as 'discourse analysis' an Billig (1987) as ideology and rhetoric. Edwards and Potter (199 later wrote about what they referred to as 'discursive psycholog and Wetherell and Edley (e.g. 1999) about 'critical discursi psychology'.

In this book I have done my best to explain the meaning of term that I think may be new to readers coming from traditional soci science, particularly psychological, backgrounds. As mentione above, I will use the terms macro and micro social constructionis to refer to the two broad approaches to theory and research that have outlined, but will also use specific terms such as 'discursi psychology' and 'Foucauldian discourse analysis' where these a more appropriate in particular contexts. To aid readers in their struggle for understanding, I have provided a brief glossary of common terms at the back of the book.

Chapter 2

The case for social constructionism

Many students initially find it difficult to accept social constructionist arguments because they appear to run so counter to ou everyday understanding of our experience, as well as to traditiona psychological explanations. This chapter is therefore about convincing you that social constructionist ideas have something t offer. My aims are to challenge common-sense understandings o the person, to lay the way for an alternative, social constructionist view and to draw attention to a number of central features of social constructionist view of the person. Although this book wi often be critical of some aspects of social constructionism, at thi point it is important to see why it might be useful.

To an extent I am using the terms 'traditional psychology' an 'common sense' interchangeably here. This is not because I believ that psychology is just common sense presented in complicate jargon. Nevertheless, psychology has often based its theories upo the taken-for-granted assumptions of the societies and culture i which it arose and these, translated into popular psychology, hav in turn infiltrated the everyday thinking of us all. It is thes assumptions that I want to expose in this chapter. So I shall make case in support of social constructionism by discussing the ways i which traditional psychology and these taken-for-granted assumptions may be seen as inadequate and by indicating how socia constructionism may sometimes offer a better 'fit' with our experience and observations of the world.

This means that social constructionism does not just offer a ne analysis of topics such as 'personality' or 'attitudes', which ca simply be slotted into our existing framework of understanding. Th framework itself has to change, and with it our understanding o every aspect of social and psychological life. Social constructionism is often counter-intuitive; it is precisely that which we take for granted which is rendered problematic by this approach. But at the same time it allows us to highlight and address some of the areas where common-sense assumptions and traditional psychology do not give us satisfactory explanations. What it is like to be a person – and to be a particular person – involves a wide range of factors such as our personality and emotions, our gender and sexuality, and whether we are healthy, ill or have a disability. So in making my case for social constructionism I have divided this chapter into three sections, each of which functions as a kind of case study. Each of these illustrates and makes a case for social constructionism and demonstrates its differences from traditional psychology in terms of the features that I outlined in Chapter 1.

Personality

The common-sense view of personality

We think of our personality as more or less unified and stable. Although we possess a number of traits, we feel that these are brought together in a coherent way to form a whole, and that our personality is fairly stable. Although we may change somewhat over time, say from a child to adulthood, or as a result of a major life event, we think of our personality as mostly unchanging. Much, though not all, of contemporary mainstream psychology, and the common-sense understanding that it has encouraged, takes for granted the idea that people have personality characteristics and that these are what make us feel and behave differently from each other. For example, we tend to think of our emotions as private events that are bound up with the kind of people we are. A person with a 'depressive' personality might be expected to often feel 'sadness'. We imagine a 'caring' person to have loving feelings. We think of anger as something we feel inside us, and which is manifested in the things we say and do. These feelings or emotions are thought of as the internal, private experience of the individual, and are intimately connected to the type of person they are. This way of thinking is referred to as 'essentialism'.

Essentialism is a way of understanding the world that sees things, including human beings, as having their own particular essence or nature, something which can be said to belong to them and which explains how they behave or what can be done with them. Tables and desks are hard (a property) and therefore don't bend when you put a pile of books on them. In the same way, we think of the nature of the shy person being such that it is unsuited to the conditions of a noisy social gathering.

This essentialist view of personality bids us think of ourselves as having a particular nature both as individuals and as a species, a 'human nature', and this nature determines what people can and can't do. For example, if we believe that the nature of the human species is essentially aggressive and self-interested, the best we can do is to ensure that society provides ways of restraining people and physically preventing them from behaving naturally. Most people today settle for a model of personality which suggests that these biological 'givens' are to some extent modifiable by environmental influences, such as the kind of childhood experiences you have. But the fact that we find personality change so difficult when we attempt it (perhaps you are a timid person trying to become more confident, or a worrier who is trying to be less anxious) seems to give credence to the idea that, even if personality isn't entirely determined biologically, one way or another, once your personality is formed your programming has been fixed for the future.

The social constructionist case

First of all, how can you be sure that you have a personality at all? If I were to ask you for evidence that, say, you have brown eyes, or that you live in a second floor apartment, the matter would be settled very quickly. You could let me look at your eyes, and you could show me your apartment. But can you show me your personality? Where is it? Even if a surgeon were to open you up and look, they wouldn't find it. There is no objective evidence that you can appeal to which would demonstrate the existence of your personality. What this shows is that whatever this 'personality' creature is, its existence is inferred. This means that in order to account for the things you find yourself and other people doing, the ways you behave, you have come up with the idea that people have a thing called a personality that is responsible for this behaviour.

What this amounts to is a kind of circular reasoning. For example, if we witness someone physically attacking another person, unless we have good reason to think otherwise (perhaps that they were acting in self-defence, or that it was an accident) we are likely to infer that the attacker is an aggressive person. This is a description of their personality. However, if someone were to ask us why we think the attacker did it, we are likely to say something like 'If you're an aggressive person, that's the kind of thing you're likely to do'. This is circular reasoning. We have observed the behaviour (the attack) and inferred from it that the attacker has an aggressive personality. But when asked to say what made them do it, we account for the behaviour in terms of the 'aggressiveness' that this behaviour itself was used to infer. We call someone aggressive because of their behaviour and then say it was their aggressiveness that made them do it, but we have had no way of establishing the real existence of this 'aggressive personality' outside of the personality–behaviour circle that we have created.

One of the fundamental assumptions of the common-sense view of personality is that personality is stable across situations and over time. However this does not stand up to scrutiny when we examine our own day-to-day experience. Do you talk to your closest friend in the same way as your bank manager? Do you feel confident and outgoing with people you know and like? What about when you go for a job interview? These examples may look trivial, but the overall message is an important one. We behave, think and feel differently depending on who we are with, what we are doing and why. There already exist a number of psychological and social psychological theories which, while they fall short of being social constructionist in the sense used by this book, offer explanations of the person that reside in the social situation rather than within the person. For example, social learning theorists talk about the 'situation specificity' of behaviour. They suggest that our behaviour is dependent not upon personality characteristics but upon the nature of the situations in which we find ourselves. Behaviour is therefore 'specific' to a particular situation and, social learning theorists would say, is acquired through the particular set of reinforcers present in those situations. According to this view we should expect a person to be different in different situations, whereas for the traditional personality view these differences are problematic. Just as we take for granted the idea that our personality is stable, so do we also tend not to question the notion that each person has a unified, coherent personality, a self which is made up of elements that are consistent with each other. Psychologists themselves have found it necessary to come up with hypothetical structures and processes precisely because our experience of ourselves and of each other is just the opposite of coherent. We talk of being 'in conflict', we say that our thoughts lead us in one direction and our feelings in another, we say that our heart rules our head, or that we have acted out of character.

Secondly, we can question the idea that our personality is inside us. Think of some of the personality-type words that are used to describe people, for example: friendly, caring, shy, self-conscious, charming, bad-tempered, thoughtless. Most 'personality' words would completely lose their meaning if the person described were living alone on a desert island. Without the presence of other people, i.e. a social environment, can a person be said to be friendly, shy or caring? The point is that we use these words as if they referred to entities existing within the person they describe, but once the person is removed from their relations with others the words become meaningless. They refer to our behaviour toward other people. The friendliness, shyness or caring exists not inside people, but in the relation between them. Of course you could reply that, even on the desert island, a person can still carry with them the predisposition to be friendly, shy etc. We can neither prove nor disprove the existence of personality traits, and similarly we cannot demonstrate the truth of a social constructionist view simply by an appeal to the evidence. In the end our task may be to decide which view offers us the best way of understanding ourselves and others and thus of guiding our research and action.

Thirdly, if personalities really are essential features of all human beings then we should expect to find personality as we know it in all human beings, no matter what part of the world they inhabit. But it is clear that all peoples do not subscribe to our western view. In some cultures, people account for their actions by reference to invisible spirits and demons and would find our idea that behaviour originates in personality a very strange one. Many people today, as well as in the past, see their actions as the result of divine guidance and in some circumstances, people who claim that they are directed by invisible spirits are labelled 'insane'. Also, the personal uniqueness and private nature of things like emotions is not an assumption made by all cultures, as Lutz (1982, 1990) has pointed out. For the Ifaluk (Samoan and Pintupi Aborigine), emotion words are statements not about a person's internal states but about their relationship to events and other people. The Ifaluk talk of *song*, which in translation comes out as something like 'justifiable anger'. This justifiable anger is not a privately owned feeling, but a moral and public account of some transgression of accepted social practices and values.

Of course we could claim that these cultural differences are due to differences in education and understanding. We could suggest that non-western cultures and those of previous historical periods do not have the benefit of our knowledge. What we would be doing then is making a claim about the truthfulness of our own view as opposed to the falsity of theirs. We would be saying 'we know that in fact people have personalities, and that the way a person behaves is heavily influenced by their personality. People in other cultures haven't realised this yet, and they therefore hold a false view of reality.' This is to state the case rather strongly, but it makes the point that, unless we have complete confidence in the 'truth' of our own view, we have to accept that personality may be a theory which is peculiar to certain societies at a certain point in time.

Some writers, such as the psychoanalyst Fromm (though not a social constructionist), have suggested that 'human nature' is a product of the particular societal and economic structure that we are born into (e.g. Fromm, 1942, 1955). For example, in a capitalist society, competition is fundamental; society is structured around individuals and organisations that compete with each other for jobs, markets etc. The assumption is that the person with the most skill, intelligence, ability, charm etc. will succeed where others will fail. So that where competition is a fundamental feature of social and economic life, what you will get is 'competitive' people and a model of the person which is framed in terms of individual differences. In other words, we think of ourselves as individuals differing from each other along a number of personality dimensions because we live in a society founded on competition. Competitiveness and greed can then be understood as products of the culture and economic structure in which we live rather than as features of an essential human nature.

As well as cultural differences in how people think about and describe their experiences our language is constantly changing and we accept that the meanings of words mutate over time. But the way in which some meanings have changed, and often quite recently at that, is of interest. The verb 'to love' is a good example. To children learning the intricacies of grammar, verbs are described as 'doing' words — they are words that tell you what people are doing, like 'working' or 'crying'. But the way in which today we employ the verb 'to love' has different connotations. When we say we love someone, what we are often referring to are our feelings for them, not our actions. And yet this has not always been the case. When I was a child, my grandmother sometimes used to say, 'Come here and give me a love' or 'Let me love you for a minute'. To 'love' someone here means to physically embrace them, and perhaps to comfort them. Perhaps this meaning is still used occasionally, but in the vast majority of cases when we talk about loving someone, we are talking about private events, our feelings, things which are taken to exist inside us and which influence how we treat people. Love has therefore become something which is seen as motivating our behaviour rather than as a word which describes our behaviour. The social constructionist argument is that loving feelings don't give rise to a language which then describes them, but rather that the use of such language itself encourages us to identify and experience our feelings as loving. Ironically, when love is relegated to this internal domain it can become so unrelated to conduct that it can be used to excuse the most appalling behaviour ('I hit her when I get angry – but I love her really . . .').

This trend toward using words to describe internal events, like feelings, rather than actions can be called 'psychologisation'. In other words, we are tending more and more to describe human life in terms of psychological qualities such as feelings and personality traits rather than in terms of what we are doing with or to other people. 'Caring' is another good example. To care for someone, in today's language, means not only to look after them and tend to their needs, but also to have caring feelings toward them. To be a caring person today is taken to be a description of the kind of person you are rather than of the type of activities you are engaged in. This move towards accounting for ourselves in terms of internal essences is of course entirely consistent with the above idea that the way people think about themselves and represent their experience to themselves and others is dependent not upon some pre-existing essential human nature but upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in their culture at that time.

Summary

The social constructionist view of personality is that it is a concept that we use in our everyday lives in order to try to make sense of the things that other people and we do. Personality can be seen as a theory for explaining human behaviour and for trying to anticipate our part in social interactions with others that is held very widely in our society. We could say that in our daily lives we act as if there were such a thing as personality, and most of the time we get by reasonably well by doing so. But it is a big leap from this to saying that personality really exists in the sense of traits inhabiting our mental structures, or being written into our genetic material. The social constructionist position, in addition to questioning the concept of personality itself, is that whatever personal qualities we may display are a function of the particular cultural, historical and relational circumstances in which we are located.

The points that I have dealt with here are important ones and will come up again many times in later chapters, especially in the context of what it means to be a person and to have a self. You don't have to be a social constructionist to abandon traditional personality theory; behaviourists and social learning theorists did this a long time ago. But it is a useful starting point from which to explore some of the key features of social constructionism.

Health and illness

The common-sense view of health and illness

Health and illness have become areas of major interest for people in recent times. In western societies, we have become concerned about changes in disease patterns, such as the increased incidence of heart disease and the spread of HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, although we see illness as something that may befall us if we are unlucky, we are taking on board the idea that our own lifestyle choices, like diet, exercise and working practices, can affect our chances of developing major illnesses. Although we may grumble occasionally about the ineffective treatment we may have received from our GP, or feel frustrated that the laboratory tests have not revealed the cause of our continuing symptoms, we often explain such things by assuming that medical knowledge is, as yet, incomplete. We may argue that we just don't know enough about the intricacies of the body's internal organs and about what causes them to malfunction, producing the disease that underlies our symptoms.

Despite its imperfections, the understanding of health and illness that underpins modern medicine is widely accepted, and is referred to as 'biomedicine'. It is the view that the origins and treatment of disease are to be understood through the application of concepts from physiology, anatomy and biochemistry (Radley, 1994). Biomedicine adopts the methods of the natural sciences, and the onset of disease and its subsequent treatment are conceptualised in terms of causal relationships. So, for example, bacteria may invade the tissues in the throat causing a pathological condition we call tonsillitis. The treatment is to remove the cause by the use of antibiotics, which kill the bacteria.

But today we also accept that psychological and social factors can influence our susceptibility to disease. For example, Friedman and Rosenman (1974) proposed that a person's susceptibility to heart disease is affected by whether they are a 'Type A' or 'Type B' personality. Type A people were characterised as ambitious and competitive and easily aroused to anger by the everyday frustrations of their lives. The physiological and biochemical processes that accompany these frequent bouts of anger are thought to be responsible for a complicated chain of events which culminates in fatty acids being deposited in blood vessels, thus increasing the risk of heart attack (Williams, 1989). The role of psychology and sociology in understanding health and illness is therefore often seen as one of identifying possible features of our social and psychological functioning that may adversely affect the proper workings of the body.

The social constructionist case

Whatever the causes of the diseases that make us ill, it seems to us that there can be little ambiguity about our bodily condition – either it is disease-free, normally functioning and we are healthy or there is a presence of some disease or malfunction and we are ill. But a few examples will serve to show that the position is not as clear as this. Dental caries (tooth decay) can be said to be a pathology of the teeth – but how many of us who need regular visits to dentist would regard ourselves as ill or suffering from a disease? A person may have a medical condition for many months or years and yet suffer no symptoms. Are we to say that the person was in fact ill for this time and didn't know it? Is a woman who is unable to conceive ill? Or someone whose eyesight deteriorates in later life? Or someone born with malformed limbs? What about the person who experiences bodily symptoms for which no underlying organic pathology can be found?

The point of these examples is that, accepting for the moment that the presence of 'disease' can unambiguously be established, this by no means leads us to an easy judgement about whether or not the person is ill. This is because illness is not a physiological matter – it is a social one. When we say that we or someone else is ill, we are making a judgement that only in part relates to their physical condition. Much of our judgement rests on cultural prescriptions, norms and values surrounding our ability to perform our usual activities. Radley (1994) gives the example of very common ailments such as colds and 'flu. A person may suffer from a variety of symptoms such as headache, sore throat, aching limbs and raised temperature. But are they suffering from a bad cold or is it 'flu? The diagnosis is less of a physical issue and more of a moral one. In our culture, we see ourselves as to some degree responsible for catching a cold; we may have gone out without our coat and got very cold or wet. By comparison, we think of 'flu as something that we are simply unfortunate enough to catch. This moral dimension has implications for the extent to which we can claim sympathy and exempt ourselves from our usual responsibilities. In a study of working-class women in Scotland, Blaxter and Paterson (1982) (cited in Hardey, 1998) found that they described themselves as 'healthy' if they were able to go to work and perform their usual everyday activities. They saw common ailments and 'women's troubles' as just part of normal life, and reserved the term 'illness' for serious conditions. A person was not ill if they just got on with their lives and didn't dwell on their symptoms; 'Illness was not so much the experience of symptoms as the reaction to symptoms' (Hardey, 1998: 33).

The status of the body as ill or healthy therefore depends upon social rather than biological criteria. Illness cannot be seen as a fixed entity but as something that necessarily varies according to the norms and values of the particular social group that one is studying. But the physical status of the body as functional or malfunctional can also be shown to be context-dependent. For example, a person may have lost the use of their legs through a spinal injury and must use a wheelchair. Typically, they may have difficulty getting into some buildings, getting up stairs and using some public facilities. They may find that in their own home they need help to use the bathroom and are unable to use their kitchen. They are 'disabled'.

It seems obvious at first that their physical impairment and their disability are the same thing. But once we provide ramps to buildings, stair lifts and make appropriate adjustments to bathroom and kitchen appliances the disability effectively reduces. We could argue that if we were to tailor the entire built environment specifically to the abilities of the wheelchair user, there would be no sense in which it would be meaningful to refer to them as 'disabled'. In fact, would we even regard their physical condition as impaired? Perhaps the rest of us would be seen as disabled by our lack of wheels? Or impaired by the encumbrance of a pair of unnecessary limbs? 'Disability' is therefore a function of the environment in which people are constrained to live, not a quality that belongs to them as persons. Makin (1995) terms this 'the social model of disability' in contrast to the medical model, which implicitly places the source of the problem within the disabled person.

Furthermore, this environment is inevitably fashioned according to the values and practices of some people rather than others. If we look at our environment and ask for whom it may be problematic in some respect, we immediately see that it is often those groups of people who have had less power in society. Apparently trivial examples show this up. Being unable to read the small print on food packets or take the lid off a vacuum-packed jar is not only a problem for those with specific disabilities but for many people of advancing age. Heavy-duty work gloves (for handling DIY materials etc.) don't come in small sizes, presenting a difficulty for many women and for men of small stature. We can give ourselves all kinds of reasonable explanations for the status quo, but in the end it comes down to the values of dominant groups. If the world was run by children, what sort of physical environment would we live in, and what difficulties would that pose for adults? So health, illness and disability are not only socially created: they are sustained by social practices that often serve the interests of dominant groups in society.

The cultural and historical specificity of biomedicine is also clear. As with the example of personality, it seems that the biomedical model is one that is not universal and is a fairly recent development in the history of western societies' attempts to understand illness. Anthropologists report medical belief systems in other cultures that are radically different from biomedicine. Young's (1976) study of the Amhara people (Ethiopia) contrasts a biomedical understanding of disease, which focuses upon the internal workings of the body, with an understanding that locates the disease in a social context. The Amhara believe that disease can be caused by a number of external events, for example eating food that has been poisoned or by being attacked by the spirit of an enemy. The cures for diseases, which are often herbal remedies, are seen not in terms of their effect on internal organs and systems, but operate to restore balance to the individual within the moral order of society (Radley, 1994). In our own society we are seeing an increasing use of 'alternative medicines', which are often based upon belief systems quite different to biomedicine, such as homeopathy, acupuncture and reflexology. This should caution us against the view that our own predominant, biomedical view of disease is the right one and all others false. To the extent that such therapies are effective, to maintain such a view we would have to argue that this effectiveness is some kind of placebo effect and explain their effectiveness within the terms of biomedicine.

So, all medical belief systems operate within a culture with norms, values and expectations that make sense of illness for people in that culture and set the criteria for what, locally, can count as illness. The variation in ways of understanding illness that exists across cultures and across the range of alternative medicines in our own society can also be seen historically. Radley (1994) describes how, up until the end of the eighteenth century, doctors saw the patient's emotional and spiritual life as directly relevant to their state of health, and the illness they suffered was not conceptualised as independent of the sick person themselves. With developments in the study of anatomy it became possible to think of illnesses as things attacking the body as a system of interrelated organs, with the result that the experience of the person as a whole became irrelevant to diagnosis. But the rise of biomedicine is not something that can be seen as simply a story of the progress of medical knowledge. It is a way of viewing the body that, it can be argued, is intimately connected to broader social developments. The study of the inner workings of the body in the anatomy laboratory took place in the context of a more general movement towards understanding the world by ordering and classifying it. Foucault (1973, 1976, 1979) has persuasively argued that such ordering and classifying, with respect to human beings, has played and continues to play a key role in controlling the populace. By classifying people as normal or abnormal, mad or sane and healthy or sick, it became possible to control society by regulating work, domestic and political behaviours. For example, the certified mentally ill may not vote and may be forcibly confined, those who cannot obtain a sick note from their doctor may have no choice but to work and those whose sexuality is deemed unhealthy or abnormal may be denied access to family life.

Furthermore, pathological entities themselves can be seen to be problematic. The above example of the distinction between colds and 'flu is an example of this. Bury (1986) cites the work of Figlio (1982), who studied the relationship of the condition 'miners' nystagmus' to social class and capitalism. The existence of this as a disease entity was not simply a medical matter. It was at the centre of conflicts over malingering and compensation for workers. As Burr and Butt (2000) have noted, in recent times we have seen the emergence of a number of conditions that were unknown in earlier times, for example premenstrual syndrome and ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis), and the medical status of these is similarly problematic and infused with cultural assumptions and moral prescriptions. Prior to 1973 homosexuality was a disease and was classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). Following changes in social attitudes and campaigning by gay activists the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove it; diseases are not simply objectively defined medical entities but social ones.

Summary

Defining illness and disease is not simply a matter of identifying the presence of pathology. It is a deeply social matter involving the interpretation of our experience within our particular cultural context of assumptions, norms and values as well as the economic structure of our society. It is also a matter of power relations. The body's 'deficiencies' only show up as such when persons are constrained to live in environments designed to suit the needs and activities of others. The biomedical conceptualisation of health and illness is only one perspective among many, and its predominance in western societies cannot be understood as simply the result of progress in scientific knowledge. The rise of biomedicine can be seen to be at least in part related to changes in the exercise of social control taking place over the last two hundred years.

Sexuality

The common-sense view of sexuality

Like our personalities and our health status, sexuality is an aspect of being a person that at first glance appears to be anything but socially constructed. We can often trace the origins of other things that we enjoy; for example it is often remarked that the British are a nation of tea-drinkers and despite the increase in coffee consumption in recent times it remains the case that for many Brits, myself included, there are times when only a cup of tea will do. But no one is born with a taste for this beverage. It develops through a long association with being offered 'a nice cup of tea' as a welcome to someone's home, or as a comfort in illness, or as a warm and relaxing way of starting the day. Often we cannot trace the origins of our sexual orientation, tastes and practices in the same way. They appear 'given' to us, beyond learning. Sex as a feature of human life seems to us little different from other basic needs, like the need for food, water and shelter. We talk of a 'sex drive', and this language paints a graphic picture of human beings as in the grip of a powerful and undeniable force.

The subjective feeling that sexuality is a 'given' of human nature is endorsed by popular biological and evolutionary theories. It is now almost common sense to think of sexual desire and behaviour as emanating directly from the imperative to reproduce, to continue the human species; it's where our 'sex drive' comes from. Men's and women's sexualities are understood as necessarily different because of the different roles they must play in this reproductive process. Evolutionary theory seems to explain men's promiscuous sexual behaviour through the logic of gene transmission. Likewise, it fits our perception of women as more selective in their choice of mate, since they must invest time and physical energy in the production of a child and therefore must ensure that their offspring come from 'good stock'. It provides a rationale for men's desire for younger women (they're likely to be more fertile) and for women's preference for 'good providers'.

Such theories underpin our ideas about what it is natural for women and men to desire. But as in many other areas of life, what is seen as natural is also seen as 'normal'. In the social sciences, to say that something is normal simply means that it is typical of the most usual characteristics or behaviour of a particular group of people. But the everyday use of this term, as well as the term 'natural', has developed moral connotations. We feel that we ought to behave in ways that are natural and normal, and with respect to sexuality this means penetrative, heterosexual sex.

The case for social construction

If sex was just about procreation it is unlikely that we would see much variation in human sexual practices. Advocates of biological and evolutionary accounts of sexuality treat human beings as similar in all important respects to other animals, but this ignores the immense variety in human sexual practices. When dogs, cats and other animals have sex they do it in the manner characteristic of their species, and it really doesn't vary too much. It is highly prescriptive. But humans have been, and continue to be, extremely inventive and imaginative in their sexual practices. Forms of sexuality are currently proliferating and sub-dividing in contemporary western societies – the sexual 'menu' is now a far cry from a binary choice between straight and gay. We can't even say that an individual person, let alone the human species, is characterised by a particular form of sexual practice. Most people ring the changes to some extent. And when it comes to what people find erotic, that which fuels their sexual desire, it is often difficult indeed to see any support for biological and evolutionary accounts. How might a fetish for lace or leather, shoes or stockings be explained? Furthermore, other people's sexual desires and fantasies are often mystifying, or even distasteful. When it comes to sex, one wo/man's meat is indeed another's poison. It is the meaning of leather or stockings to the person that makes them erotic; the role of meaning in sexuality is impossible to deny. And meaning making is something that is characteristically human. Our ability to invest our actions with meaning is what marks us out from other animals.

These meanings are socially created and socially shared. In order to go along with the view that the need for sex, like the need for food, is something that is 'hard-wired' into human nature, a biological imperative that we cannot ignore, we would have to deny – or at least to render pathological – the choices that many people evidently make about their sexuality. A person who decides to practise chastity or celibacy, whether for religious, health or other reasons, becomes a puzzle. We leave ourselves with a conundrum that we can only resolve by imagining, and without any evidence, that such people must be channelling their sexual drive in some other way, or repressing it – with potentially explosive future consequences. This problem does not present itself if we see sexuality as something that is powered by meaning rather than biological drive, and meaning itself is profoundly social. The person who lives in celibacy as part of their religious commitment is doing so in part because of the meaning of sex in their community and culture. The woman with a husband and children who later chooses to become a lesbian because she now sees heterosexuality as politically oppressive can only be understood when we recognise the meaning that heterosexuality holds for her. And we understand it further if we locate that meaning within a feminist perspective on the world that is predominant in the social circles in which she moves.

Like personality and illness, human sexuality is not a stable phenomenon. It is often pointed out that, a couple of hundred years ago, a woman of ample proportions and pale skin was the epitome of desirable femininity. The change to today's preference for a slender, tanned body is hard to understand within the view of sexuality as hard-wired and fixed but makes a good deal of sense once we locate sexuality within a socially shared meaning system that is intimately bound up with social structure and the economy. In times when access to the material resources for sustaining life was perhaps even more divided by class than today, a well-fleshed body, whose skin declared that its owner had never needed to toil in the fields, spoke of wealth and comfort. Today, a tanned body is more likely to signal enough disposable income to spend on holidays in the sun; but this too may be changing as such activities become more widely enjoyed by people of all classes, together with the increasing circulation of meanings linking exposure to the sun with illness. In addition to this historical instability, as mentioned above we are seeing an explosion in the forms of sexuality practised by people in contemporary western societies.

As Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers (2001) have pointed out, biological and evolutionary theories are highly speculative and could tell a plausible story to explain quite the opposite state of affairs from the gender differences we commonly see. If men preferred mature women who already have children, it could be argued that this is because they are choosing more experienced, and therefore potentially better mothers for their own future offspring. The attractiveness of such theories is that, to the extent that they purport to tell us what is natural and normal, they can be used to bolster our moral arguments about what kind of sexuality is permissible. Such theories are often wheeled out when people want to defend sexual or gender inequalities by suggesting that they are inevitable, or to derogate non-normative sexual practices. But they are on other occasions conveniently forgotten for the very same reasons. For example, heterosexuality is seen as natural and hard-wired – but a homosexual teacher is seen as a potentially corrupting influence upon children in his charge. They could 'learn' homosexuality from him.

Sexuality is, then, primarily a moral issue for human beings, not a biological one. It is hard to imagine people getting so worked up about our different tastes in food or drink. Why? Because the meaning that sexuality carries for us is intimately bound to the social and economic structure of the society we live in. Masturbation was seen as an illness in times when fertility and reproduction were crucial to capitalism's need for an increasing supply of workers. Our sexual practices have immediate bearing upon such fundamental issues as who bears children, how many and who cares for them; how families are constituted and what kinds of housing and other provision is needed for them; who is available for work and who takes care of the workers. To the extent that diversity and change in sexuality may sound the death knell of the form of society in which we currently live, those with an investment in the status quo may well find such diversity and change deeply threatening.

Summary

As with personality and illness, there is considerable diversity across people and across time in sexual desire and sexual practice. In the face of this we must distrust essentialist accounts of sexuality. The role of meaning in our sexual lives is paramount, and meaning is made by human beings together: it is social. Meaning, unlike biological material, is fluid, volatile and always open to change through this medium of social interaction. Furthermore, sexuality is an area of our lives where the meanings we have created are often imbued with value and come with prescriptions for action. They are moral meanings; they tell us how we ought to feel and behave. And finally, these moral meanings are not accidental. They make sense within the social and economic structure of the society we live in. To the extent that this society is one divided by numerous power inequalities, the meanings that are widely endorsed play a role in maintaining these power relations.

Conclusion

I have used these three examples of personality, health and illness, and sexuality to illustrate some of the main features of social constructionism. In the abstract, the theoretical tenets of social constructionism can seem to be counter-intuitive. At first sight, they appear to contradict what seems common sense in our understanding of ourselves. But by appealing to everyday experiences that are problematic for these common-sense understandings, I have tried to demonstrate why we should at least take seriously social constructionist ideas long enough to see if they offer us a more fruitful or facilitative vision of human beings. The major conclusion that I would like you to draw from this chapter is that a lot of the things we take for granted as given, fixed and immutable, whether in ourselves or in the phenomena we experience, can upon inspection be found to be socially derived and socially maintained. They are created and perpetuated by human beings who share meanings through being members of the same society or culture. This is, in short, what social constructionism is all about. In the next chapter, I shall put some flesh on the bones of the idea (outlined in Chapter 1) that it is language, both in its form and its use, that is central to the making, maintenance and contesting of meaning and that it is language that provides the framework for the kinds of thought that are possible for us.