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Social Constructionism
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Key features of Social Constructionism

Language

The core tenet of the social constructionist approach is that how we understand and even perceive the world and the objects (including people) and events within it does not necessarily reflect the nature of that world but rather is a product of how the world is represented or produced through language. Thus, for example, what we perceive as a tree is, from the social constructionist's perspective, largely a consequence of how classifications (such as 'flowers', 'shrubs' and 'weeds') are produced through language rather than being a natural consequence of our perceptual capabilities. This is not to suggest that trees do not have various "natural" characteristics that could be identified and charted, but rather that what are deemed to be the defining characteristics of trees are primarily a product of language. This argument is perhaps best exemplified by the use of social rather than naturally occurring phenomena. Take, for example, the current preoccupation in the media, and perhaps society more generally, with body size and what counts as thin versus fat. While it is probably the case that society has noted differences in body size from time immemorial, its salience or importance as a primary defining characteristic of individuals is more recent. Hence, while all objects (including people) in the world have definite properties, for social constructionists, what is more interesting is why certain properties assume importance and, critically, are then used as the basis for social or scientific evaluation (we will return to this idea below).

Cultural and historical specificity

How the world is classified and categorized varies culturally (that is from place to place) and historically (over time). For example, we are all familiar with the idea of the class system in European societies which broadly categorizes people as belonging to working, middle or upper classes. Not only is this division highly contested in the current era, it has also expanded to include such categories as the "underclass". However, if we go back in time just 200 years, there was no such category as the "middle class" – this emerged during the industrial revolution as a consequence of changes in property rights and relative prosperity (Stallybrass and Whyte, 1986). Similarly, 150 years ago, it was highly unusual for women to go into higher or further education and those that did were often called "blue stockings" to draw attention to their novel status as scholars in further and higher education.   Some of you may well be familiar with or have read about the genocide that occurred in the African state of Rwanda in 1995. This was a consequence of conflict between two groups of Rwandan people – the Hutus and the Tutsis. This classification was actually developed by the Belgian colonialists who used it a means to divide and govern Rwandan society. Prior to colonialism, this categorization did not exist. We will say a bit more about historical and cultural specificity later in the chapter.

Michel Foucault, the French social theorist, was particularly interested in how processes of classification and categorization proliferated during and following the enlightenment period (17th Century). Foucault (1977, 1979) points to how this proliferation was closely tied to changes in society, notably the expansion of the population and growing urbanization and industrialization. Such changes prompted the necessity for more effective forms of what Foucault termed "governance" – which refers to all the ways through which populations are regulated and governed. Foucault argues that these governance processes were directly responsible for producing categories of "being" that we all take for granted in our current epoch, such as academic ability; mental stability; sexual orientation and so forth. The point he makes is not that these categories did not exist prior to this time, but rather, similar to the example of body size above, they became central and defining characteristics

of modern personhood for particular reasons at a particular time. Specifically, contemporary categories of being are closely aligned with the needs of a capitalist economy and the need for individuals to be productive in both a biological and physical sense (see Rose, 1990; 1996).

Discourse and disciplinary power

Discourse for social constructionists refers to sets of ideas that are culturally significant or what could be called "broad meaning systems" (Speer, 2005) and that can be used to make sense of the world and events within it. Thus for instance, it is very common in today's society for us to make sense of what people do and say through the discourse of "personality" or "disposition". This meaning system produces the idea that individual behaviour is a consequence of largely internal traits or motivations that are either inherited or learned. Not every idea counts as a discourse. Thus for example, "fruit" is not generally seen as a discourse even though it is a category derived from language that we use to classify certain edible matter. What differentiates discourse from ideas more generally for the social constructionist is its *productive* power. That is, discourses do not simply describe the world, an event or a person, they actually influence what we do and how we act (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Thus, for example, because the dominant explanation for the causes of human behaviour is currently "personality", we tend to see people as responsible for their own fate and well-being in life. We tend only to accept that someone lacks such responsibility if they are shown to be mentally ill or incapacitated in some way. Thus when someone commits a crime, the societal response tends to be punishment of some sort and often attempts to rehabilitate or retrain the individual so that their internal "faults" causing the criminal behaviour can be corrected. However, critical scholars point out that a lot of criminal behaviour appears to be the consequence of poverty and lack of access to education and employment (e.g. Reiner, 2007). While such causes of criminality are widely acknowledged, the dominance of the "personality" discourse means that interventions targeted at improving persons are more frequent than interventions designed to alleviate, say, poverty.

A further productive aspect of discourse comes from its *disciplinary* effects. Returning to Foucault's ideas, he argued that one of the most effective modes of modern governance is disciplinary power or, to grossly simplify, the desire of individuals to conform to norms in society. Discourses of personhood, for example, produce ideas about what "normal" people should be like. Currently, for instance, having a Body Mass Index of over 25 is said to show that the individual is "overweight". And because, as outlined above, body size is currently such a central defining characteristic of personhood, this is producing much behaviour aimed at reducing BMI such as diet and exercise regimes. Not every discourse produces strong disciplinary effects and indeed, the more discourses operate to normalise certain modes of behaviour and being, the more "resistance" is generated and counter-discourses are often produced (Foucault, 1979). A study conducted in 1995, for example, looked at the influence of discourses of beauty on Black British women (Mama,1995). Mama argued that because dominant discourses in the West push the idea that beauty is dependent on being white, blonde and blue eyed, this can have a deleterious effect on those who do not possess such characteristics, such as Black women. Mama found that the Black women in her study resisted this discourse by celebrating the physical attributes of black women - but only once they had become conscious that their feelings of "lacking beauty" were a consequence of this culturally produced discourse. These processes of conformity and resistance are what lead to the proliferation of categories, particularly of personhood, that typify late modernity (Frank and Meyer, 2002). Consider, for instance, how many different and socially accepted sexual orientations there are today compared to 100 years ago when heterosexuality was the only publically acknowledged form of sexuality.

Power relations

As mentioned above, social constructionists are interested in why certain properties of the world and individuals assume importance and are then used as the basis for social or scientific evaluation. We have already discussed body size as one relevant contemporary

"property" that has influenced how people act and evaluate themselves and others. Body size is also currently a dominant measure of health. But why has this property assumed such contemporary importance? Power relations refer to how the positions occupied by people in society, such as occupations and class, allow some groups to have more authority (and therefore power) than others. Thus for instance, doctors and other elite professionals have considerable power in our society, whereas individuals said to belong to the "underclass" have very little. While power relations are never fixed or invariable, those occupying more authoritative positions are able to set the standards and the norms to which the rest of us are expected to conform. In the current epoch, for example, doctors possess much power because health is essential to our survival and because demand for health services is infinite, growing and financially costly. Hence, because doctors are able to both intervene in order to (sometimes) improve our health and are also able to make legitimate claims about the personal factors that increase health risks, other authorities, such as governments and educational establishments, see the views of the medical profession as critical to their own survival and prosperity. In concert, this means that the medical profession is able to set standards (such as those pertaining to body size) that we are then exhorted to meet through various policies and practices, such as nutritional guidance and school dinners/breakfast clubs. Power relations exist both at the level of society (as between the medical profession and the rest of the population) and between individuals. In the next section, we will look at some research that illustrates the link between these two levels and its influence on the production of discourse.

Relativism

One potentially troubling consequence of social constructionist philosophy is that it leads us to the position that there is no definitive "truth" to the nature of the world or of people. Rather, what we take to be true at a given point in time cannot be divorced from the processes of power outlined above and their relationship to language. This means that if we are going to embrace a social constructionist philosophy, we also have to accept that there are multiple

perspectives on any given event, person or object and that which perspective is currently accepted as correct is more a matter of politics and power than of some attribute of the perspective itself. Thus for instance, in our contemporary era we tend to believe accounts of objects, people or events if they are supported by what we deem to be appropriate evidence, but unfortunately this is not quite as straightforward as we might think. We tend to think, for example, that if someone claims they have been sexually harassed that we can find out the truth of this by means of say, witnesses, or perhaps video or audio recordings of particular events and interactions or by the personal account of the person being harassed. However, in reality, it is very difficult to establish whether or not a particular interaction can indeed be unproblematically classed as an instance of sexual harassment. As the film Bridget Jones clearly shows, a sexual comment from a particular man can be read as a compliment by a particular woman and the same comment from another man as sexual harassment. Policy on sexual and other forms of harassment tends to fudge this issue by emphasising that it is individual perceptions of an event that is important in deciding whether or not it is harassment, but there are real dangers here, including the generation of double standards in which some individuals are "allowed" to make sexual comments and others are not (see below).

Critique of mainstream social psychology

Social constructionism (see Burr, 2015) critiques mainstream social psychology, focusing on the latter's commitment to an inappropriate model of the person and commitment to a model of social science which arguably askes the wrong questions and is blind to key features of human life. It also raises the important issue of who sets the agenda behind the questions that are asked by the discipline, and therefore about the role of psychology in the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Social psychology has inherited the assumptions of its parent discipline, which has in turn modelled itself upon the natural sciences. The natural sciences, which study the nature of the physical world through disciplines such as biology, chemistry and physics, have developed within a positivist theoretical framework; the properties of the natural world have been explored principally through key techniques such as experimentation and observation, with an emphasis upon objectivity. As psychology emerged as a new discipline, academic respect appeared achievable through developing its own credentials as a science, and psychology therefore adopted the methods and theoretical framework of the natural sciences. A great deal of mainstream work has consequently been concerned with isolating and measuring psychological 'variables', and this is no less true of mainstream social psychology.

Social constructionism continues the critique of this mainstream work that began with the 'crisis' in social psychology in the 1960s and 1970s (eg. Armistead, 1974). Social psychology emerged as psychologists during the Second World War in the USA and Britain were asked by their respective governments to provide knowledge about people that could help the war effort. For example, psychologists suggested ways of keeping up the morale of troops and of encouraging people to eat unpopular foods (Guthe and Mead, 1943; Hovland, Lumsdane and Sheffield, 1949);; social psychology was therefore funded by and served those in positions of power, and over the following decades it became a matter of concern to some within the discipline of social psychology that it implicitly promoted the values of dominant groups. As we discussed in the previous section, this concern with power relations is a key feature of critical social psychology and social constructionism today.

Another concern raised at this time was that the 'voice' of ordinary people was missing from social psychological research; mainstream, experimental researchers gathered typically quantitative data from their 'subjects' which they then interpreted. The participants in such research had little or no opportunity to account for their behaviour, which was

typically de-contextualised by the laboratory setting thus ignoring the social contexts which give behaviour its meaning. For example, Solomon Asch's classic social psychological studies on conformity in the 1950s are often reported as demonstrating that a surprising number of people are prepared to deny the evidence of their own eyes in order not to appear to disagree with their peers. This prompted much theoretical speculation as to what kind of social influence might be operating in such a situation, and which experimental variables might be the most important factors in producing conformity.

But later attempts to replicate Asch's studies in different populations reported very varied levels of conformity. Of particular note is a study by Perrin and Spencer (1981) in which they introduced interesting variations on the conformity research paradigm. In some of these studies, they drew their sample of experimenters, confederates and naïve subjects from West Indians, whites, probationers and probation officers. Although they had previously found very low levels of conformity in a student sample, in these variants they found similar levels of conformity to those reported by Asch when the experimenter was white and the naïve subject West Indian, and when the experimenter and confederates were probation officers and the naïve subject was on probation. The responses of the naïve subjects in these studies seems best understood as a response to the meaning of the situation they found themselves in, a meaning grounded in the social context of their lives outside of the social psychology laboratory and one suffused with power relations.

Cherry (1995) provides an insightful and thoughtful re-consideration of the 'bystander intervention' research paradigm in social psychology, in her discussion of the murder of Kitty Genovese, the incident which arguably prompted research interest in this topic in the 1960s and 1970s. Second-wave feminism had begun to have an impact on psychology, and there was concern about the way that women's experience was often distorted by research and theory. Furthermore, critical writers were keen to point out that psychology, whilst dressing

itself as a-political and value-free, often subtly reinforced and legitimated oppressive attitudes and practices (see later in this section).

Cherry argues that incidents such as the murder of Kitty Genovese cannot be properly understood outside of the material conditions and power relations existing in the society in which they take place. Whereas bystander research has typically presented its findings as illustrating general principles of social behaviour, Cherry locates the murder of Kitty Genovese within its cultural, racial and gendered context, re-framing it within the social problem of violence towards women. In the 1960s, when the attack took place, the widespread abuse of and violence towards women was not recognised as a social problem, and Cherry points out that many of the witnesses to the murder were reluctant to intervene in what they perceived as a 'lovers' quarrel'. She argues that the fact that Kitty Genovese was a white women, and that she was killed in a middle class area of New York, is what made the incident shocking to people. If Kitty had been black or killed in a poor neighbourhood her murder would not have been nearly so 'newsworthy'.

The idea of human behaviour as intelligible only when isolated from the 'contaminating variables' of social life is enshrined in Floyd Allport's (1924:12) definition of social psychology: "The science which studies the behaviour of the individual in so far as his [sic] behavior stimulates other individuals, or is itself a reaction to this behavior." Allport's definition invites us to see people as self-contained individuals who exist prior to social life and who impact upon each other with particular effects. But for social constructionism the social context in which we live is not just a set of important variables to be taken into consideration when trying to understand behaviour. Without the social realm people as we know them would not exist at all; we become human by virtue of taking part in social life. This view of the person as socially constituted stands in critical contrast to the individualism of the mainstream discipline. Allport's definition may be seen as embodying an assumption about people that has been entrenched within western thinking since before psychology

began and which is arguably becoming even more so. The model of human beings intrinsic to mainstream psychology and social psychology is a particularly individualistic one; it celebrates and privileges the unique, self-contained person. And the content of this individual is the stuff of psychological and social psychological research- traits, drives and motivations, attitudes and beliefs.

This individualism became part of the discipline of psychology as it developed and flourished in the early 20th century in North America, where the individual is arguably especially celebrated (see Farr, 1996). Such individualism has resulted in, and continues to feed, a reductionist, 'intrapsychic' account of a number of psychological and social phenomena. We are invited to consider problems such as eating disorders and dyslexia as syndromes or illnesses contained within the individual. But social constructionism is critical of this approach, arguing that such phenomena can be best understood at the level of the social realm. Our interactions and relations with others, especially power relations, provide us with an understanding of such phenomena that is ultimately more facilitative, since the 'psychologisation' of such problems (see Burr and Butt, 1999) ultimately places the origin of, and therefore blame for, problems within the individual's psyche. As in the cases of personality and health that we examined in the previous section, this 'psychologisation' can be seen as an example of how discourses can affect how we account for our experience and behaviour, especially when these are promoted by powerful groups such as medical professionals.

It is worth noting that this individualism is not present in the sub-discipline of social psychology that emerged from sociology, sometimes referred to as 'sociological social psychology' (see Farr, 1996), a body of work that has been influential in the development of social constructionism within psychology. The origins of this can, paradoxically, be traced back to the work of Wundt who set up the first psychology laboratory at the University of Leipzig in 1879. Despite now being lauded as the founder of experimental psychology,

Wundt believed that only some psychological phenomena were suitable for laboratory study and saw myth, religion and culture as key social factors in understanding human conduct. This focus on the social and cultural realm was taken up by George Mead at the University of Chicago. Mead had studied with Wundt and his work later became developed by Herbert Blumer as Symbolic Interactionism. The psychologist John Watson began his career as a PhD student under Mead's supervision, but later diverged from him in his focus on behaviourism. Arguably, the split between Mead and Watson was influential in producing the parallel careers of psychological and sociological social psychology, with the psychological variety maintaining a focus on the self-contained individual and a vision of the person as analytically separable from its social context.

Psychological social psychology is committed to a vision of science that is positivist and reductionist, and it holds up the experimental paradigm as the epitome of 'good science'. This approach brings with it a view of knowledge whereby what we come to 'know' through our research is assumed to build a more and more complete, a more and more accurate, picture of the world as it really is. The unwritten assumption is that psychological and social psychological research will eventually provide accurate answers to the question of how human beings function psychologically and socially. The mainstream discipline therefore makes the assumption that its knowledge is (at least ideally) good for all time and for people in all cultures.

Social constructionism challenges this assumption and argues that the individualistic model of the person that psychology assumes is in fact a very local one, both historically and culturally. It is born out of specifically western ideologies that are rooted in styles of thinking that have emerged in Europe over the last few hundred years. Increased geographical mobility in modern times has highlighted the diversity of alternative conceptualisations of personhood that exist throughout the world. For example, it has been suggested that social life in some non-western cultures is much more rooted in 'community' and that, as a

consequence, people who are part of such cultures do not conceive of or experience themselves in individualistic terms but as being in an interdependent relationship with others (see Markus and Kitayama, 1991). However, psychology has assumed a narrative of progress towards a single, accurate understanding of human functioning. For example, in Greco-Roman medicine (around 350-450 BC) people were thought to have one of four types of temperament, called the 'four humours'. These were sanguine (optimistic, leader-like), choleric (bad-tempered or irritable), melancholic (analytical and quiet), and phlegmatic (relaxed and peaceful). The Greek physician Hippocrates believed human moods, emotions and behaviours were caused by an excess or lack of four body fluids (the humours): blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Today, such a theory is regarded as inaccurate and personality is seen in terms of traits that have a genetic basis. Our contemporary understanding is seen as more enlightened and as a product of scientific progress, although evidence for the existence of personality traits as concrete entities or structures (rather than theoretical constructs) could be said to be no greater than that for the four humours.

Psychology has responded to the historical and cultural diversity of ways of conceptualising people by incorporating them into its own narrative: other ways of thinking are mis-informed because they are not founded on the scientific evidence that we have painstakingly built. The spread of western psychology across the world and into other cultures has been regarded by critical psychologists as a form of colonisation, replacing their indigenous psychologies. Social constructionism takes a pluralist, or relativist, view which regards all other approaches to understanding people as alternative constructions. As we outlined in the previous section, from such a viewpoint there can be no accurate or 'truthful' account of the person; different constructions must instead be explored for how they potentially restrict or facilitate human life.

One of the key critiques of mainstream psychology and social psychology that social constructionism shares with other critical psychologists is that it engages in a kind of

hypocrisy. Like the natural sciences, psychology regards itself as free from vested interests and power relations, and as a-political; it views its research activity as producing objective 'facts', and its objectivity is taken to mean that such facts therefore cannot, in themselves, advantage some groups of people over others. The claim that psychology is value-free becomes questionable when one examines the assumptions lying behind its research activities. For example, the case of IQ is now well rehearsed in this respect; the measurement of the 'trait' of intelligence was assumed to be value-free, but we now regard the content of traditional IQ tests as reflecting the concerns and world-view of white, middle class males and it should therefore be no surprise that people lying outside of this privileged social group have often performed less well on such tests. And it need hardly be pointed out that the lower IQ performance of black and working class people has served to reinforce rather than challenge their relatively powerless position in society. It can therefore be claimed that psychology has routinely operated in a way that has political effects while claiming that it is a-political and value-free.

This concern with power relations, together with the desire to include the 'voice' of research participants referred to earlier, has led social constructionism to radically challenge the conception of language implicit in the mainstream discipline. The 'turn to language' that is a key feature of social constructionism has brought a preference for qualitative research methods such as semi-structured and narrative interviews, diaries and other forms of discourse. Despite the greater use of qualitative methods within the mainstream discipline today, the mainstream retains a value system whereby quantitative methods are seen as more likely to produce 'hard facts', data that can objectively, reliably and accurately inform us about the nature of the social world. But since social constructionism challenges these values and rejects the notion of a single, objective truth, qualitative methods are championed as highly effective ways of gaining access to individual and socially shared constructions.

Furthermore, in its assertion that all the phenomena of social and psychological life are constructed in the course of human interaction, social constructionism radically transforms the role and status of language in social psychological research. Within the mainstream discipline, language is implicitly taken for granted rather than interrogated; our talk is assumed to unproblematically constitute a vehicle which carries our interior life, such as our thoughts, attitudes and emotions, into the social realm. When we say 'I remember…', 'I feel' or 'in my view…' it is assumed that the content of pre-existing psychological states and structures are being communicated to others via our language. Social constructionism argues that, rather than simply describing the (interior and exterior) world, language is a key site where these worlds are constructed. Social constructionist writing has therefore re-framed psychological and social psychological topics that have formed the mainstay of the research agenda for decades, such as attitudes and memory. Classic works such as Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards (1997) have challenged the mainstream conception of attitudes, memories and other cognitive events, emphasising instead the constructive and performative powers of language; within this view, people are highly skilled social actors who employ language to build accounts and to perform identities that are useful for them. Other social constructionists have focused on the power of prominent discourses and texts circulating in society to create identities and subject positions which may be problematic for those individuals who are implicated in them. For example, there is a now a large stream of literature that has examined the problems women experience as leaders and managers in organizations because of how these roles are constructed through particular discourses of masculinity which valourize certain behaviours and attitudes, such as work centrality, upward mobility and presenteeism (see e.g. Mills, 1992). Not only do some women (and men) find it difficult to conform to such discourses of the "ideal manager" in general (Haynes, 2012), but they may find they are seen by others to be less professional and committed once they have a family and decide to devote more time to their non-working life (Dick, 2015).

Social constructionist research

The key principles of social constructionism mean that the aims and practices of social enquiry must be radically transformed. We cannot investigate the psychological and social world using our old assumptions and practices, because their focus on internal psychic structures and processes is inappropriate. Instead, our research must focus more on language and other symbolic systems. In addition, social constructionism brings into question some of the key criteria we are used to associating with 'good science'.

Because social constructionism problematises all truth claims, the familiar ideal of objectivity becomes inappropriate; there is no single 'truth' to be revealed by taking an objective stance to the world. Furthermore, we must all encounter the world from our particular location in the social world; our questions, theories and hypotheses, must therefore stem from the assumptions embedded in our perspective. For example, the extensive research literature on sex differences (see Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974) says less about the psychological differences between the sexes, which turn out to be relatively few, than it does about psychologists' assumptions that women and men must be different kinds of people. The task of the researcher therefore becomes to acknowledge the influence of their own background and involvement in the research process, reflecting on the part that this may play in the findings.

The familiar concepts of reliability and validity likewise become problematic. Reliability is the requirement that the research findings are repeatable, and therefore not simply a product of fleeting, localised events; and validity is the requirement that the scientist's description of the world matches what is 'really there'. But social constructionism argues that there can be no final description of the world, and 'reality' may be inaccessible or inseparable from our discourse about it. Nevertheless, social constructionist researchers recognise the need to demonstrate the rigour and robustness of their work, and a variety of alternative criteria have been put forward as ways of demonstrating that the analysis has been carried out systematically and that the interpretation has been soundly argued. In fact,

these are criteria that are more broadly used within qualitative research, such as 'trustworthiness'. Practically this involves such things as providing in-depth information about the steps in the analytic procedure, and 'member checking' whereby the researcher asks for feedback from the research participants themselves.

Social constructionists argue that, since there can never be any objectively defined truth about people, all claims to have discovered such truths must be regarded as political acts; they are attempts to validate some forms of human life and to invalidate others. Psychology is criticised because it has achieved its political effects precisely through its claim to be value-free and therefore apolitical. This also obscures the ways that psychological research has been used, and continues to be used, to address the concerns of relatively powerful groups in society. Some social constructionist researchers therefore use their research as critique, to reveal how language can be used to legitimate and support unequal power relations.

Social constructionist research also implies a preference for qualitative research methods since these are ideal for gathering linguistic and textual data and are also seen as less likely to decontextualise the experiences and accounts of respondents. The preferred method of a psychology that models itself on the natural sciences is the experiment. In this research paradigm, the experimenter and subject are positioned in an undemocratic relationship, where the experimenter's 'voice' is heard but that of the subject is not. The reported experience of the subject also becomes decontextualized; the control of variables seen as irrelevant to the concerns of the experiment effectively strip subjects' behaviour of the context that gives it meaning and rationale, replacing this with the experimenter's own interpretations. This is one of the concerns that fuelled the 'crisis' in social psychology.

Data used in social constructionist research may include interviews, transcripts of naturally-occurring speech, newspaper articles, advertisements and so on- in fact anything that could be considered a 'text' to be read for meaning. Data are then often analysed using one of a number of approaches that are collectively referred to as 'discourse analysis'. Both spoken discourse (such as interview transcripts, or transcripts of political speeches) and

written texts (such as news articles) are often analysed through these methods, but other kinds of materials such as pictures, films or even the built environment can also be treated as texts and analysed for their symbolic meaning. To illustrate some of the methodological and epistemological issues outlined above we will now discuss two examples of social constructionist research that examine very different phenomena. The first example is a study of sexual harassment in the police service and the second is a study of paranormal phenomena.

Sexual harassment

Mainstream approaches to the study of sexual harassment follow the positivist tradition we have critiqued above and assume that sexual harassment is an objectively verifiable experience that can be measured and quantified by using such instruments as questionnaires and surveys (e.g. Klonoff and Landrine, 1995; Somvadee and Morash, 2008). Typically the extent of sexual harassment in a given context, such as a workplace, will be assessed by asking respondents to specify how often they have been on the receiving end of "unwanted sexual comments", for example. One problem with this approach, however, is that it does not easily capture whether individuals find such experiences distressing which makes it difficult to use the results of such research to draw firm conclusions about sexual harassment. Furthermore, qualitative and mainly feminist researchers have argued that if norms in a given context operate to sanction and render "normal" sexualized behaviour, then sexual harassment may be masked or complaints about it "silenced" (Clair, 1998).

From a social constructionist perspective, however, both ideas (that the extent of sexual harassment can be measured and that norms render sexual harassment invisible) are problematic because they assume that sexual harassment exists independently of our interpretations of that experience. That is, the literature assumes that certain actions, activities and practices (including talk) can be unproblematically categorized as sexual

harassment. A recent study by Dick (2013) tackles this issue from a social constructionist perspective.

Using a discursive psychology approach which focuses on how individuals construct accounts of their experiences and the extent to which these accounts "work" to produce credible versions of reality, Dick (2013) argues that sexual harassment cannot be viewed as an objectively verifiable experience but needs to be understood as a discursive accomplishment which is rendered more or less difficult dependent upon the precise nature of the interactional context in which the claim about sexual harassment is being made. So, for example, imagine that a woman is at work and a man makes a comment to her e.g. "you look sexy in that skirt". She then discusses this with one friend who is of the view that this is an outrageous example of sexual harassment and another who thinks it is typical of the man concerned - "he says that to all the young girls in the office". Now imagine that this woman comes to agree with the view of the first friend and decides to report this to her manager. Her manager is an older man who, following organizationally recommended procedures, asks her whether the "harasser" has made more than one such comment to her or has done anything else she finds offensive. He suggests she returns to see him if any other incidents occur or that she asks the man concerned not to talk to her in this way if it happens again. On leaving her manager's office, she is now less certain about how to interpret the sexual comment that was made to her and she is also now a little concerned about what to do when she sees this man again.

This vignette raises a number of issues that Dick (2013) explores in her study. First, interpretations of experiences such as sexual harassment are difficult to make and are facilitated or inhibited by the interactional context in which the interpretation is negotiated. The idea that a comment can be interpreted as sexual harassment, for example, may be much more likely in a context with another female who dislikes such behaviour than in one with a female who sees such comments as normal and unremarkable or where the other

party is sceptical about whether the comment was "meant" to be sexual or harassing. Second, these contexts are characterised by particular relations of power that render some interpretations more acceptable than others. For instance, where the manager as the more powerful party in an interaction expresses scepticism, this is more likely to affect either how an individual interprets his or her experience or the extent of the effort the individual has to make to render her interpretation "believable". For example, in Dick's study, she shows how her own position as a feminist researcher influenced the construction of an account in which sexual harassment was constructed as normal and harmless. The research participant producing this account had to put a lot of effort into persuading the researcher that the behaviour she was discussing (sexual innuendo) was "in the mind of the observer", efforts that proceeded from Dick's interrogation of what this innuendo involved. Third, the category "sexual harassment" is itself a product of particular societal relations of power. That is, sexual harassment emerged as a credible category of experience once women (and some men) in workplaces began to object to the subordination of women in organizations. Like any discursive category, this has disciplinary effects in as much as most individuals in contemporary society would not want to be labelled as a sexual harasser. This in itself is likely to be having distinct effects on how men and women relate to each other in the workplace, in turn influenced by shifting relations of power occurring as a consequence of these disciplinary effects i.e. men are much more aware that they need to be careful about the comments they do make to women in the workplace. Finally, Dick (2013) argues that when scholars insist that particular experiences should be interpreted as sexual harassment, they are themselves reproducing relations of power in which the researched are seen to be "naïve" and the scholars "correct". This in itself, Dick argues, has distinct effects on how individuals interpret and account for their experiences in the workplace, with many research participants unwilling to accept that the researcher's interpretation of what a given experience means should be privileged above their own interpretation. For instance, a study by Scarduzio and Geist-Martin (2008) looked at male professors' experiences of sexual harassment in academe. They noted that their participants were very reluctant to name

certain experiences as sexual harassment, which they suggest may stem from the subject position "victim" in sexual harassment discourse. Scarduzio and Geist-Martin argue that this subject position is not easily taken up by men, especially high status men, who may experience high levels of internal conflict and ambiguity in using this term, as they attempt to define and make sense of their experiences. It is also equally as feasible that these men did not want to be labelled as a "victim" by the researcher and hence their unwillingness to label their experiences as sexual harassment may be a product of the research interview as much as any "internal" reason.

Paranormal experiences

A second example of social constructionist research also conducted using a discursive psychology approach is Robin Wooffit's (1992) work on paranormal experiences. Paranormal experiences can be difficult to discuss in an interaction because there is always a risk that the person claiming to have had such an experience will be seen as "odd" or in some way "unreliable". Wooffitt brackets the issue of whether or not a person is telling the truth when they claim to have seen a ghost, live in a haunted house or experienced any other form of occult experience and instead looks very closely at how individuals build accounts of paranormal experiences. Wooffitt notes two particular characteristics of such accounts that tell us much about out contemporary Western culture. The first is that when individuals are constructing accounts of paranormal experiences, they put significant effort into building a picture of themselves as an ordinary and not a strange, reactionary or deluded individual. They do this with a number of what are called discursive devices (patterns in talk that transmit particular meanings). One such device is known as "avowal of prior scepticism" whereby an individual will claim that prior to the particular paranormal event experienced, they too did not believe such phenomena existed. They tend also to preface their account of the experience with descriptions of highly mundane actions e.g. "I was just having a cup of tea with Mary when we heard this funny noise". These two devices work to persuade the other party to the interaction that the individual was not expecting to have a

paranormal experience, and had never experienced such an event previously. Thus the other party in the interaction is being instructed not to read the individual as someone who is always anticipating that such events might occur. A further important element of building a believable account of a paranormal experience is related to what Wooffitt terms "auspicious contexts". Similar to the point made by Dick (2013) regarding the extent to which power relations make it more or less difficult for an individual to be believed, Wooffitt argues that some contexts are more conducive to an individual being believed than others e.g, being with those who believe in the paranormal versus with those who are highly sceptical.

The nature of the efforts that individuals put into building accounts of paranormal experiences do seem to indicate particular features of our contemporary culture that influence how we make sense of the world, ourselves and others. First, in Western contemporary culture, we tend to be more inclined to believe that a particular phenomenon exists if there is "scientific evidence" for it, that is, objectively verifiable indicators of its existence, which in the case of paranormal experiences might be video or audio recordings of such activity. Pollner (1987) refers to our contemporary desire for such evidence as "mundane reasoning". He argues that while this preference is probably entirely sensible if trying to, for example, verify the speed at which a car was travelling, for more ambiguous social phenomena this form of reasoning is not necessarily helpful. Nevertheless it explains why individuals put so much effort into constructing facticity (i.e. that the experience being recounted is a product of objective rather than subjective circumstances) when providing accounts of contested phenomena. A second and related issue is that when people construct accounts of experiences that are widely viewed as spurious or lacking credibility, there is the danger that they will be interpreted as "odd" or "strange". Again, the fact that individuals devote so much effort into constructing themselves as ordinary individuals who have had extraordinary experiences shows how dispreferred such self-attributions are in our society. This, we suggest, is evidence of the dominance of rationality – the idea that a sane

and therefore reliable and normal person is one who is governed by reason and logic, not fantasy and emotion.

As our two examples here suggest, discourse analysis can be used to investigate a very wide range of phenomena (see Augoustinous, this volume). But the focus is always upon the constructive power of language and how it is used. A Foucauldian discourse analysis is often used when the researcher wants to identify the discourses (ways of speaking about and otherwise representing something) that are prevalent in society around a particular topic and identifying the possible ideological and political effects of these. However, political concerns are not necessarily central to all social constructionist research. Some social constructionists, such as discursive psychologists, are often more interested in investigating the workings of language and the construction of accounts for their own sake; the approach to analysis they take is more likely to consist of a fine-grained exploration of naturally-occurring interactions ('conversation analysis') and the aim is to answer questions about how people manage their identities, make truth claims and build justifiable accounts during their interactions. Increasingly, researchers are adopting 'hybrid' versions of discourse analysis, aimed at investigating both prevailing discourses and how discourse is used in interaction. A good example comes from Speer (2005), who examines how discourses of femininity and masculinity influence how individuals discuss such issues as gender inequalities. As Speer shows, discourses have both context-free and context-dependent meanings and it is the latter that can illustrate their essentially dynamic, contingent nature. Speer critiques the idea that "hegemonic masculinity" (the idea that certain characteristics are important for being masculine) is a prevailing discourse, constraining the identities of men such that they are disciplined by these ideas (i.e. feel motivated to conform to them). Speer illustrates that how participants construct their identities can be understood as fuelled not by the discourse itself, but by the interactional demands generated by the research interview, and the extent to which these render masculinity an accountable matter. In doing so, she is able to avoid reifying masculinity

while, nevertheless, illustrating how participants may orient to this category as a normative construct within interactions.

Recent trends in social constructionism

The focus of social constructionism upon the constructive power of language has arguably led to its neglect, and even denial, of key aspects of being a person. Our subjectivity and sense of self, our emotions and other bodily experiences, whilst key to mainstream psychology, have been problematic for social constructionist theory. One reason for this has been the reluctance of social constructionists to set in motion a 'slide back' into essentialism; talking of such things as selves and emotions as psychological entities appears to re-introduce the very ideas that social constructionism has been at pains to critique. Instead, the study of the self and subjectivity has been replaced by the study of how identities are constructed, and the study of emotions has become the study of how these are performed during interactions.

However, in recent years there has been a growing feeling among social constructionists that the theory really must engage with human subjectivity; what it feels like to be a person, our hopes and fears and the choices we make are crucial aspects of human life. At best, social constructionism has in the past regarded such things as side-effects of discourse, or has looked only at those aspects of them that can be seen as 'performances' during interaction. But recent work has seen a real concern to include human subjectivity within social constructionist theory. One attempt to do this has been through the development of 'psycho-social studies' (see Frosh, 2003; Taylor, this volume) which aims to dissolve the constructed division between the psychological and social realms. However, the use of psychodynamic theory within this approach has been critiqued by others (eg. Edley, 2006) as fundamentally incompatible with the tenets of social constructionism.

The importance of the body and of the emotions in human experience has also recently received a great deal of attention from social constructionists. The term 'embodiment' is used as a way of signalling the desire to overcome the mind/body dualism of mainstream psychology, and the term 'affect', likewise, is used in preference to 'emotion'; affect covers a wide range of subjective experiences that do not come pre-categorised as in the case of emotions such as anger, love or sadness. As in the case of subjectivity, the aim has been to disrupt the constructed divisions between the body, the mind and the world of language to find a way of understanding the person holistically as an embodied, biological, psycho-social-linguistic entity (Cromby, 2012; Wetherell, 2012; Burkitt, 2014).

Summary

Social constructionism argues that the concepts and categories we use to think and communicate with are socially constructed rather than 'natural' features of the world. These concepts and categories are historically and culturally specifric, making our 'knowledge' of the world relative rather than absolute and rendering the idea of 'truth' problematic. Furthermore, the creation and reproduction of what we think of as 'knowledge' is intimately tied to power relations ; people in some sections of society have more power than others to decide what counts as legitimate knowledge, and some ways of speaking (or 'discourses') frame experience and identities in ways that can be oppressive. Social constructionists have therefore been critical,of mainstream psychology and social psychology, which have arguably contributed to oppressive regimes of knowledge whilst professing to be value-free and apolitical. Social constructionism has also challenged the individualism of the mainstream discipline, arguing that human behaviour and experience cannot be properly appreciated when divorced from its social context. This critical focus of social constructionism means that its research agenda is concerned with how language is used to build accounts and representations of people and events, and the implications of these.

Although not all social constructionist research is concerned with issues of power and ideology, the challenge that the approach presents to the mainstream disclpline characterises it as a form of 'critical social psychology'.

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