

Social Constructionism

Viv Burr, School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

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Abstract

Social constructionism is a term used to refer to a number of related theoretical approaches that challenge the underlying assumptions and research practices of mainstream psychology. Its insistence upon the historical and cultural specificity of all knowledge means that it constitutes a radical critique of the discipline. Its focus on the importance of language in the construction of people and events has led to the adoption of several varieties of discourse analysis as its research methods of choice.

Introduction: the Origins of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a relatively new term in the social sciences, especially psychology. But the ideas and practices that have cohered around this term in recent decades have a longer history in disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and linguistics. The key tenet of social constructionism is that our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality. Although very different in other respects, the philosophers Kant, Nietzsche, and Marx all took this view; important concepts in the sociology of knowledge developed during the twentieth century, such as ideology and false consciousness, reflect this key tenet, focusing on how sociocultural forces construct knowledge and on the kind of knowledge they construct.

But an important contributor to social constructionist thinking has been the microsociological approach of Symbolic Interactionism, cogently laid out in the now classic book *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In the early twentieth century, George Mead, at the University of Chicago, developed this approach from the earlier work of Herbert Blumer and later published his ideas in *Mind, Self and Society* (1934). Mead had studied at Leipzig University under Wilhelm Wundt, who is widely acknowledged as the founder of experimental psychology. However, Wundt is less well known for his belief in the importance of sociocultural factors, such as myth, folk customs, and religion, in understanding human behavior and experience. Mead took up these ideas in his development of Symbolic Interactionism, which argues that people construct and negotiate identities for themselves and others through their everyday social interactions with each other. Language, as a system of socially shared symbolic meanings, is central to this constructive process. Ironically, John Watson, later to become one of the key expounders of behaviorist psychology, studied under Mead as a postgraduate student. Watson's rejection of the concept of 'mind' and his focus on decontextualized behavior was antithetical to Mead's own position, and their relationship deteriorated. When a new psychology department was set up at Chicago, the split between Watson and Mead was mirrored in the subsequent disciplinary separation of psychology from sociology. This division persists today and consequently few undergraduate psychology students have the opportunity to learn of approaches such as symbolic interactionism and the mainstream discipline continues to operate within a socially

decontextualized model of human behavior and experience. In addition to these North American influences, social constructionism has also drawn on the ideas of more recent European thinkers. The work of the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault has been highly influential, as has that of Ferdinand de Saussure in structural linguistics, of the philosopher Jacques Derrida's work on 'deconstruction' and of the psychodynamic theorist Jacques Lacan. The ideas of these writers have been extensively drawn upon in developing social constructionist thinking around the role of language in the construction of human social phenomena.

The influx of some of these ideas into psychology was encouraged in the later half of the twentieth century by the increasing dissatisfaction with and unease about their discipline of a number of social psychologists. What came to be known as the 'crisis in social psychology' (e.g., Har e and Secord, 1972; Armistead, 1974) centered on mounting worries about the way that social psychology's agenda was driven by the needs and motivations of powerful factions (government, the military, and commerce); its theories and research findings often seemed to bring further oppression to relatively powerless and marginalized groups (women, ethnic minorities, working class people, and those of non-normative sexual orientation) and this operated partly through the study of human phenomena in socially decontextualized laboratory environments, since experiments ignored the real-world contexts which, it was argued, give human conduct its meaning. There was a move to attend to this social context, as well as to explore human phenomena from the perspective of psychology's 'subjects' themselves rather than to overwrite this with the perspective and voice of the relatively powerful researcher. These concerns encouraged social psychologists to embrace the ideas already flourishing in neighboring disciplines, including micro-sociology, and also fed into the increasing call to recognize qualitative research methods as legitimate and fruitful for the discipline of psychology.

Epistemology

Social constructionism poses a radical challenge to the epistemological position assumed by mainstream psychology. Psychology has followed the natural sciences in its vision of scientific endeavor, and this vision of science was born in the Enlightenment historical period.

The Enlightenment was characterized by the search for objective truth through reason and rationality. Science was to challenge the dogma and superstition of the medieval period when knowledge was handed down by religious leaders and was to be unquestioningly accepted. The Enlightenment challenged the church's monopoly on truth and proposed that individual people (increasing numbers of whom, with the invention of the printing press, could read the scriptures and scientific publications for themselves) should be responsible for developing their own knowledge, and discover the truth for themselves; individuals should draw their own conclusions about the nature of the world, and how to live in it, based on objective, scientific evidence. This vision of scientific endeavor, focusing on the systematic observation and recording of phenomena, became known as positivism and is closely allied with realism (sometimes referred to as naive realism), the idea that through our observations of the world, objective reality will be revealed to us. The philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was a central contributor to the idea that science could discover 'laws' of human nature just as it was doing for the natural world. It is important to appreciate the role of positivist thinking in challenging the power of religious dogma and superstition. Nevertheless, the capacity of science to capture the true nature of the world through empirical investigation is what social constructionism, in its turn, now challenges.

Social constructionism problematizes the claim that what we call knowledge, our current understandings of the nature of the world and its phenomena, is derived from objective, unbiased observation of events; that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Neither does it argue that the problem lies in systematic biases operating within scientific method. The concept of bias in turn rests upon the concepts of truth and accuracy, both of which social constructionism also challenges. The solution is not, therefore, to improve scientific method in order to reduce its biases; truth and accuracy are rejected as meaningful conceptual tools because social constructionism's epistemological position is one of relativism. Sometimes referred to as perspectivism, this position argues that there can never be one objective, final and 'true' account of phenomena; instead what exists are multiple perspectives, potentially as many different versions of events and things as there are people in the world. What we call knowledge, which we regard as facts, can therefore not be compared to an accurate standard to assess its truthfulness; instead, different ways of understanding the world coexist in parallel and none of them can be said to be the truth. Rather than pursuing a search for objective truth and the nature of the real world, social constructionism recommends that we take a critical and skeptical attitude toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world.

Time and Place: Knowledge in Context

One of the earliest and most influential social constructionist publications within psychology came from the North American psychologist Kenneth Gergen in 1973. His paper *Social Psychology as History* argues that all knowledge, including psychological knowledge, is the product of a particular historical period and of a particular cultural location. He

reframes social psychology as a historical, rather than scientific, project. The constructionist case is that all human psychological and social phenomena arise out of social life, from the interactions between people. These interactions in turn are given structure and content by the culture in which we live, by our society's economic conditions, and by the power relations in which we are embedded. But these social conditions are subject to constant flux. From time to time, and from location to location, the conditions within which people construct themselves and each other differ and are transformed. It follows, therefore, that there can never be definitive answers to questions about the nature of human and social phenomena. Instead, Gergen recommends that we ask how and why certain constructions come into being. This of course includes the constructions that we call 'theories,' and so the very projects of psychology and social psychology themselves become questions about history and culture. To properly understand the evolution of present-day psychology and social life, we therefore must extend our enquiries beyond the individual into social, political, and economic realms. Social constructionism also challenges the very categories of things and people that characterize our (current, local) thinking and language. We cannot imagine dispensing with categories and dichotomies such as urban/rural, male/female, individual/society, or mental/physical, but social constructionism proposes that these are human constructions rather than objective descriptions of the world and at least some of them would not have made sense to people living in earlier historical times.

Such a view disrupts the notion of scientific progress, the idea that through science we are advancing toward a more and more accurate understanding of the physical and psychological world. Our contemporary conceptions of, say, children, illness, or sexuality are certainly different to what they were 100 or 200 years ago, and may differ radically from ways of thinking in non-western, industrialized cultures. But social constructionism cautions against making the assumption that our current, local ways of thinking are better because they represent a more accurate or truthful account. Such thinking, it is argued, is responsible for the imposition of our own ways of thinking upon other cultures and nations; psychology has been imperialist in its view of other cultures and has colonized them, replacing their indigenous conceptions of human life with western-grown ideas. The model of human beings intrinsic to contemporary psychology is a particularly individualistic one, a model which celebrates and privileges the unique, self-contained person. Social constructionists argue that this individualism became part of the discipline of psychology as it developed and flourished in North America, where the individual is arguably especially valorized (Farr, 1996).

Challenging Psychology's Model of the Person

Antiessentialism

The vision of the person lying at the heart of mainstream psychology is the self-contained individual, an autonomous and agentic person that preexists society and social life. This vision is expressed in Floyd H. Allport's (1924: 12) definition of social psychology: "The science which studies the behavior of the individual in so far as his [sic] behavior stimulates other

individuals, or is itself a reaction to this behavior.” This pre-existing individual has a discoverable nature, and the agenda of psychology is its discovery. The content of this individual is described by the various and competing psychological theories that have been developed over the last 100 years or so: personality traits and intelligence, unconscious motivations and drives, learned behaviors and habits, attitudes, and beliefs. All these constructs are similar; however, it that they are thought of as properties of the person, whether inherent or acquired. Social constructionism regards all such concepts as constructions, and like any other constructions, they have arisen in the course of social life in particular sociocultural conditions. This position is referred to as antiessentialism, and stands as a critique of the notion of psychological essences, structures, or qualities that exist at an intrapsychic level as properties of individuals. Social constructionism also therefore challenges the determinism of psychology, its assumption of causality. This is the view that psychological and social phenomena are caused and explained by events or structures either in the individual’s environment (such as upbringing or traumatic events) or internal to them (such as personality traits or the actions of hormones).

Rejecting Reductionism

The essentialism and determinism of mainstream psychology are also expressed in its reductionist thinking. Reductionism is the attempt to explain complex events in terms of simpler, lower level ones. Levels of explanation are typically arranged from the biological (genetic material, brain activity, hormonal activity, etc.) through the psychological (behavior and experience) to the social/societal (social structures and social phenomena). In this way, complex social phenomena, such as poverty, crime, and alcoholism, are reduced to and explained by events or structures at the psychological level (such as intelligence and personality) which are in turn reduced to and explained at the biological level, often genetic inheritance or brain structures.

This reductionism is not confined to the discipline of psychology but is increasingly evident in popular understandings of a great range of social and psychological phenomena. The burgeoning discipline of neuroscience has taken centre-stage in popular understandings of human experience, so that we are invited to understand psychological events as caused by events happening at a neurological level. [Gergen \(2010\)](#) is critical of this, arguing that it leads to fatalistic thinking; if behavior is seen as caused by neurological events, over which we have no control, personal agency is an illusion and we may simply blame our wayward brains for the acts we commit. Gergen offers a constructionist challenge to such thinking, arguing that the psychological behaviors, events, or properties that neuroscience purports to explain, for example, aggression are complex, changeable social constructions subject to local interpretations. It is therefore not possible to identify causes of such phenomena, whether neurological or not.

The Centrality of Social Interaction and Discourse

Social constructionism turns on its head the relationship between the individual and society implicit in Allport’s definition of social psychology; what we recognize as individual

persons cannot exist without a preexistent social network. Human beings are born into a world of social relations, language, norms, and customs and it is this social world that constructs them as recognizable persons who are capable of meaningful conduct. In this sense, it would be legitimate to say that all psychology is social psychology; there is no part of an individual’s functioning that does not have its origins in social life in one way or another. As in symbolic interactionism, the very contents of our thoughts, what we call our attitudes and beliefs, our sense of self, all these things arise out of interaction with others. The constructionist [John Shotter \(1995\)](#) writes about ‘joint action’ as a way of conceptualizing the social origins of thought and behavior. [Kenneth Gergen \(1999\)](#), drawing on the work of Lev Vygotsky and the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin, argues for a relational, dialogical approach to the self. He writes of the interconnectedness between people; we are locations in a network of myriad ‘voices,’ past and present. Gergen has since developed these ideas into a political vision of the self, deconstructing and challenging the self/other dichotomy upon which much conflict arguably rests. The constructive work that produces us as persons takes place in social interaction of all kinds, and language as a key constituent of social interaction is therefore of great importance. Discourse is at the heart of social constructionism, and this term has been used in different ways by two approaches that have developed within social constructionism, which can broadly be called the ‘macro’ and the ‘micro’ approach ([Burr, 2003](#)).

The macro approach draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, who argued that discourses are widely prevalent ways of talking about or otherwise representing (such as in images, written materials, films and even buildings and other physical spaces) people or things and these discourses function to construct and maintain our understanding of those people and things in social life. Through his method of the ‘archaeology of knowledge,’ he traces the discourses historically producing contemporary constructions of phenomena such as mental illness ([Foucault, 1964](#)) and sexuality ([Foucault, 1976](#)). Our talk about such things is reframed as manifestations of these discourses, almost as if they were speaking through us. In its most extreme form, this view renders people the hapless carriers of discourses who are also constructed by them in a rather deterministic fashion; our identities become multiple and changeable, distributed across the discourses that construct us. However, taking this approach brings to fore the issue of power, something which psychology has arguably neglected. Prevailing discourses are said to be constructed in the interests of the relatively powerful (in general, white, middle-class men), it is relatively powerful in society that has the greatest opportunity to disseminate such discourses and it is their status (for example, as members of the medical profession, the law, or the state) that authorizes and legitimates them. This approach is therefore able to offer an understanding of how psychology as a discipline has contributed to the oppression and marginalization of some people.

The micro approach is associated principally with work that came to be known as discursive psychology (e.g., [Edwards and Potter, 1992](#)). Discourse here is taken to refer to our everyday linguistic practices, particularly spoken interactions. The focus here is not on the constructive power of prevailing discourses, but on the constructive work that people do in interactions in

order to build accounts of themselves and events that are effective for them. The key ideas here were laid out in the now classic publication by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987). Using their own interview research data, which examined racism in New Zealand, they reject the mainstream social psychological concept of attitudes as an explanatory tool. Focusing on the variability within participants' accounts, they propose instead that interactants' talk is occasioned by the moment-to-moment needs of each party in the conversation; these needs might include, for example, justifying one's actions, attributing blame to another for the outcome of events or creating a good impression.

One danger here is that these two approaches threaten to recreate the mainstream division between the individual and society, with the macro approach being socially deterministic and the micro approach seemingly reinstating the agentic individual. However, the macro and micro approaches are not in themselves incompatible and some have been keen to explore how they might be synthesized. One such attempt is in the concept of 'positioning,' put forward by the philosopher of science Rom Harré (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999). Here, persons are simultaneously positioned by discourses (the macro approach) and draw on these to position themselves and others within specific interactions (the micro approach).

Research

Social constructionism challenges mainstream psychology's approach to research, critiquing the laboratory experiment, in particular, for its socially decontextualized approach to understanding the person. As social constructionism has developed, various theoretical and methodological preferences have emerged within it, and there are now a number of approaches to the analysis of research data that can broadly be called 'discourse analysis'. The macro and micro approaches outlined above are characterized by their own research questions and associated methodologies, although the latter are predominantly qualitative. Those who wish to focus on the constitutive force of discourse and analyze the power relations implicated in subject positions have favored a Foucauldian approach, and Fairclough's (1995) method of Critical Discourse Analysis has gained popularity for such purposes. This kind of approach has been enthusiastically taken up by some feminists and others who wish to conduct research which exposes the oppressive use of discourse and address the marginalization of relatively powerless people.

Research focusing at the more micro level of social interaction has cohered around the practice of what has come to be known as 'discursive psychology'. The research focus here is everyday language as it is used by ordinary people in the course of social interaction. Drawing on the sociological subdiscipline of ethnomethodology, its focus is upon identifying the processes by which ordinary people construct and build accounts of themselves and events. Early work from this orientation used the conceptual tool of the 'interpretative repertoire,' with research aiming to identify the repertoires used by people when accounting for events, often in research or other interviews. Later developments in discursive psychology have led to a greater focus on identifying the use of a range of rhetorical devices (such as justifications and blamings, three-part lists, and

extreme-case formulations) used by interactants to construct their accounts in naturally occurring conversations. To this end, discursive psychologists have typically adopted a version of Conversation Analysis as their preferred research method.

Issues and Debates

Realism vs Relativism

The relativist epistemology that appears to be a key feature of social constructionist thinking is regarded by many as deeply problematic has, in the past, been hotly debated (see the special edition of *Theory and Psychology*, 11 (3), published in 2001). Relativism appears to undercut political efforts to challenge oppressive practices and to take a moral stance since it is impossible to demonstrate the 'truth' of one version of events, the superiority of a particular moral code, over any other; one view is as valid as any other, and 'anything goes'. The difficulty appears to be the impossibility of specifying a reality that exists beyond language. This has led to the development of 'critical realism'. Originating with the philosopher Roy Bhaskar, critical realism argues that social systems are real; they are constructed by people and have real causes and constraints that are external to individuals. Oppressive systems and structures may therefore be critiqued as they have an objective existence beyond discourse. Such a position has been important for those researchers who are keen to analyze power relations, especially in relation to marginalized experiences or groups. Indeed, discursive psychology has been criticized for its failure to contextualize social interaction within broader power structures, while discursive psychologists argue that a Foucauldian approach neglects actual everyday language as used by real people.

However, discursive psychologists claim that social constructionism's relativism has been misunderstood. Edwards et al. (1995) argue that social constructionism does not deny the existence of a real, material reality but that this reality is always brought into social being through language and is transformed in this process. Others disagree that relativism is in itself morally problematic. For example, Gergen (2001) believes that the strength of relativism is that it constantly demands argument and debate. Moral and political positions must be argued for and discussed, and this process is the best way of guarding against any one version of truth becoming legitimated and generally imposed. The heat in this debate now appears to have dissipated, with writers generally adopting and justifying one or other of the above positions or their variants.

Identity and Subjectivity: the Relationship between the Individual and the Social

Early enthusiasm for the Foucauldian approach to discourse within social psychology subsequently raised concerns about the loss of anything we might recognize as the psychological content of the person, and about the danger of replacing the determinism of mainstream psychology with a determinism that is simply social/discursive instead. And despite discursive psychology's focus on the individual use of language in interaction, which focuses on the agentic use of language by skilled social actors, the interior life of the person was effectively

'bracketed off,' much as it had earlier been for behaviorism. Another concern was the absence of any embodied presence of the person within social constructionist thinking. If social constructionists were to understand how people construct meaningful identities for themselves and are able to challenge and resist dominant discourses, the person as a psychological being needed to be reinstated, but in a radically different form to the self-contained, liberal-humanist conception of the individual in the mainstream discipline. An early attempt to do this is represented in the edited collection *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al., 1984), with contributors drawing on (psychoanalytic) Lacanian and object-relations theory to make good the absence of psychological processes from the socially constructed person. Within social constructionist writing, psychology's key traditional concept of personality became replaced by those of identity and subjectivity, to signal the strong social and discursive origins and situatedness of personhood. However, reinstating interior, psychological life as a valid focus of enquiry was not enthusiastically taken up by social constructionists across the board. Now sensitized to the political implications of psychology's historical individualism, many feared backslide into such ideas and were deeply suspicious of any reference to the self.

Nevertheless, psychologists working within a social constructionist framework have made continued efforts to theorize and remodel psychological subjectivity. The concept of 'subject positions' within discourse has become particularly widely used. Davies and Harré (1990) propose that when people take up positions within discourses (for example, as women or men within discourses of gender, or as gay or straight within discourses of sexuality), these positions inevitably provide us with a particular perspective on the world, with affordances for what can meaningfully be said and done from that subject position. The term 'subjectivity,' Frosh (2003) argues, signifies both being subject to (discourse) and being a (psychological, agentic) subject who acts. This concept has become a key focus of a relatively new approach which has emerged over the last 10–15 years, referred to as psychosocial studies. Following a critical agenda, much work within psychosocial studies draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory and is concerned to address the problematic dichotomy of individual/society in a new understanding of subjectivity. Some see the aim of psychosocial studies as transcending this dichotomy such that its poles "are instead thought of together, as intimately connected or possibly even the same thing" (Frosh, 2003), echoing earlier attempts to provide an alternative to the agency/structure debate within sociology (e.g., Giddens, 1979). However, others (e.g., Jefferson, 2008) argue that the 'psychic' is lost in such a conceptualization. In this context, the terms subjectivity and identity are themselves contentious within psychosocial studies. Originally intended as a new way of conceptualizing the relationship between the psychic and the social (Venn, 2006), some (e.g., Wetherell, 2008) are concerned that the psychic realm, under the label of subjectivity, once more becomes one pole of the old individual-social dichotomy with identity occupying the social pole, representing a backslide into dualistic thinking. Wetherell argues that what we regard as features of both social identity and subjectivity are themselves socially constructed, and recommends 'psycho-discursive practices' as a more fitting conceptual tool.

Social Constructionism in Psychology

In the foreword to their (1998) reissue of *Changing the Subject*, the authors comment that since the time of the first edition, there had been little take-up of social constructionism's challenging ideas by the mainstream discipline. This situation seems to have continued, at least outside of mainland Europe, with academics researching and writing principally within one realm or the other. New academic journals have been developed which welcome social constructionist and discursive work, while many preexisting mainstream journals continue to favor work carried out within a traditional, positivist framework. Social constructionist work within psychology can now be said to be broadly subsumed under the umbrella term of 'critical psychology' (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997), but there has been relatively little productive dialogue between mainstream psychology and social constructionism/critical psychology, the two paradigms, and their agendas, continuing to lead more or less parallel, self-contained lives. Frosh (2003) notes that the more recently emerging field of psychosocial studies has in the main developed outside of academic psychology, and there has been little dialogue between these.

See also: Critical Psychology; Essentialism; Levels of Analysis in Social Psychology; Social Identity in Social Psychology; Social Psychology: Research Methods; Social Psychology.

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Relevant Website

<https://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/inventory5.html> – ‘The Mead Project’.