

What's wrong with social constructionism?

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Introduction

There is a sense in which the aims of this book may already be compromised by its very existence, a sense in which even as you read this you are open to an argument which potentially undermines much that we have to say. Let us explain...

The theme of this book is that it is time for social constructionist psychology to loosen its almost exclusive focus on language and discourse, and begin also to include other vital issues. This chapter identifies three issues which social constructionism (for the most part, and with some honorable exceptions) currently fails to adequately consider: embodiment, materiality and power. But how do we demonstrate this? Do we bundle together into boxes examples of embodiment (toenails, dead sharks in formaldehyde?), materiality (blades of grass, sticks and stones?) and power (hmm: perhaps a miniature Panopticon, made from matchsticks by homeless people and sold to get money for food?) Do we give these boxes to our publishers with a request to distribute them, since in their *immediacy* (see Patten, 1981) they make our point more forcibly than any argument we could possibly contrive? We do not: instead, we write a book - and in so doing, move onto the very territory we are identifying as problematic and insufficient.

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In short, we are well aware that language does things. We accept that what follows is a story, and that alternative stories could be told. One such story would tell how social constructionism is a powerful and growing influence in psychology today. It would describe how theorising and debate is both innovative and vigorous, as constructionists advance social explanations for an increasing range of phenomena - attitudes, memory, personality, emotions, the "self." This story would tell how the status of these phenomena as qualities or properties of individuals has been challenged. It would describe how the methods typically used by constructionists (discourse and conversation analysis, Q-sorts, ethnography) are increasingly acceptable to mainstream psychologists, and are now commonplace on undergraduate courses. It would show how constructionist ideas are being applied in practice in areas such as health psychology, counselling and therapy, developmental and educational psychology. In passing, it would mention that some of constructionism's most determined advocates now enjoy high esteem in academic circles. Let us emphasise now that this account of social constructionist psychology is one that we enjoy and frequently re-tell - it is, in our view, a rattling good yarn. But the purpose of this book is to tell a slightly different story. It has many of the same characters and settings as the one outlined above, but the plots diverge at crucial points. Moreover, you'll be glad to hear that our story has at least the potential for a much happier ending.

Our story begins with the observation that despite the charms of the tale of progress and consolidation outlined above, there are some things *wrong* with social constructionist psychology. Many of these problems are an inevitable result of the ways in which social constructionism has developed over the last 15 years or so. In particular, we believe that the "discursive turn" - constructionism's strong emphasis on the role of language in the constitution of both world and person - has produced a corresponding lack of attention to other significant elements of human life. The kinds of things we will be talking about here include:

the influences of embodied factors (from missing limbs to coldsores) and personal-social histories (from idyllic childhoods to abusive incidents) upon social situations and individual activity

the ways in which the possibilities and constraints inherent in the material world always already shape and inform the social constructions we live through and with

the power of institutions, governments and multi-nationals, and the inequalities that arise from those structural features of society usually described under terms such as "capitalism" or "patriarchy"

Other problems, we suspect, arise either from strenuous efforts to bring into the linguistic arena these missing elements, or alternatively from misguided attempts to downplay their significance. The excessive wordiness, conceptual confusion, [p.3] abstraction and indeterminacy of some social constructionist writing (Searle, 1995) may be due at least in part to such striving.

In this chapter we will discuss embodiment, materiality and power in more detail arguing both that these elements are not reducible to discourse, and that those approaches which treat them as though they were purely discursive are erroneous. This necessarily implies that *our* constructionism will attempt to include the "real". Of course, this does not mean that we expect the booming, buzzing confusion of the ecosystem, or still less the embodied or physiological aspects of subjectivity, to show themselves here, unrepresented and unmediated. It simply means that we will decide not to question the existence of certain aspects of them (however, since these are moral or political decisions, rather than "scientific" or "academic" ones, we simultaneously reserve the right to do so in the future). Moreover, at times, we will explicitly call upon the "real" to support our arguments - in contrast to many other constructionists, for whom the only reality that appears unproblematically is that of discourse. This means that we must also summarise another story called "the realism-relativism debate". But first, to make clear that we "really" are

social constructionists, we must briefly say what we think is *right* with social constructionism.

What's right with social constructionism?

Gergen (1985) described social constructionist psychology in terms of its qualities, interests and principles, providing something of a "manifesto" for constructionists. Yet Burr (1995) points out that what unites the various people who describe themselves as social constructionists is no more than a "family resemblance", and Potter (1996) emphasises that there is no one type of psychology which could be described as social constructionist. Danziger (1997) describes two strands of social constructionist psychology: a "dark" version which attends to issues of power and subjectivity and is rooted in the work of Foucault; and a "light" version which attends to the minutiae of discourse and social processes and descends from speech act theory, ethnomethodology and deconstruction. Like other psychologies, then, social constructionism contains disparate and sometimes conflicting ideas (including those expressed here). But this disagreement and debate should not be allowed to obscure the broad consensus that has emerged between the many writers who all place one or more of the following principles at the core of their psychology. Below, we sketch what we see as the principal areas of broad agreement together with outlines of the disagreements that surround them.

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The primacy of social processes

Social constructionists argue that the world we experience and the people we find ourselves to be are first and foremost the product of social processes. Neither God nor individual consciousness but society itself is the prime mover, the root of experience. It is the social reproduction and transformation of structures of meaning, conventions, morals and discursive practices that principally constitutes both our relationships and ourselves. This implies that language, both as the dominant carrier of categories and meanings and as the medium which provides much of the raw material for our activity, is central. Rather than asserting this as an item of dogma we prefer to provide evidence, and employ German Critical Psychology for this. Tolman (1994, p.86-92) summarises how an evolutionary perspective leads us to necessarily (at this point in the evolution of our species) privilege the social realm over other determinants of human life.

Although it seems that all constructionists must subscribe to some version of this argument, there is disagreement about the extent to which it can be applied. Some (e.g. Edwards & Potter 1992, Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995) seem to believe that when we talk about "reality" we can

only be referring to the world we discursively construct, that "there is nothing beyond the text". Others (e.g. Harre, 1990) accept there is a real world beyond the text, but argue that what we can know of that real world is a sub-world or "umwelt" restricted by the physiological, sensory apparatus of our species. Within those restrictions our world is always socially constructed - again, primarily through language.

Historical and cultural specificity

History provides extensive evidence that cultures change over time, whilst social anthropology demonstrates that they vary greatly from place to place (and note that, to the extent that evidence from these disciplines is accepted uncritically, this is already a realist argument). This variation does not only mean that the things we (think that we) know could be different. It also means that the ways we could find them out and the things that we would count as "proof" may also be different. Being "real" about constructionism leads us to emphasise that it isn't just our ways of talking about the world that vary: the actual, living people that are constituted in and from those ways of speaking will vary, along with the cultures that produce and sustain them. For example, feminists and critical theorists have drawn attention to how dominant notions of "women" and "the person" in contemporary Western society fit all too neatly with the demands of patriarchy and capitalism. Such notions are much more than just ways of representing people; they become, in their elaboration, determinants of [p.5] social practices in which we make and find ourselves either as the subjects of patriarchy and capitalism, or alternatively as their opponents. In both cases, patriarchy and capitalism become influences to which we must attend.

Realism aside, what is contentious here is the extent of this variation. Some constructionists emphasise the significant differences that can be found even between neighbouring countries, the important cultural shifts that can occur within one lifetime, and argue that any and all aspects of existence may be subject to enormous variation. For example, Geertz (1979) says "The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures". Other constructionists simultaneously emphasise the consistencies and continuities that endure between and across cultures (such as widespread and enduring oppression based around gender or sexuality) and argue that these commonalities must also be explained. Geertz (1973) also says "At least some conception of what a human individual is, as opposed to a rock, an animal, a rainstorm or a god, is, so far as I can see, universal".

Knowledge and activity are intertwined

Or, as Burr (1995) puts it, "knowledge and social action go together". We pose the questions we do and frame the answers we obtain in ways which are fundamentally, profoundly and intimately related to the activities we carry out. We actively seek to explore aspects of our world, in particular ways for particular purposes, and in so doing create knowledge which we then take as the "truth" about the world. But other activities carried out for other purposes might have produced alternative "truths". So knowledge is inextricably linked to, and emerges as a product of, activity and purpose. However, an extreme version of this argument would say that there can be no facts which are true in every culture and for all time. Whilst some constructionists are happy to accept this possibility, others find it more useful to believe that some things are still more "true" or "right" than others. The disagreement, then, is about the extent to which all knowledge is always local and particular, versus the extent to which it may also be grounded in aspects of the world which precede or transcend local human beliefs and activity.

A critical stance

The understanding that knowledge is both relative and emerges from practice gives constructionism a powerful critical impetus, placing it in opposition [p.6] to the positivist, empiricist tradition of science which assumes that "facts" can be gathered by disinterested and neutral observation. However, as some observers have pointed out, this critical impetus has given rise to two distinct strands of social constructionist critique (Danziger, 1997; Parker, 1997a). One strand promotes a relativism which does not give rise to any explicit political activity, but is nevertheless opposed to the positivist tradition which still informs most of mainstream psychology. The other strand holds that whilst social constructions are relative they are not arbitrary, but emerge through social processes that are already shaped by influences such as power relationships and material resources. Both strands share an emphasis upon the socially constructed and therefore malleable nature of our world, but differ in the extent to which they use this understanding as grounds for political (as opposed to philosophical or methodological) critique.

The realism-relativism debate:

Social constructionists all agree that social processes, particularly language, are central to everyday life and experience. They all endorse notions of historical and cultural change, and

accept that knowledge and activity are intimately related. They are all critical of the beliefs, methods and techniques of mainstream psychology, and advocate in their place alternative models of the person, research and practice. Yet within this consensus there are also significant disagreements, to do with locating the limits of socially constructionism and quantifying the relative contribution of extra-discursive processes. In recent years these questions and their various answers have coalesced to produce what is described as the "the realism-relativism debate". Since this debate provided much of the impetus for this book and is a recurrent (if often implicit) theme within it, we will now briefly sketch its contours and some of its implications (for a more complete account see Parker, 1997b).

Realism is the doctrine that an external world exists independently of our representations of it (Searle, 1995). Representations include perceptions, thought, language, beliefs and desires as well as artefacts such as pictures and maps, and so include all the ways in which we do or could know and experience the world and ourselves. Relativism repudiates this doctrine, arguing that since any such external world is inaccessible to us in both principle and practice then it need not be postulated or considered. It might appear at first glance that social constructionism must be inherently and exclusively relativist. We have already described and endorsed its historical and cultural relativism, and its understanding of the way that knowledge is both part and product of social action. Gergen (1985) also mentions the theory dependence of observation, the impossibility of "proving" the [p.7] theory of logical induction by any means other than induction itself, and the existence of paradigm shifts in the "hard" sciences, all of which seem to demand a relativist stance. However, the existence of extra-discursive influences, and the need to ground critique and to understand continuity as well as variability have led some to propose a realist ontology for social constructionism - whether in Harre's notion of the "Umwelt" or the critical realism of Parker (1992) and Willig (1997).

The most explicit argument for relativism in social constructionist thought is provided by Edwards, Ashmore & Potter (1995). Their eloquent paper calls relativism the "quintessential academic position", and says that as such it is the only proper ground for inquiry in the human or social sciences. To demonstrate the value of relativism the authors identify two "bottom-line" arguments commonly used against it in the social sciences: the existence of "things" such as furniture, as demonstrated by hitting a table - "its real!"; and the "fact" of death, suffering, illness and disease. Then they set out to show how, far from being real things in themselves, both death and furniture are socially constructed.

Along the way, they identify two complementary dilemmas. The first occurs at those moments

when exasperated realists clout the furniture in order to demonstrate its physical existence to pedantic relativists. Edwards *et al* argue that "not only words signify. The table-thumping does its work as meaningful action, not mere behaviour .. Rocks, trees, furniture are not *already* rebuttals of relativism, but become so precisely at the moment, and for the moment, of their invocation.. We term this the realist's dilemma." Second, there is the relativist's dilemma which occurs because relativism "must treat everyone's views as equally valid .. it offers no grounds for caring one way or another on anything moral, political or factual". Thus, Edwards *et al* argue that both realists and relativists are compromised, albeit in slightly different ways: "While realists shoot themselves in the foot as soon as they represent, relativists do so as soon as they argue. To argue for something is to care, to be positioned, which is immediately non-relativist." Edwards *et al* conclude that these two dilemmas produce an impasse, the way out of which is to adopt relativism as "a non-position, as critique or scepticism, not as a positive statement opposed to realism. Relativism is offered as a meta-level (or one more step back) epistemology that can include and analyse realism and relativism alike, viewed as *rhetorical practices*". On this analysis, relativism thus gains a (weak) victory over realism.

It is our view that in so far as this paper succeeds, it does so in two ways. First, Edwards *et al* deploy a wide range of more-or-less subtle academic strategies and grammatical, rhetorical and textual devices to blur the experiential distinction between "things" and "words", a strategy which (at least implicitly) derives academic legitimacy from Derrida's assertion that "there [p.8] is nothing beyond the text". This is significant, since Derrida himself has both acknowledged the possibility of a reality *before* the text in Levinasian ethics (Critchley, 1992), and according to Searle has said that "all he meant by the spectacular declaration that there is nothing outside of texts is the banality that everything exists in some context or other" (Searle 1995, p.160; see also Derrida 1988, p.136). Nevertheless, by muddying the distinction between word and world Edwards *et al* place the onus of proof firmly in the realist camp, and then claim an impasse when realists are forced to deploy rhetorical devices in their attempts to provide it. However, the apparent impasse only arises because although it is reality which provides the conditions that make the discussion possible, the discussion itself - as discussions must - takes place in the relativist arena of representations, of discourse.

Such a move is identified and criticised by Searle (1995), who points out that the demand for a proof of realism "already somehow presupposes what is challenged". Searle observes that one can easily establish whether a given English sentence is grammatical, but one cannot establish whether the English language itself is grammatical because English itself sets the standards for grammaticality in English. He suggests that attempts to prove realism by argument have a similar

character: external reality frames them and makes them possible, but (as Edwards *et al* successfully demonstrate) does not appear within them in unmediated or non-occasioned ways. Searle argues that it is misguided to take this as a proof of relativism since "realism is thus not a thesis nor an hypothesis but the condition of having certain sorts of theses or hypotheses". It is the failure to acknowledge this point that produces the impasse in which Edwards *et al* find themselves.

Second, Edwards *et al* provide a convincing demonstration of the strengths of relativism, showing how it insists that all apparent truths can be challenged: indeed, their argument is at its strongest when they show how relativism "offers an ever available lever of resistance. It is potentially liberating, dangerous, unsettling, with an appeal that is enduringly radical: nothing ever *has to be* taken as merely, obviously, objectively, unconstructedly true". But this universal utility which they claim as one of relativism's strengths is simultaneously its greatest weakness. This is because the deconstructive methods which Edwards *et al* advocate, and which depend for their universal applicability upon a totalising and universal relativism, are double-edged swords which dissolve all solutions as remorselessly as they dissolve the problems from which they arise (Burman, 1990). The history of critical thought shows that both realism and relativism are typically deployed strategically. Writers ground their critiques in aspects of the world they wish to make or remain real and, from this grounding, relativise aspects of it they want to question or deny (see Fay, 1987 or Held, 1980). Which aspects of the world are to be relativised and which "real-ised" is a choice typically shaped by moral, political or pragmatical precepts, not epistemology or ontology.

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So the difficulty is not with relativism *per se*, since as Edwards *et al* point out relativism is essential to critical thought and academic work; rather, the difficulty is with their appeal to relativism to provide theoretical closure. For we simply cannot construct the world any old way we choose, and if we persistently attempt to do so we are ultimately more likely to come to the attention of psychiatric services than to gain academic approval. Moreover, realising that our world is socially constructed need not force us to adopt a promiscuous and unbridled relativism. Social constructions are all around us and include such diverse features as racism, marriages and marriage guidance, government policies, governments themselves, child abuse, crime, disease, psychology including social constructionist psychology, buildings, people and cities (to name but a few). *None of these things are any the less real for being socially constructed* although the dominance of the processes of construction, as compared to other influences, may vary from one to the other.

Third, the arguments put forward by Edwards et al benefit from their resonance with the postmodern zeitgeist, in which relativism is sometimes elevated almost to a point of principle. Relativism informs postmodern art and literature through questions about the intrinsic value of 'great' works and in the rise of new and challenging forms (Foster, 1985; Taylor, 1987); it appears in recent challenges to the authority and value of science (Holton 1993; Gross and Leavitt, 1994); and it gains political credibility in the fragmentation of mass movements and the corresponding emphasis on heterogeneity, pluralism, and the ineluctable diversity of experience (Arac, 1986; Callinicos, 1989; Eagleton, 1995). In this context, questions about the value of relativism are often seen as the thin end of a wedge that might reintroduce problems (for example, those of objectivism, essentialism and naïve realism) that postmodernism seems to have transcended. In this sense, relativism is not just a theoretical perspective or philosophical claim. Relativism is simultaneously a culturally offered rhetorical resource that can be drawn upon to disparage 'realist' arguments (as unsophisticated, as failures to understand the subtleties or nuances of relativists' claims, and so on) and so avoid the need to take seriously the entirely reasonable questions that are being raised. With this in mind, the final chapter of this book offers a 'deconstruction' of relativism, and begins [p.10] to develop a set of principled arguments to assess critically and challenge relativism's dominance.

Instead of attempting to universalise relativism, our view is that social constructionists must now embark upon a far more difficult and dangerous task. We must acknowledge the potentials and constraints which permeate and frame the social realm. We must begin to integrate our knowledge of the processes of social construction with that from other (sub)disciplines. We must find ways of talking and writing about the world which, instead of questioning its existence, explicitly acknowledge the situatedness of our own texts within it. We must strategically deploy the analytical and critical methods we have developed in an attempt to forge a coherent and grounded social constructionism that explains the world, in all its intransigence and mess, since only in this way might we contribute to its progressive transformation. To illustrate the need for such an approach, we will now discuss some issues which a wholly discursive (and hence relativist) social constructionism is unable to adequately address.

Embodiment

The human body is a site of birth, growth, ageing and death, of pleasure, pain and many things (like mild hunger, or being tickled) that fall between. It is an object of desires, whether aesthetic, erotic or narcissistic. It is a bearer of features, from retrouche noses and pigeon chests to skins of different hue and primary and secondary sexual characteristics. It is a biological machine that

provides the material preconditions for subjectivity, thought, emotion and language. With other bodies it makes possible physical interaction of all kinds, from passionate kissing to senseless killing. Bodies are celebrated in dance, honed in exercise and disciplined in Foucault, they are mended and modified by surgery and adorned by practices such as tattooing and piercing. Bodies differ, not just in their characteristics but in their capabilities: not all can touch fingers to their toes or dance all night, some struggle even to walk unaided, whilst others (blind, deaf and mute) can see, hear or speak no discourse. Bodies are the intimate place where nature and culture meet, they are the external boundary and principal mass of the mind-body-brain system that we call a human being. They are lumpy, smelly, messy, unreliable and ultimately destined to self-destruct.

Such bodies are difficult to find in social constructionism, which tends to dismiss the body whilst simultaneously appearing to address it by providing detailed analysis of the discourses of bodily matters. Studies of discourse typically proceed as though their raw material was not already the product of embodied beings, in seeming ignorance of the fact that talking is not the only form of interaction. In continually either ignoring the body or treating it as mere metaphor or text, social constructionism obscures and downplays the significance of its functional, physiological, hormonal, anatomical and phenomenological aspects. Not only does constructionism have no notion of the body to call its own, it views other approaches to the body with deep mistrust, branding them as biologicistic, cognitivist or essentialist. It then has little choice but to implicitly reduce the speaking bodies we meet and find ourselves to be to mere discursive traces, transcribed echoes of their actual fleshy substance.

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We do not deny that our understanding of embodiment benefits greatly from an analysis of the ways in which discourses and cultural practices are written on and through the body. Nor do we suppose that the body can be simply and unproblematically incorporated into an over-arching constructionist framework. The spectres of Cartesian dualism, biological reductionism and essentialism continue to haunt the body, just as surely as its obstinate meatiness weighs down the airy flights of its discursive construction. We accept that bringing the body into social constructionism will cause problems, but emphasise that leaving it out has already done so. In ignoring the extensive evidence that the body's biological and physiological substrate differentially acts back upon or interacts with socially obtained discourses, constructionism has implicitly adopted a uniform plasticity of the human body (Nightingale, 1999). All aspects of all bodies must be so similar, so malleable before discourse, that they may as well not be there: if the body can be anything, it might as well be nothing (see Wendell, 1996, for an extended discussion of the problems this raises).

There is a further aspect of embodiment about which social constructionism is largely silent, which is that subjectivity itself is embodied. The subjectivity which is "me" inhabits one particular lump of flesh and no other such lump, and so appears in the context of one, and only one, personal-social life history. Let it be clear that in drawing attention to this issue we are not advocating a lapse into individualism, since it is through personal-social histories that such factors as class, gender and race enter subjectivity and discourse as experiential (rather than mere categorical or indexical) influences. Rather than continue along the neo-behaviourist path of pretending that subjectivity does not exist, we prefer to acknowledge and attempt to understand how subjectivity is constituted through embodied interactions, material possibilities and personal-social histories.

Materiality

Materiality refers to the elemental, physical nature of the world in which we are embedded, its "thing-ness" and solidity. In addition to the human bodies already more specifically discussed above it includes the physical (as opposed to conceptual or discursive) aspects of tables, rocks, tape recorders and transcripts, books like this one, rivers, mountains, oceans, planets, and the dizzying curvature of the space-time continuum. Materiality is the wetness of water, the coldness of ice, the viscosity of oil and the grittiness of sand. It is the weight of lead and the lightness of feathers, the fragrance of tree flowers in the spring and of burning leaves in the autumn. Materiality embraces the distribution of resources, the location of bodies, the organisation of space and the irreversible fact of time.

Whilst all of these things may appear in discourse, as they do here, they are not reducible to it. Even the existence of distinctions that appear in some [p.12] languages but not others, such as the many words for snow in the languages of Greenland, does not demonstrate that discourse can be divorced from materiality. Something that speakers of English would call snow (and Greenlanders might call *qanik*, *pukak*, or *apirlatt* according to its age, texture, and which dialect they spoke) would fall from the sky in certain atmospheric conditions, whether we had words for it or not. Far from demonstrating the ephemeral status of the material world, as is sometimes claimed, this example demonstrates both the diversity of human culture and the rootedness of social, discursive constructions in the material world and the activities of everyday life.

Materiality matters because it both creates possibilities for, and puts constraints upon, the social constructions by and through which we live our lives. Most fundamentally, the ecosystem which supports life is a necessary precondition for any and all social constructions, discursive or

otherwise. This ecosystem is both dynamic and variable, yet the dominant trend in social constructionism is to treat materiality as simply uniform and hence to ignore its contribution to the processes of social construction. Murphy (1995) is critical of this stance, arguing that it is only maintained by the use of "rhetorical avoidance strategies" and a neglect of comparative research which would allow materiality to emerge as a factor. He suggests that denying materiality makes social constructionism appear unconvincing, and leads to a spurious overstatement of the social that results in errors of reification.

Power

Power is a term swathed in confusion, with multiple and sometimes mutually exclusive definitions. Even confining ourselves to the social sciences, power is variously seen as a personal attribute or characteristic, as the implementation of strategies or the use of resources, as a commodity which can be "seized", as a structural feature of societal relations, and as a property which flows from and through the use of discourses acknowledged (at least by those who wield them) to be "true". We come to explicate power and not to bury it, and so we will accept these multiple definitions and use their inconsistencies to help us develop the potential of social constructionism to analyse and understand power and its effects, a potential which the dominant strand of constructionist thought currently fails to fulfil. This failure is closely related to the two issues previously described. Whilst constructionism does not adequately address embodiment and materiality and continues to consign subjectivity and personal-social history to its margins, it cannot include power. Embodiment and power are intimately related, as Foucault shows and the experiences of those whose bodies are considered to deviate from acceptable norms graphically illustrates. Power is a material issue too, from interpersonal violence through access to resources and on to the existence of armies and weapons of mass destruction. Power is essential to an understanding of subjectivity, since the personal-social histories from which it [p.13] emerges are always moulded and shaped by power relationships. Evidence for this in everyday life is provided by research on gender, race and disability; and in extremis by studies of the effects upon individuals of sexual and physical abuse.

Clearly, power has not been ignored by social constructionists: as we described above, there are two strands of social constructionism which diverge in part around this very issue. The relationship of power and discourse is central to the work of Foucault, and permeates the work of those constructionists influenced by his ideas (e.g. Hollway 1989, Parker 1992, Mama 1995, Burman *et al* 1996). Power is also acknowledged in Gergen's notion of "warranting voice" (Gergen, 1989). Yet it is our contention that power is always and already a significant factor in

the processes of social construction, whether it is acknowledged or not, since it is forever present in the interactions and relations which constructionism studies. For example, the analyses of racist discourse described by Potter & Wetherell (1987) are interesting precisely because of the history of oppression and exploitation which they recall and reproduce. Power appears in and operates through discourse, and to this extent discourse analytic methods may usefully map its contours and processes. However, unless discourse is then situated in the material, embodied context that actually gives it meaning (Parker, 1992), such analyses will remain paradoxically incapable of fully addressing their own significance (as Wetherell & Potter, 1992, in fact seems to acknowledge). Conversely, the simultaneous denial of both materiality and embodiment makes it easier for constructionists to ignore power relationships, contributing to the tendency to conceal power identified by Billig *et al* (1988).

Conclusion

The intense focus on language and discourse has served social constructionism well so far, and determined efforts to deny the significance of influences "beyond the text" were perhaps strategic necessities in the earliest phase of constructionism's development. However, such strategies have outlived their usefulness and are now causing more problems for constructionism than they solve: the discursive turn is threatening to become a discursive retreat. Continuing to ignore or downplay embodiment and materiality may eventually create the conditions for the tide of knowledge and practice to simply sweep social constructionism away. The many psychologists who have recourse to notions of embodiment and materiality, both in their practice and in their everyday lives, are unlikely either to resign *en masse* or wholly transform their approach simply because constructionism refuses to believe in them. It seems far more likely that social constructionism will simply make itself irrelevant and trivial, and so waste the valuable gains it has made.

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