Theory and Psychology

Unravelling Social Constructionism

There can be little doubt that the post-modern theorization of language has had a significant impact within social psychology. Most obviously, perhaps, it has provided the theoretical foundations for discursive or social constructionist research - an area of rapidly expanding influence, not just within social psychology, but across virtually all of the human and social sciences. In many academic circles today it is no longer contentious to suggest that all manner of objects and phenomena are 'socially constructed', accomplished in the hurly-burly of ordinary, everyday interactions (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1991; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Sampson, 1993). Such statements are now quite common-place. And yet, in Britain at least, the so-called 'turn to language' has fuelled the development of a new set of divisions or rifts, not just between social constructionists and 'mainstream' social psychologists but, more significantly perhaps, between constructionists themselves. There are now signs that a number of commentators who are, in some sense, quite sympathetic to constructionist

arguments, are becoming increasingly uneasy about their broader implications. As well as raising questions about the truth status of many previously taken for granted objects and events, a thorough-going constructionism is seen by them as both theoretically parasitic and politically paralysing (Gill, 1995; Nightingale and Cromby, 1999; Soper, 1991).

In this paper I would like to do three things. First of all I would like to provide a brief outline of how our common sense understandings of the relationship between representation and reality have been thrown into question by a number of post-structuralist arguments. Having done so I would then like to focus upon the uptake of these ideas within the social sciences, paying particular attention to what I see as some pervasive misunderstandings. In an attempt to help clarify some of these confusions, I will be drawing upon a conceptual distinction made by Derek Edwards between, what he calls, the *ontological* and *epistemic* senses of social construction (Edwards, 1997). Finally, at the very end of the paper, I will look very briefly at the implications of this distinction for social constructionism's reputation as a radical theoretical approach.

Truth in Trouble: Psychology's turn to language

It is now widely understood that the 'turn to language' has prompted a major reconsideration of some of the most central tenets of Western philosophy. The work of theorists such as Baudrillard (1983), Derrida (1973) and Lyotard (1984) is said by many to have undermined our confidence in the twin notions of Truth and Reality (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991). In particular, it is thought to have disturbed our understanding of relationship between representation and reality; throwing into radical doubt the assumption that language maps on to reality in a fairly straight-forward manner.

However, if we take the time to look at the history of philosophy, we will see that the picture is much more complicated. Far from being an isolated incident, these current disagreements appear as just the latest in a long line of similar intellectual battles. According to Gergen (1985), the last few hundred years have witnessed a recurring epistemological debate, between those who see knowledge as somehow grounded in reality (e.g. Locke and Hume) and those who see it as, in part at least, a product of human mental functioning (e.g. Spinoza, Kant and Nietzsche). Social constructionism has

done less, it seems, to rattle existing philosophic certainties[1], than it has to ruffle the feathers of contemporary common sense[2].

All the same, it is important to take account of this common sense view (not least because it also represents the position from which most psychologists work). Common sense assumes that we have the 'real world' on the one hand, with all its distinctive qualities and then, on the other, we have accounts or descriptions of that world. Here, representations are just what they say they are; re-presentations or copies of something original. This is not to say, of course, that people always assume representations to be good, faithful or accurate. They know very well that representations can vary in terms of their fidelity. A photograph, for instance, is generally assumed to be an extremely good representation of the real (‘the camera never lies’ - although see Barthes, 1978; Sontag, 1978), whereas a four year old's drawing of their mother is likely, by comparison, to be thought of as a somewhat inferior reproduction. Nevertheless, at the very heart of our common sense understanding is the assumption that reality is both *prior to* and *independent of* representation.

The challenge to this assumption (i.e. the turn to language) has its roots in a number of different disciplines including anthropology (Geertz, 1973; 1983), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), linguistics (Derrida, 1973; Saussure, 1974), the philosophy of language (Austin, 1962; Wittgenstein, 1953), semiology (Barthes, 1973) and the social studies of science (Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Woolgar, 1993) (see Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1991; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987 for general reviews). What emerged in common was the view that the 'correspondence' or 'mirror' model of language was inadequate. It was argued that, far from there being some kind of straight-forward link between words and the world, the relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' was arbitrary. As they saw it, language doesn't function to provide so many labels for objects and events already existing 'out there' in the world. Rather, in a move which turns the popular understanding completely on its head, they made *representation* the prior term. Language, they claimed, is *productive* rather than (merely) reflective. ‘Reality’ isn't so much mirrored in talk and texts as actually *constituted* by them. Discourse, said Foucault (1972) in an often quoted phrase, constructs the objects of which it speaks.

As a teacher of social constructionist ideas it is easy to appreciate the apparent radicalism of such arguments. Students new to social constructionism often respond to my opening lectures by saying things like: 'Are you seriously trying to suggest that trees and houses, the stars in the sky, my great uncle Roger are not real?' and 'Are you trying to tell me that everything is just made up of talk?' They think it perfectly obvious that the world contains a whole range of different objects and artefacts that are made of more solid stuff than words. They feel absolutely sure that, say, mountains exist irrespective of what we call them and that if, for some strange reason, we were to deny the existence of mountains - if we were to strike the word from all the world's languages - they would still be there for us to admire, to ski on and to fall off.

However, this kind of reaction to social constructionist arguments is by no means restricted to relatively naive student audiences. Indeed, very similar kinds of objections have also been raised within the academy. For example, in a piece by Ben Bradley (Bradley, 1998), he complains that whilst language has taken up a position within the centre-stage of social psychological enquiry, it is treated by some social constructionists as the only reality there is. He states:

> Talk about the mind is viewed as an artefact of cultural forces, an epiphenomenon shaped by the conventions of discourse. Discourse is real. Everything else is relative to discourse. So subjective reality, personal experience and mind is not real (pg 68).

A similar point is made earlier in the same volume by none other than Edward Sampson - in which he accuses some social constructionists of denying the materiality of the body - which also stands as a leitmotif in David Nightingale and John Cromby's book *Social Constructionist Psychology'* (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999).

There can be little doubt that Foucault's statement as well as Jacques Derrida's equally famous claim that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (1976: 158) have fanned the flames of these concerns, insofar as they are so easily taken to imply that the world is purely textual. However, the main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that this is a misreading and that the complaints made by the likes of Bradley, Nightingale and Cromby rest upon a central confusion between or conflation of two quite distinct senses of social construction.

Dividing Constructionism: Ontological and Epistemic

In recent years there have been a number of academic commentators who have suggested that social constructionism is not a unitary paradigm and that differently nuanced forms exist side by side. Such has been claimed, for example, by Kurt Danziger (1997), Ian Hacking (1998) and Ian Burkitt (1998; 1999). However, the particular distinction to which I want to turn comes from the work of Derek Edwards (Edwards, 1997). In the context of a more general discussion about the relationship between cultural and discursive psychology, Edwards draws a line between what he terms the *ontological* and *epistemic* senses of social construction. He says:

> In much of cultural psychology, mind is 'socially constructed' ontologically... In other words, mind is real for the theorist and analyst, and the analytic task is to explain how it is built within a real world of cultural settings and practices. In discursive psychology, the major sense of 'social construction' is epistemic; it is about the

> constructive nature of *descriptions*, rather than of the entities that (according to descriptions) exist beyond them. (pgs 47-8).

Perhaps the first thing to say about this quotation is that I disagree with Edwards over his disciplinary ring-fencing. As far as I can see, there is plenty of evidence of both senses of social construction within the writings of discursive psychologists, including Edwards' own work. Nevertheless, if we focus upon the particular sense with which he prefers to align himself, we should note that *epistemic* social construction orientates around the notion that any attempt to describe the nature of the world is subject to the rules of discourse. It points to the fact that as soon as we begin to think or talk about the world, we necessarily begin to represent (see also Edwards *et al*, 1995). Talk involves the creation or construction of particular accounts or stories of what the world is like.

As far as I can see, it is from this *particular* sense that we get the claim that there is no way of apprehending the world outside of language; that we do not see reality for what it is and then translate it into words. It is from an epistemic point of view that we can see language operating as the medium through which we come to understand or know the world. This is because,

epistemologically speaking, reality cannot exist outside of discourse, waiting for fair representation. Instead, it is the *product* of discourse, both the subject *and the result* of what talk is all about.

The mistake that critics such as Bradley make is to assume that when social constructionists state that 'there is nothing outside of the text', they are making an *ontological* rather than an epistemological pronouncement; that is, a claim about what the world is actually like. However, there are at least two good reasons for doubting this interpretation. First of all, to say such a thing would appear to invite a logical contradiction, for as Jonathan Potter (1997) has pointed out, to claim that there *really is* nothing outside of talk implies that one can somehow *know* that to be the case, absolutely and for all time - which is precisely the assumption that the epistemic sense of social constructionism sets out to disturb. The second reason for doubt is in many ways more empirically based. For as Steve Woolgar has suggested (Woolgar, 1983), it is actually very difficult to find occasions where social constructionists have explicitly denied the existence of an extra-discursive realm. More often or not it is an opinion that others (i.e. realists) have attributed to them.

Consider the following four extracts that I have taken from two of the publications which, within social psychology at least, are amongst the most frequently cited with regard to these kinds of controversies: Derek Edwards' book *Discourse and Cognition* and Jonathan Potter's *Representing Reality*.

1. Descriptions are not *just* about something but they are *also* doing something; that is, they are not *merely* representing some facet of the world, they are *also* involved in that world in some practical way (Potter, 1996, pg. 47 - emphasis altered).

2. Emotion categories are not graspable *merely* as individual feelings or expressions... They are discursive phenomena and need to be studied as such, as part of how talk performs social actions (Edwards, 1997, pg. 187 - emphasis added).

3. It is our texts, our discourses, our descriptive practices, that bring their objects into being. *At least,* they bring them into being as the objects of our understanding (Edwards, 1997, pg. 45 - emphasis added).

4. Descriptions and accounts construct the world, or *at least* versions of the world (Potter, 1996; pg. 97 - emphasis altered).

If we look carefully at these four quotations, we should see that neither author denies the existence of a world outside of talk. In the first extract, for example, Potter doesn't deny that discourse is *about* something, nor does he suggest that descriptions cannot have their referents. Similarly, in his analyses of emotion talk, Derek Edwards does not attempt to deny the reality of feelings like 'jealousy', 'guilt' and 'anger'. As we can see in Extract 2, what he *is* suggesting is that when people talk about emotions they are usually doing a lot more than simply reporting upon how they feel inside.

The idea that social constructionists are denying the existence of emotions and feelings is one that trades upon a familiar but spurious bifurcation between representation and reality. For example, if we look back at the quotation from Bradley, we will see it implied that if subjective experiences are the products of discourse, then they cannot, in fact, be real. It seems to me that there is something deeply ironic about this line of reasoning, as social constructionists are hardly the ones proposing that there is no reality to discursive objects. Indeed their point is usually the reverse. In

Edwards' work, for example, the way that people talk about emotions is seen as *constitutive* of how we understand ourselves as emotional beings. In other words, whether people are 'angry', 'irritated', 'jealous' or 'anxious' is, in the *ontological* sense of construction, a consequence of the terms we apply to ourselves.

What is more, some of the most celebrated pieces of constructionist work have drawn specific attention to the *onto-formative* (Connell, 1995; Kosik, 1976) capacities of language. Work such as Foucault's (1981) *The History of Sexuality*, Phillipe Aries' (1962) *Centuries of Childhood* and Benedict Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* have all shown how discourse can bring into being a whole range of different phenomena that are every bit as 'real' as trees and houses. In addition, they have helped us to understand that there is no clear dividing line between words and the world or between the material and the symbolic.

Many critical realists would tend to see something like the theft of a car, for example, as consisting of two different orders of 'reality'; the car, and its removal, would be seen as belonging to the material realm whereas the act of ‘theft’ would be classified as belonging to the symbolic order (that is, it

would be seen as a constructed reality; a consequence of reading the event through a particular moral-judicial framework - see Foucault, 1977). Yet, if we think about it, the fact that a perpetrator's status as a ‘thief’ is constructed via a set of texts or discourses - including the magistrate's pronouncement and the resulting criminal 'record' - does little to diminish the damaging material effects of being so described. Those texts alone might well cost the offender a good deal of time and money. Similarly, a car is much more than just a physical hunk of machinery. For as Barthes (1973) has ably demonstrated, cars have a strong mythical quality about them; they are important symbols of status and power. Indeed, it is precisely this quality of cars, as objects of desire, that renders them so vulnerable to being stolen in the first place. We should see that the realms of the material and the symbolic are inextricably bound up with one another and that it is a pretty futile task to try to tease them apart.

Conclusions

In closing, I should repeat that the main point of this paper is to show that some of the arguments surrounding social constructionism are based upon a central misunderstanding. Contrary to the view of some critical realists, most social constructionists do not see language as the only reality. When they

travel to conferences or go on holiday, for example, they consult their map books just like everybody else. They do not suppose that, say, Nottingham appears in the middle of the M1 motorway *because* it says so on the page and neither do they imagine that it somehow springs into existence at the moment it is mentioned. The way that constructionism upsets our common sense understandings is much more subtle than this. Instead, a constructionist might point out that Nottingham is a city by virtue of a text (that is, by royal decree) and that it's boundaries - where it begins and ends - are also a matter for negotiation and agreement. The argument is not, therefore, that Nottingham doesn't really exist, but that it does so as a socially constructed reality.

My other main conclusion is that, when kept apart like this, neither the epistemic nor the ontological sense of social construction looks anything like as contentious as when they are both mixed up together. Most of us are able to accept, I think, that descriptions are seldom neutral; that they are typically purpose-built for the contexts in which they make their appearance. Likewise, I think that most people are able to appreciate how discourses can give rise to forms of social life, such as gender, class and national identity. The irony is, however, that the conflation or confusion of these two different

senses of social construction has not only fuelled countless academic arguments but, as I think we can detect in the third and fourth quotations above, it has often been exploited for rhetorical effect. What this means, of course, is that in unravelling social constructionism, not only do we take some of the heat out of many a recent academic exchange, but we may also prompt a cooling down of interest in social constructionism as a whole.

Notes:

1. In actual fact, in this article Gergen (1985) does present social constructionism as making a distinctive philosophical contribution - one of transcending the impasse between empiricist and rationalist (or, in his words, *exogenic* and *endogenic*) perspectives.

2. This is not to suggest, of course, that the realms of philosophy and common sense are in any way sealed off from one another. Indeed, it would seem that what Gergen (1985) calls the 'exogenic' perspective dominates both the metatheory of science and our common sense view of knowledge.

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