WHAT IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM?

Since the early 1980s, students of the social sciences have witnessed the gradual emergence of a number of alternative approaches to the study of human beings as social animals. These approaches have appeared under a variety of rubrics, such as ‘critical psychology’, ‘discursive psychology’, ‘discourse analysis’, ‘deconstruction’ and ‘poststructuralism’. What many of these approaches have in common, however, is what is now often referred to as ‘social constructionism’. Social constructionism can be thought of as a theoretical orientation which, to a greater or lesser degree, underpins all of these newer approaches, which are currently offering radical and critical alternatives in psychology and social psychology, as well as in other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Social constructionism, as it has been taken up by psychology and social psychology, is the focus of this book, and my aim is to introduce the reader to some of its major features, while also elaborating upon the implications it holds for how we are to understand human beings, and for the discipline of psychology itself.

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

**Is there a definition of social constructionism?**

As Craib (1997) points out, many social constructionist assumptions are actually fundamental to psychology’s disciplinary cousin, sociology, and it is a measure of the unhelpful separation of sociology and psychology since the early twentieth century that psychologists have only recently discovered social constructionist ideas. There is no single description of social constructionism that would be adequate for all the different kinds of writers who I shall refer to as social constructionist; although different writers may share some characteristics with others, there isn’t really anything that they all have in common. What links them together is a kind of ‘family resemblance’, in the sense that members of the same family differ in the family characteristics that they possess. Similarly, there is no one feature that could be said to identify a social constructionist position. Instead, we might loosely think of as social constructionist any approach that accepts one or more of the following key assumptions (from Gergen, 1985).

*A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge*

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

**Historical and cultural specificity**

The agenda of mainstream psychology is to discover universal principles of psychological functioning. It asks questions such as ‘How are attitudes formed?’, ‘Why do people behave altruistically?’ and ‘How does play influence children’s development’? The assumption underlying such questions is that we can find an answer to such questions
that applies to all people – we are discovering ‘human nature’. But social constructionism argues that the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. Whether one understands the world in terms of men and women, children and adults, urban life and rural life, etc. depends upon where and when in the world one lives. For example, the notion of childhood has undergone tremendous change over the centuries. What it has been thought ‘natural’ for children to do has changed, as well as what parents were expected to do for their children (e.g. Aries, 1962). It is only in relatively recent historical times that children have ceased to be simply small adults in all but their legal rights. And we only have to look as far back as the writings of Dickens to remind ourselves that the idea of children as innocents in need of adult protection is a very recent one indeed.

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

Looking at knowledge this way challenges the idea of scientific progress, that through science we are advancing toward a more and more accurate understanding of the physical and psychological world. Social constructionists argue that this way of thinking has led to the imposition of our own systems of knowledge upon other cultures and nations; psychology has been accused of being imperialist in its attitude toward other cultures and has colonised them, supplanting their indigenous ways of thinking with western ideas.

Knowledge is sustained by social processes

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

**Knowledge and social action go together**

These social dealings can produce a variety of possible social constructions of events. But each different construction also brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from human beings. For example, before the growth of the Temperance movement in nineteenth-century USA and Britain, a drunken person was seen as entirely responsible for their behaviour, and therefore blameworthy. A typical response was therefore imprisonment. However, the Temperance movement represented alcohol itself as the problem, turning people into addicts. There has therefore been a move toward thinking of drunkenness as a kind of illness. The alcoholic is therefore seen as not totally responsible for their behaviour, since they are the victim of a kind of drug addiction. The social action appropriate to understanding drunkenness in this way is to offer medical and psychological treatment, not punishment. Constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefore also bound up with power relations because they have implications for what it is permissible for different people to do, and how they may legitimately treat others.

**How is social constructionism different from mainstream psychology?**

If we look closely at the four broad social constructionist tenets outlined above, we can see that they contain a number of features, which are
in quite stark contrast to mainstream psychology and social psychology and which I cover in the sections that follow.

**Anti-essentialism**

The model of human beings intrinsic to mainstream psychology is a particularly individualistic one, a model that celebrates and privileges the unique, self-contained person. This individualism became part of the discipline of psychology as it developed and flourished in North America, where the individual is arguably especially valorised (see Farr, 1996).

This idea is at the heart of Floyd H. Allport’s (1924:12) familiar 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.’ Here, people are pre-existing, self-contained individuals who impact upon each other with particular social effects. Mainstream psychology, despite the many theoretical differences within it, adheres to an essentialist model of the person. Trait theory and psychoanalysis are based on the idea that there is some pre-given ‘content’ to the person, whether in terms of identifiable personality traits or the operation of inescapable psychological drives and conflicts. Within cognitive and social psychology, thoughts, memories, beliefs and attitudes are assumed to exist as psychological structures which are part of who we are and manifest themselves in our actions.

However, social constructionism argues that there are no ‘essences’ inside people that make them what they are. If the social world, including ourselves as people, is the product of social processes, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature to the world or people. It is important to stress the radical nature of the proposal being put forward here. The social constructionist argument for cultural and historical specificity is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as just another way of taking the nurture side in the ‘nature/nurture’ debate. But social constructionism is not just saying that one’s cultural surroundings have an impact upon one’s psychology, or even that our nature is a product of environmental, including social, rather than biological factors. Both of these views are essentialist, in that they see the person as having some definable and discoverable nature, whether given by biology or by the environment, and as such cannot be called social constructionist.
Social constructionism therefore opposes the essentialism of mainstream psychology. Essentialism is seen as trapping people inside personalities and identities that are restrictive and pathological, rendering psychology an even more oppressive practice. For example, if someone is described as a manic depressive and this is seen as an abiding feature of their personality, they not only face a future in which change appears unlikely but may also become subject to invasive psychiatric procedures. Essentialism also creates a tendency for psychologists to seek dispositional explanations for human behaviour, and to look for causes of behaviour in psychological states and structures rather than in social processes.

Psychology’s essentialism often takes a reductionist form. Reductionism is the practice of describing a complex phenomenon in terms of simpler or more fundamental elements, especially when this is said to provide a sufficient explanation of the phenomenon.

In principle, psychological phenomena can be subject to reductionism of two kinds, biological and social. But psychology and social psychology have tended to assume that all behaviour will eventually be explained in terms of biological mechanisms. Partly for this reason, the form that reductionism takes within psychology is most often the biological kind and the complex social and cultural conditions that inform psychological phenomena are likewise reduced. Socio-biology (for example, Wilson, 1978) attempts to explain social phenomena, such as patterns in sexual behaviour, through evolutionary, biological mechanisms. It is commonplace to encounter the idea that social inequalities and differences between women and men derive from psychological sex differences, and that these psychological differences may themselves derive from differences in hormone levels or brain structure that are said to have evolutionary origins.

But perhaps the most important current influence on psychology’s reductionism is the field of neuroscience (see Box 1.1). Advances in technology, such as the development of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), have led to a burgeoning in the study of brain structure and activity, giving rise to claims that reduce psychological phenomena to the level of brain processes. Neurological accounts of experience and behaviour are becoming commonplace in everyday discourse, such that we are ‘increasingly encouraged to understand our experiences in terms of brain chemistry and structure rather than social
practice and relations’ (Cromby, 2012b: 290–1) and Rose (2005) suggests we are becoming ‘neurochemical selves’.

The rising popularity of neuroscience within psychology is not accidental. The discipline of psychology has for various reasons wished to be regarded as a science and has therefore aligned itself with the natural sciences rather than with other social sciences such as sociology and cultural studies. The need, as perceived by governments in the UK and the USA, for a population well educated in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) has led to public funding being directed into those disciplines that can legitimately describe themselves as ‘science’. One of the consequences of such trends is that in the last UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, the research outputs of psychologists were assessed within a combined unit of Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience, and this alignment seems likely to strengthen the pull of reductionism within the discipline.

Gergen (2008) argues that biological, psychological and social levels of explanation are themselves social constructions that have historically grown within different research communities, giving rise

**Box 1.1**

Neuroscience is the scientific study of the nervous system and it is now an interdisciplinary field that has relationships with other disciplines such as chemistry, computer science, linguistics, philosophy and psychology. Neuroscience studies many aspects of the nervous system, from its molecular and cellular structure to its evolution and functions. It has flourished in recent times due to advances in technology, and neuroscientists are now able to examine in detail the activity within a single neuron as well as using imaging to study brain activity during sensory and motor tasks.

Cognitive neuroscience is a branch of both psychology and neuroscience and relates to the study of the neural bases of behaviour. It aims to map the functions of various parts of the brain in relation to cognitive processes, using methods such experiments and electrophysiology. Its research often involves studies of patients with cognitive deficits due to brain injury.
to problematic dualisms such as individual/society and mind/body, which then present difficult questions about how the two sides of each pair relate to each other.

**Questioning realism**

Social constructionism denies that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality. Instead, as a culture or society we construct our own versions of reality between us. Since we have to accept the historical and cultural relativism of all forms of knowledge, it follows that the notion of ‘truth’ becomes problematic. Within social constructionism there can be no such thing as an objective fact. All knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others. For example, I may say that my dining room table is made of excellent wood. Someone else may say that it is of contemporary design, and yet another may comment that it is too small to be practical. None of these statements is the truth about the table, and each description is driven by a different concern – quality, style or practicality. The search for the truth about people, human nature and society has been at the heart of social science, and social constructionism therefore heralds a radically different model of what it could mean to do social science. The social constructionist critique of mainstream psychology centres upon reminding psychology that its own grasp on the world is necessarily partial. It is partial both in the sense of being only one way of seeing the world among many potential ways and in the sense of reflecting vested interests. Although social constructionism is generally suspicious of realist claims, some social constructionists embrace a form of realism known as critical realism (see Chapter 5).

**Historical and cultural specificity of knowledge**

If all forms of knowledge are historically and culturally specific, this must include the knowledge generated by the social sciences. The theories and explanations of psychology thus become time- and culture-bound and cannot be taken as final descriptions of human nature. There are numerous emotional states recognised and experienced by people in non-western cultures that just do not translate into western labels (Stearns, 1995). For example, for the Japanese, *amae* refers to a feeling of ‘sweet dependence’ on another person. The
disciplines of psychology and social psychology can therefore no longer be about discovering the true nature of people and social life. They must instead turn their attention to a historical study of the emergence of current forms of psychological and social life, and to the social practices by which they are created.

Language as a pre-condition for thought

Social constructionism argues that our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present. We are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the people in our culture already exist. We do not each conveniently happen to find existing categories of thought appropriate for the expression of our experiences. For example, if I say that I prefer to wear clothes that are fashionable rather than out-dated, it is the concept of fashion that provides the basis for my experienced preference. Concepts and categories are acquired by each person as they develop the use of language and are thus reproduced every day by everyone who shares a culture and a language. This means that the way a person thinks, the very categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning for them, are provided by the language that they use. Language therefore is a necessary pre-condition for thought. The relationship between thought and language has been the focus of a long-standing debate in psychology. For our purposes, a significant difference exists between the positions adopted by Piaget and by Whorf (1941). Piaget believed that the child must develop concepts to some degree before verbal labels could be given to these, but Whorf argued that a person’s native language determines the way they think and perceive the world. Mainstream psychology tacitly assumes that language is a more or less straightforward expression of thought, rather than a pre-condition of it. Rather than viewing language as a route to internal psychological states, such as emotions or attitudes, social constructionism sees language as one of the principal means by which we construct our social and psychological worlds.

Language as a form of social action

By placing centre stage the everyday interactions between people in the production of knowledge, it follows that language has to be more
than simply a way of expressing ourselves. When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed. Our use of language can therefore be thought of as a form of action, and some social constructionists take this ‘performative’ role of language as their main interest. Mainstream psychology has typically regarded language as the passive vehicle for our internal states. Social constructionism challenges this, because language has practical consequences for people that should be acknowledged. For example, when a judge says ‘I sentence you to four years’ imprisonment’ or when a priest says ‘I pronounce you man and wife’, certain practical consequences, restrictions and obligations ensue.

_A focus on interaction and social practices_

Mainstream psychology looks for explanations of social phenomena inside the person, for example by hypothesising the existence of attitudes, motivations, cognitions and so on. These entities are held to be responsible for what individual people do and say, as well as for wider social phenomena such as prejudice and criminality. Social constructionism regards as the proper focus of our enquiry the social practices engaged in by people, and their interactions with each other. For example, a child with a learning difficulty is pathologised by mainstream psychology by locating the difficulty within the psychology of the child. The social constructionist would challenge this by looking at how the learning difficulty is a construction that emerges through the interactions between the child, its teachers and others. Social constructionism therefore re-locates problems away from the pathologised, essentialist sphere of mainstream psychology.

_A focus on processes_

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

**Where did social constructionism come from?**

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

**Philosophical influences**

The cultural and intellectual backcloth against which social constructionism has taken shape, and which to some extent gives it its particular flavour, is what is usually referred to as postmodernism (see Hollinger, 1994 for a discussion of postmodernism in the social sciences). Postmodernism as an intellectual movement has its centre of gravity not in the social sciences but in art and architecture, literature and cultural studies. It represents a questioning and rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism, the intellectual movement that preceded it, generating much argument and debate.

In many ways it embodies the assumptions underlying intellectual and artistic life that have been around since the time of the Enlightenment, which dates from about the mid eighteenth century. The Enlightenment project was to understand the true nature of reality through the application of reason and rationality. This is in sharp contrast to the mediaeval period, in which the church was the sole arbiter of truth; it was not the responsibility of individual human beings to enquire or to make decisions about the nature of life and morality. Science, as the antidote to the dogma of the mediaeval period, was born in the Enlightenment period. The philosopher Immanuel Kant was an advocate of ‘Enlightenment’, and saw the motto of this project as ‘Sapere aude!’—have courage to use your own understanding. He argued that all matters should be subject to publicity and debate. The individual person, rather than God and the church, became the focus.
for issues of truth and morality. It was now up to individuals to make
judgements, based on objective, scientific evidence, about what reality
was like and therefore what were appropriate moral rules for humans
to live by.

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

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

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

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

**Sociological influences**

Despite their differences, Kant, Nietzsche and Marx held in common the view that knowledge is at least in part a product of human thought rather than grounded in an external reality. A number of sociologists took up this theme in the early twentieth century in the form of the sociology of knowledge. They were concerned with how sociocultural forces construct knowledge and the kind of knowledge they construct, and were initially focused on concepts such as ideology and false consciousness.
But a major and more recent contribution with its roots in the sociology of knowledge is Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) book *The Social Construction of Reality*. This book draws on the sub-discipline of symbolic interactionism, which began with the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) at the University of Chicago. Fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the view that people construct their own and others’ identities through their everyday encounters with each other in social interaction. In line with this, the sociological sub-discipline of ethnomethodology, which grew up in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, tried to understand the processes by which ordinary people construct social life and make sense of it to themselves and each other.

Berger and Luckmann’s account of social life argues that human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices. Berger and Luckmann show how the world can be socially constructed by the social practices of people but at the same time experienced by them as if the nature of their world is pre-given and fixed (see Chapter 9 for more details of Berger and Luckmann’s theory). We could say that social constructionism itself has become ‘real’, one of many theories that seem to just ‘exist’. But in writing this book and ostensibly describing it I am actually contributing to its construction. Nevertheless, in the future those who read this and other books about social constructionism will tend to think of it as an area of knowledge that has been discovered rather than as an effect of social processes. In writing this book, then, I am contributing to what might be called ‘the social construction of social constructionism’.

*The turn to language and the ‘crisis’ in social psychology*

In psychology, the emergence of social constructionism is usually dated from Gergen’s (1973) paper ‘Social psychology as history’ in which he argues that all knowledge, including psychological knowledge, is historically and culturally specific; we therefore must look beyond the individual and enquire into social, political and economic realms for a proper understanding of the evolution of present-day psychology and social life. He argues that it is pointless to look for final descriptions of people or society, since the only abiding feature of psychological and social life is that it is continually changing. Social psychology thus
becomes a form of historical undertaking, since all we can ever do is to try to understand and account for how the world appears to be at the present time.

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

Social psychologists in the 1960s and early 1970s were becoming increasingly concerned about the way that the discipline implicitly promoted the values of dominant groups. The ‘voice’ of ordinary people was seen as absent from its research practices, which, in their concentration on de-contextualised laboratory behaviour, ignored the real-world contexts that give human action its meaning. A number of publications tried to redress the balance, by proposing alternatives to positivist science, focussing upon the accounts of ordinary people and challenging the oppressive and ideological uses of psychology (e.g. Brown, 1973; Armistead, 1974). While Gergen was writing in America, in the UK Harré and Secord (1972) were arguing for a new vision of the science of psychology, based upon the view that people are ‘conscious social actors, capable of controlling their performances and commenting intelligently upon them’ (preface). They therefore opposed the positivist, experimentalist tradition in social psychology and saw people as skilled social practitioners who are able to reflect and comment upon their own activity.

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

**What kinds of psychology can be called social constructionist?**

One of the biggest difficulties in presenting an account of varieties of social constructionism is the wide range of terms that are used by writers and researchers to describe their work. It would be wrong to suggest that there exist coherent and identifiable types of social constructionism; indeed, Billig (2012) points to the intellectual losses incurred as the boundaries around disciplines and sub-disciplines harden. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this book some broad-brush characterisations are necessary. In the following account I have chosen terms that some may feel are misleading, but I have tried to explain, where appropriate, the reasons for my choice.

**Critical psychology/critical social psychology**

As Danziger (1997) points out, the most obvious feature of the relationship between social constructionism and mainstream psychology is that social constructionism functions as critique, and this critique is in part a continuation of the ‘crisis’ debates in social psychology. There is now a considerable literature that has come to be termed critical psychology (Fox et al., 2009; Hook, 2004, 2012; Parker, 2002; Sloan, 2000; Stainton Rogers et al., 1995) and critical social psychology (Gough et al., 2013; Hepburn, 2003a; Ibáñez and Iñiguez, 1997; Tuffin, 2005). Critical psychology and social psychology look at how the individual is located within society in relation to difference, inequality and power and provide alternative readings of a range of psychological phenomena, such as mental illness, intelligence, personality theory, aggression and sexuality. Critical psychologists are politically oriented, focus on issues of exploitation and oppression, and are concerned to bring about social change in the form of emancipation and social justice. For example, a key development has been in ‘postcolonial’ critical psychology (see Hook, 2012), which aims to problematize the discourses that help to maintain and legitimate
disadvantaged Third World countries. In particular, it attends to the situation of those who have in the past been subjugated and dominated by colonialism, often suffering diaspora and displacement.

Critical psychologists are especially critical of the assumptions and practices of mainstream psychology itself, where this is considered to be exploitative and oppressive. They have attended to the numerous ways in which the discipline of psychology may be said to operate ideologically, having far-reaching and powerful effects upon the lives of people whose own voices are silenced. Through its status as a science it has presented as ‘truth’ representations of people that serve to legitimate the inequalities of contemporary social arrangements. For example, through ‘sex differences’ research psychology has promoted the popular idea that women and men are different kinds of people and therefore suited to different roles in society; through its measurement and testing programme and through its diagnostic classification system it has set norms for intelligence, personality and behaviour based on white, male middle-class norms and values and has pathologised people whose behaviour and experience lie outside of these prescriptions.

Although some critical psychologists build their critique upon social constructionist principles, others have arrived at critical psychology through alternative theoretical routes and may draw more upon ideology, Marxism or various forms of feminism. So, although much critical psychology can be said to be social constructionist in spirit, some critical psychologists would not necessarily refer to themselves as social constructionists. For some critical psychologists and social psychologists the political agenda is less explicit and they are critical in the sense of raising awareness of the assumptions underlying the theory and practice of social psychology.

**Discursive psychology**

The focus on social interaction and language as forms of social action and characteristic features of social constructionism has been placed centre stage by those who have in recent times come to refer to themselves as ‘discursive psychologists’, particularly within a UK context (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Harré and Stearns, 1995; Potter and Edwards, 2001). Discursive psychology shares the radically anti-
essentialist view of the person of social constructionism, and in particular it denies that language is a representation of, or route to, internal states or cognitions such as attitudes, beliefs, emotions and memories (e.g. Antaki, 2006; Edwards and Potter, 2005; Harré, 1995a; Harré and Gillett, 1994). Discursive psychology does not necessarily try to deny the existence of such states; rather than debating the existence or nature of such things, it ‘brackets’ this issue. Potter says:

I am certainly not trying to answer ontological questions about what sort of things exist. The focus is upon the way people construct descriptions as factual, and how others undermine those constructions. This does not require an answer to the philosophical question of what factuality is.

(Potter, 1996a: 6)

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

Discursive psychologists have applied this understanding of the constructive, performative use of language to a number of psychological phenomena, thereby challenging the mainstream understanding of these. Examples include memory (Shotter, 1990; Edwards and Potter, 1995), emotion (Edwards, 1997; Hepburn, 2004; Nikander, 2007; Wetherell, 2012), attribution (Edwards and Potter, 1993; Sneijder and te Molder, 2005), attitudes and beliefs (Puchta and Potter, 2004), stress (Hepburn and Brown, 2001) and learning disability (Mehan, 1996/2001). The action orientation of discursive psychology therefore transforms mainstream psychology’s concern with the nature of phenomena into a concern with how these are performed by people. Thus memory, emotion and other psychological phenomena become things we do rather than things we have. Some psychologists taking a discursive approach have gone beyond analysing the accounting practices of interactants to an examination of how these may be intimately related to the power of ideologies in society, for example, sexism (Edley and Wetherell, 1995) and nationalism (Billig, 1995).
Deconstructionism and Foucauldian discourse analysis

Deconstructionism draws on the work of poststructuralist French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the term ‘deconstruction’ was introduced by Derrida. Deconstructionism originated in disciplines outside of psychology and therefore cannot strictly be considered a form of it. But it has been heavily drawn upon by psychologists adopting a macro social constructionist approach (see below) and to this extent has infiltrated psychological research and theory.

Deconstructionism emphasises the constructive power of language as a system of signs rather than the constructive work of the individual person. It is concerned with how the human subject becomes constructed through the structures of language and through ideology. The central concept here is the ‘text’:

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

(Denzin, 1995: 52)

In terms of the features of social constructionism outlined above, its focus is upon the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge and the relationship between such knowledge and its implications for power and social action. The different approaches that share this broad concern really don’t appear under a generic title in the social constructionist literature. Although deconstruction as a method of analysis is often associated with the historical development of discursive psychology (see Potter, 1996a), its research application today often appears under the rubric of ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’ (see Willig, 2001) and is often associated with a concern to identify the ideological and power effects of discourse.

Foucault argued that the way people talk about and think about, for example, sexuality and mental illness, and the way they are widely represented in society, brings implications for the way we treat people. Our representations entail particular kinds of power relations. For example, as a society we think of people who hear voices as mentally
ill and refer them to psychiatrists and psychologists who then have power over many aspects of their lives. Foucault referred to such representations as ‘discourses’, since he saw them as constituted by and operating through language and other symbolic systems. Our ways of talking about and representing the world through written texts, pictures and images all constitute the discourses through which we experience the world. It is the structures of our socially shared language that are seen as producing phenomena at both the social and personal levels. The way that discourses construct our experience can be examined by ‘deconstructing’ these texts, taking them apart and showing how they work to present us with a particular vision of the world, and thus enabling us to challenge it. Examples of the critical use of deconstruction include Parker et al. (1995), Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network (1999) and Wodak (1996). Today, such work is more likely to be carried out under the rubric of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see Chapter 8).

Constructivisms

Readers may become confused by the fact that the term ‘constructivism’ is sometimes used to refer to theoretical approaches that seem to share fundamental assumptions with social constructionism. Constructivism is sometimes used to refer to Piagetian theory and to the theory of perception associated with Bruner (see Bruner and Goodman, 1947) and Gregory (1970), but in the current context readers may encounter it in the form of perspectives that, in one way or another, see the person as actively engaged in the creation of their own phenomenal world (see Raskin, 2006). The contrast being made by such approaches is usually with the view that things and events have an essential nature or meaning that then impacts upon the person in some predictable manner, and that perception is a matter of internalising an accurate representation of the world. Much of mainstream psychology fits this description, including behaviourism, psychoanalytic theory and evolutionary psychology. Constructivist psychologies, by contrast, argue that each person perceives the world differently and actively creates their own meanings from events. The ‘real’ world is therefore a different place for each of us. This is the stance of ‘radical constructivism’ (von Glasersfeld, 1981), which assumes a Kantian distinction between an individualised phenomenal world and an unknowable real world.
A similar position is espoused by Kelly (1955) in his personal construct psychology (PCP). Kelly argues that, through the course of our myriad social interactions and relations with others, each of us develops a system of dimensions of meaning, or ‘constructs’. We perceive the world in terms of these constructs and our actions, although never predictable, can be understood in the light of our construal of the world. Everyone construes the world in their own idiosyncratic way, although by virtue of being a member of a society, culture or social group much of our construing is inevitably shared with others. PCP rejects the idea that there is any pre-given or determined content to the person. It therefore stands in contrast to all other psychologies that theorise the existence of internal cognitive states, drives, emotions, motivations, traits or developmental stages that determine our experience and/or behaviour. It is a ‘content-less’ psychology in which the only fundamental and key process in human functioning is the project of meaning-making. The power of this constructivist position is that we have the capacity to change our own constructions of the world and thereby to create new possibilities for our own action, although this process is often difficult and challenging. Similarly, narrative psychology (Andrews, 2014; Crossley, 2000; Gergen and Gergen, 1984, 1986; László, 2008; Sarbin, 1986) argues that we tell each other and ourselves stories that powerfully shape our possibilities.

The essential difference between such constructivisms and social constructionism are twofold: in the extent to which the individual is seen as an agent who is in control of this construction process, and in the extent to which our constructions are the product of social forces, either structural or interactional. I will say more about the potential of PCP to contribute to a social constructionist psychology in Chapter 9.

The critique of mainstream psychology

The reader will by now be in no doubt that social constructionism positions itself in opposition to the assumptions of mainstream psychology and has been a severe critic of it. But, as Danziger (1997) points out, in this sense social constructionism paradoxically ‘needs’ the mainstream. There is therefore something of a tension around the extent to which social constructionist theory and research is able to generate its own theoretical and research programmes, as opposed to maintaining a kind of guerilla warfare upon mainstream psychology.
from the margins of the discipline. For some (e.g. Parker, 1999, 2002; Parker et al., 1995) the primary aim is to use social constructionism to subvert the more damaging or oppressive aspects of mainstream psychology. Social constructionism has been adopted in a variety of ways by those wishing to challenge oppressive and discriminatory practices in, for example, gender and sexuality, disability and race.

Such a critical stance may suggest the conclusion that the huge body of work currently constituting the mainstream discipline should be disregarded as a misleading representation of humanity, or that psychologists should no longer engage in the kind of empirical research characteristic of the mainstream. However a commitment to social constructionist principles does not necessarily lead to this conclusion, and Gergen (2009b) defends the continued usefulness of mainstream research for a variety of purposes. But the problem lies particularly in the stance that psychologists, of whatever persuasion, take towards the issues of truth and reality. Drawing on the key assumptions outlined above, social constructionists argue that we need to adopt a sceptical stance towards all truth claims (including our own). We therefore need to exercise caution when interpreting research findings, being careful to consider the cultural and historical context of our research and any political or ideological interests it may serve and thus how it may function to disadvantage or misrepresent certain people or groups.

It is the general absence of such reflectiveness in mainstream psychological research that renders its findings potentially problematic. A good example is the re-interpretation of ‘bystander intervention’ research provided by Cherry (1995). Cherry takes a fresh look at the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964, an event which prompted research into bystander intervention in the 1960s and 1970s. As I have described elsewhere (Burr, 2002, 2012), Cherry places this event within its cultural, racial and gendered context. Whereas bystander research has typically presented its findings as illustrating general principles of social behaviour, Cherry re-frames it within the social problem of violence towards women.

This does not mean that the findings of mainstream research on bystander intervention (or anything else) are ‘wrong’, but, as Gergen (2008) suggests, it does mean that all researchers can improve the social relevance of their work by fully acknowledging the kinds of social and cultural contextual features that generations of laboratory experimenters have taken pains to eliminate as ‘contaminating variables’.
Differences and debates in social constructionism

Research focus

As indicated above, there exist at present two major forms of social constructionist theory and research, the first focussing upon the micro structures of language use in interaction and the second focussing upon the role of more macro linguistic and social structures in framing our social and psychological life. Danziger (1997) characterises this difference as ‘light’ versus ‘dark’ social constructionism, emphasising the more ‘hopeful’ message implicit in the idea that people construct themselves and each other during interaction (rather than being outcomes of ‘dark’ social forces). These terms may be seen as preferable to, for example, ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ constructionism, which may imply that one form is more fragile. However, it has been argued that ‘dark’ and ‘light’ also carry negative connotations (Burman, 1999). At the risk of introducing further confusion into the literature, I am going to adopt the terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ social constructionism to refer to these two broad approaches. The most prominent representatives of micro and macro social constructionism may be said to be discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis respectively. Confusingly, both kinds of research may be referred to as ‘discourse analysis’, although much work within discursive psychology in the UK has now moved towards the adoption of conversation analysis (CA) (see Chapter 8) as a research method and often appears under this rubric rather than ‘discourse analysis’.

Micro social constructionism

As outlined above, this sees social construction taking place within everyday discourse between people in interaction. For micro social constructionism, multiple versions of the world are potentially available through this constructive work, and there is no sense in which one can be said to be more real or true than others; the text of this discourse is the only reality we have access to – we cannot make claims about a real world that exists beyond our descriptions of it. All truth claims are thus undermined, giving rise to a keen scepticism in line with the first of the definitive characteristics of social constructionism outlined above. If power is referred to, it is seen as an effect of
discourse, for example, an effect of being able to ‘warrant voice’ (Gergen, 1989) in interaction. Micro social constructionism includes, in the USA, the work of Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter. Gergen focuses upon the constructive force of interaction, stressing the relational embeddedness of individual thought and action (Gergen, 1994, 2009a, 2009b; Gergen and Gergen, 2012). In a similar vein, Shotter takes the conversation as his model, emphasising the dynamic, interpersonal processes of construction, which he calls ‘joint action’ (Shotter, 1993a, 1993b), a term borrowed from the symbolic interactionist Blumer. Both Gergen and Shotter have developed their work using the concept of ‘dialogue’, with a particular concern with how this may help us understand conflict. In the UK, those sharing an emphasis on discourse in interaction include a number of discursive psychologists (many of them using CA as their method of choice), including Jonathan Potter, Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, Charles Antaki, Alexa Hepburn and Michael Billig (although Billig’s work goes beyond a concern with micro processes, as it incorporates the concept of ideology). The work of discursive psychology, particularly where it uses CA as the method of analysis, focuses mainly on the analysis of naturally occurring interactions in order to reveal the rhetorical devices that people use to achieve their interactional goals.

Macro social constructionism

Macro social constructionism acknowledges the constructive power of language but sees this as derived from, or at least bound up with, material or social structures, social relations and institutionalised practices. The concept of power is therefore at the heart of this form of social constructionism. Macro social constructionism is particularly influenced by the work of Foucault (1972, 1976, 1979) and has been used by Rose (1990, 1999) to show how notions such as ‘science’ and ‘the individual’ have been socially constructed. The principal form it takes today is CDA, which is particularly associated with the work of Norman Fairclough in the UK (Fairclough, 1995). Macro social constructionism has also been attractive to some writers interested in feminist analyses of power. Feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) was developed by Judith Baxter (Baxter, 2003), drawing on the work of Weedon (1997). FPDA analyses the ways in which speakers are ‘positioned’ (see Chapter 6) by different and often competing
discourses. Since their focus is on issues of power, macro social constructionists are especially interested in analysing various forms of social inequality, such as gender, race and ethnicity, disability and mental health, with a view to challenging these through research and practice.

Macro and micro versions of social constructionism should not be seen as mutually exclusive; there is no reason in principle why they should not be brought together in a synthesis. Danziger (1997) has argued that this is where most further reflection is needed in social constructionism, and Wetherell (1998) argued that in our research we need to take account of both the situated nature of accounts as well as the institutional practices and social structures within which they are constructed. Some writers have attempted such syntheses (e.g. Burkitt, 1999; Burr and Butt, 2000; Davies and Harré, 1990) and a variety of more recent publications have attempted to bring into discursive psychology some consideration of the concerns that are more central to macro social constructionism. These have focussed on a synthesis of discursive psychology with conceptual tools such as critical realism (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007), ideology (Gibson, 2009) and subject positions (Reynolds et al., 2007), the latter under the label of ‘critical discursive psychology’.

**The realism/relativism debate**

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

Although the tenets of social constructionism appear to lead automatically to a relativist position, some (principally macro social constructionists, and those adopting a critical realist perspective) have resisted this and have maintained some concept of a reality existing
outside of discourse and texts (e.g. Cromby and Nightingale, 1999; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007; Willig, 1999a). One reason for this has been the problematic nature of morality and political action that ensues from a relativist position. If all accounts of the world are equally valid, then we appear deprived of defensible grounds for our moral choices and political allegiances. Discursive psychology has been criticised on the grounds of its relativism, with the charge that it therefore becomes politically impotent and ineffective in terms of applications. However, many discursive psychologists reject this criticism. For example, Kitzinger and Frith (1999) and Wetherell (2012) have argued that CA and discursive psychology respectively are compatible with feminism.

Other reasons include the inadequacy of discursive accounts of the material body and embodied subjectivity (e.g. Burr, 1999; Harré, 1995b; Nightingale, 1999; Shilling, 2003; Shotter, 2012). Those taking up a relativist stance as well as those adopting a more critical realist viewpoint have both made defensible arguments regarding the moral and political implications of these positions, and these will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5.

Agency, determinism and the self

Closely related to, but not completely mapping on to, the distinction between micro and macro versions of social constructionism is the issue of personal agency. The emphasis upon the constructive work of individuals in interaction that is the focus of the micro approach implicitly affords us personal agency. Accounts must be constructed to suit occasions and are crafted in such a way as to further the speaker’s current agenda. Macro social constructionism tends towards the ‘death of the subject’ (a term associated with the work of Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers) where the person can be conceptualised only as the outcome of discursive and societal structures. The implication of this latter view is that individual persons, either alone or collectively, have no capacity to bring about change. However, it is also true that neither form of constructionism allows the vision of personal agency seen in mainstream psychology, since both would deny that structures such as beliefs, values or attitudes exist as part of our intra-psychic make-up, forming the basis for our action.

Both forms of social constructionism clearly reject mainstream psychological conceptions of the person, but have generally not
replaced these with alternatives. This means that the traditional subject matter of psychology – subjective experience and behaviour, and what we think of as ‘the self’– have not only been problematised by social constructionism but also largely omitted from its theorising. The absence of the self and subjectivity from social constructionist thinking is now beginning to be addressed by some social constructionists, and I discuss these issues in more depth in Chapter 9.

Research methods

All the forms of social constructionism outlined above agree on the constructive force of language, and it is therefore the analysis of language and other symbolic forms that is at the heart of social constructionist research methods. It would be a mistake to suggest that there are particular research methods that are intrinsically social constructionist; social constructionist research simply makes different assumptions about its aims and about the nature and status of the data collected. However, the insistence of social constructionism upon the importance of the social meaning of accounts and other texts often leads logically to the use of qualitative methods as the research tools of choice. In practice this has often been the analysis of interview transcripts, recordings of naturally occurring conversations and other texts of various kinds. But the specific requirements of a social constructionist approach to such work have led to the development of a range of methods of analysis referred to as discourse analysis. Confusingly, exactly what is meant by discourse analysis depends upon the particular theoretical and research orientation of the writer. I will elaborate on some of these differences in Chapter 8.

Plan of the book

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

Chapter 3 deals with the claim that it is language that provides the framework for the kinds of thought that are possible for us, and also
with the performative role of language. I will explore the view that our descriptions and accounts of events have consequences in the world and that language is therefore a site of struggle.

In Chapter 4, I look at the Foucauldian concept of discourse and the relationship between discourse, knowledge and power. I will look at Foucault’s notion of ‘disciplinary power’, in which we are thought to be effectively controlled through our own self-monitoring processes, and its implications for mainstream psychology.

The problematic nature of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ is explored in Chapter 5. The claim that ‘nothing exists outside the text’ often provokes the reaction that social constructionism is clearly fanciful. Such questions go right to the heart of debates in social constructionism about the status of the real and the material world, and in this chapter I outline the nature of the issues that have fuelled the realism–relativism debate and indicate the extent to which I think that the disagreements are capable of resolution. The heat in the debate between realism and relativism has largely been generated by concern over morality and politics, and I explore the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of this debate.

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

Chapter 8 looks at some of the research approaches developed and adopted in social constructionist research. After examining theoretical and methodological issues, such as objectivity, value-freedom and reflexivity, I go on to describe some of the methods that have been used. Using brief examples of real research studies, I look at the aims and methods of analysis of six approaches: conversation analysis; discursive psychology; interpretative repertoires; Foucauldian discourse analysis; critical discourse analysis; and narrative analysis.

Although throughout the book I will point out some of the limitations of and difficulties with different forms of social constructionism,
it is in the final chapter that I discuss these in more depth and put forward my own views. This discussion focuses upon the nature of subjectivity, the psychology of the person and the need for a concept of self, as well as the need to transcend the various dualisms that have haunted both mainstream psychology and social constructionism.

**A word about words**

Perhaps more so than other areas of social science, social constructionism abounds with words and phrases that may be unfamiliar, and their meaning may be hard to grasp at first. In reading more advanced social constructionist material, people are often confused by the terms they meet and some of what is written is, I would argue, unnecessarily difficult and obscure. To make matters worse, the same terms are often used by different writers to mean different things, so that it is sometimes impossible to come up with a definitive account of what a term means. This is partly because, as work in this field has accumulated and progressed, lines of theory and research have splintered and the thinking of individual theorists and researchers has also changed over time.

At the time of writing the first edition of this book, the terms ‘social constructionism’ and ‘discourse analysis’ were sufficient to describe the field to the newcomer. Today, we meet not only these but ‘discursive psychology’, ‘critical discursive psychology’, ‘critical discourse analysis’ and other terms and, to aid confusion, the distinctions and differences between these variants are not always clear or easy to grasp. In this book I have done my best to explain the meaning of terms that I think may be new to readers coming from mainstream social science, particularly psychological, backgrounds. As mentioned above, I will use the terms macro and micro social constructionism to refer to the two broad approaches to theory and research that I have outlined, but will also use specific terms such as ‘discursive psychology’ and ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’ where these are more appropriate in particular contexts. To aid readers in their struggle for understanding, I have provided a brief glossary of common terms at the back of the book.