An Introduction to Social Constructionism

An Introduction to Social Constructionism is a readable and critical account of social constructionism for students new to the field.

Focussing on the challenge to psychology that social constructionism poses, Vivien Burr examines the notion of 'personality' to illustrate the rejection of essentialism by social constructionists. This questions psychology's traditional understanding of the person. She then shows how the study of language can be used as a focus for our understanding of human behaviour and experience. This is continued by examining 'discourses' and their role in constructing social phenomena, and the relationship between discourse and power. However, the problems associated with these analyses are also clearly outlined.

Many people believe that one of the aims of social science should be to bring about social change. Vivien Burr analyses what possibilities there might be for change in social constructionist accounts. She also addresses what social constructionism means in practice to research in the social sciences, and includes some guidelines on doing discourse analysis.

An Introduction to Social Constructionism is an invaluable and clear guide for all perplexed students who want to begin to understand this difficult area.

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An Introduction to Social Constructionism

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London and New York
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This book is for students. As a lecturer teaching social psychology to Behavioural Sciences undergraduates, I have in recent years attempted to include in my teaching something of what I shall call the social constructionist movement within social psychology. This has proved to be a difficult task, partly because of the inherent difficulty of the subject matter, but also because of the dearth of reading material appropriate to the needs of students coming to social constructionist ideas for the first time. Although there exist a number of excellent books written from a social constructionist perspective (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Weedon, 1987; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b; Parker, 1992), for the most part these appear to be written by academics for other academics. This book, then, is an attempt to redress the balance. Its primary aim is to introduce social constructionist ideas to social sciences students so that they may then be in a position to read and understand more advanced material. To this end, I have tried to explain the key concepts and terms clearly and simply, and have used illustrative examples as much as possible in order to help students gain a foothold in what may be to them quite alien territory. To guide students in their choice of more advanced reading, I have provided a short, annotated reading list at the end of each chapter. Sometimes it was an arbitrary decision whether to recommend a book or journal article in an earlier or a later chapter, and sometimes I have done both.

I believe that it is not possible to write about something in a completely impartial and dispassionate way, that is, taking up no personal stance at all with respect to the subject matter (and as it happens this itself appears to be consistent with a social constructionist view). One must (even if only to engage the
interest of one's readers) decide whether one is on the whole an advocate or a critic of the material one is writing about. In writing this book, I have generally adopted the position of the advocate, so that my overall strategy has been to persuade the reader of the advantages of a social constructionist approach. However, this is not an uncritical advocacy, and a second major aim of this book is to point out the weaknesses, inadequacies and dangers of social constructionism and to indicate the areas where I believe there is still much to be resolved. As one who has as yet no history of publication or research in this area, I feel myself to be particularly free of axes to grind and reputations to defend, and therefore able to advocate and criticise with relative impugnity.

As an introductory text, some may feel that my account of social constructionism is somewhat idiosyncratic. However, while it may not be the story that another person would have told, I justify it on the grounds, firstly, that it concerns itself with social constructionist viewpoints that I believe students are likely to meet up with in their excursions into the literature, and, secondly, that it reflects the questions (built into the chapter titles) most commonly raised by students. Although the book is British in its emphasis, drawing examples from issues and everyday life in the UK and highlighting the debates current in British social constructionist writing, it brings together both British and North American contributions under a common umbrella. With respect to the illustrative examples that I use, I have endeavoured to render them meaningful to the North American reader.

Social constructionism is in a state of flux. It is a field of enquiry which is changing and expanding very rapidly, and it is therefore quite difficult to gain a stable perspective on the issues. This book is a 'snapshot' of what the social constructionist world looks like to me at present, and, like any snapshot, it is a likeness that is recognisable without passing itself off as the only true image. I hope that you find it useful.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all those who have suffered during the birth of this book. In particular, special recognition is due to Trevor Butt, who tirelessly read and commented upon earlier drafts, and to my great friend, Katrine Ellerd-Styles, who helped me to elaborate my ideas during many telephone conversations and still managed to remain full of enthusiasm and support. My thanks are also due to Dallas Cliff for readily providing me with some of his own material, and for his commitment to this project. And, bringing up the rear in this motley troupe, I must include my musical friend Geoff Adams for once again giving up his free time to prepare both indexes.

June 1994
Introduction

What is social constructionism?

Over the last fifteen years or so, students of the social sciences in Britain and North America 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’, ‘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 as an initial orientation for 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. It is quite possible that I will be guilty of labelling as ‘social constructionist’ writers who would not wish to be labelled as such, and vice versa. I apologise in advance to those who feel uncomfortable with my description of
them, but must adopt the rationale which appears to me to make sense of the area. I shall use the term 'social constructionism', rather than 'constructivism', throughout. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but Gergen (1985) recommends the use of 'constructionism', since 'constructivism' is sometimes used to refer to Piagetian theory and to a particular kind of perceptual theory, and could cause confusion.

I will then go on to outline something of the history of the social constructivist movement, especially as it has been taken up by social psychology. As we shall see, social constructionism as an approach to the social sciences draws its influences from a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and linguistics, making it multidisciplinary in nature.

Finally, I shall raise the major issues that will be addressed by this book, indicating the chapters where they will be dealt with.

**IS THERE A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM?**

There is no single description which would be adequate for all the different kinds of writer whom I shall refer to as social constructionist. This is because, although different writers may share some characteristics with others, there is not really anything that they all have in common. What links them all together is a kind of 'family resemblance' (this is what Rosch (1973) meant by 'prototypes' or 'fuzzy sets'). Members of the same family differ in the family characteristics that they share. Mother and daughter may have the typical 'Smith nose', while father and son may have inherited from grandma Smith, who also has the Smith nose, their prominent ears. Cousin George may share the prominent ears, and also, like his aunt Harriet, have the Smith thick, curly hair. There is no one characteristic born by all members of the Smith family, but there are enough recurrent features shared amongst different family members to identify the people as basically belonging to the same family group. This is the model I shall adopt for social constructionism. There is no one feature which could be said to identify a social constructionist position. Instead, we might loosely group as social constructionist any approach which has at its foundation one or more of the following key assumptions (from Gergen, 1985). You might think of these as something like 'things you would absolutely have to believe in order to be a social constructionist':

1 A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge:

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including 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 is therefore in opposition to what are referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science – 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 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. Our observations of the world suggest to us that there are two categories of human being – men and women. Social constructionism would bid us to question seriously whether even this category is 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 should ask why this distinction has been given so much importance by human beings that whole categories of personhood (i.e. man/woman) have been built upon it. 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.

2 Historical and cultural specificity:

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, pop music and classical music, urban life and
rural life, past and future, 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. We can see changes even within the timespan of the last fifty years or so, with radical consequences for how parents are advised to bring up their children.

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 seen as products of that culture and history, and are 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.

3 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, and particularly 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. Therefore what we regard as ‘truth’ (which of course varies historically and cross-culturally), i.e. our current accepted ways of understanding the world, is 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.

individual’ have been socially constructed. The historical and cultural relativity of knowledge, and the way that ‘truth’ claims are constructed, have been taken up with enthusiasm by those who wish to give psychology a political cutting edge, such as Kitzinger (Kitzinger, 1987, 1989), Parker, Burman (e.g. Burman, 1990) and Walkerdine (e.g. Walkerdine, 1984). I also include as ‘social constructionists’ writers such as Potter, Wetherell, Edwards and Billig, some of whom prefer to call themselves ‘discourse psychologists’. I include them since they are concerned primarily with the performative, action-oriented function of language and see accounts as constructed to achieve particular social goals, rather than representing and expressing intra-psychic events (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Billig, 1987; Billig et al., 1988). In addition, these writers in one sense hold an extreme social constructionist view. They argue that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, i.e. that when we talk about ‘reality’ we can only be referring to the things that we construct through language.

WHERE DID SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM COME FROM?

Social constructionism as it is now infiltrating British and North American psychology and social psychology 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 more than thirty years. I shall give 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!

Sociological influences

As someone working and teaching in a multidisciplinary university department, it has been apparent to me that many of the fundamental assumptions of social constructionism have been alive and well and living in sociology for quite some time. Sixty years ago Mead (1934), writing in the USA, founded ‘symbolic interactionism’ with his book Mind, Self and Society. Fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the view that as people we construct our own and each other’s identities through our everyday
encounters with each other in social interaction. In line with this way of thinking, 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. But the major social constructionist contribution from sociology is usually taken to be Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) book The Social Construction of Reality. Berger and Luckmann’s anti-essentialist account of social life argues that human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices. They see three fundamental processes as responsible for this: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. People ‘externalise’ when they act on their world, creating some artefact or practice. For example, they may have an idea (such as the idea that the sun revolves around the earth) and ‘externalise’ it by telling a story or writing a book. But this then enters into the social realm; other people re-tell the story or read the book, and once in this social realm the story or book begins to take on a life of its own. The idea it expresses has become an ‘object’ of consciousness for people in that society (‘objectivation’) and has developed a kind of factual existence or truth; it seems to be ‘out there’, an ‘objective’ feature of the world which appears as ‘natural’, issuing from the nature of the world itself rather than dependent upon the constructive work and interactions of human beings. Finally, because future generations are born into a world where this idea already exists, they ‘internalise’ it as part of their consciousness, as part of their understanding of the nature of the world.

Berger and Luckmann’s account shows how the world can be socially constructed by the social practices of people, but at the same time be experienced by them as if the nature of their world is pre-given and fixed. We could say that ‘social constructionism’ itself has now achieved the status of an object. In writing this book and ostensibly describing it I am contributing to its objectivation in the world. And in the future, students 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 emergence of social constructionism in psychology

In psychology, the emergence of social constructionism is usually dated from K.J. Gergen’s (1973) paper ‘Social psychology as history’, in which he argues that all knowledge, including psychological knowledge, is historically and culturally specific, and that we therefore must extend our enquiries beyond the individual into social, political and economic realms for a proper understanding of the evolution of present-day psychology and social life. In addition, he argues that there is no point in looking for once-and-for-all descriptions of people or society, since the only abiding feature of social life is that it is continually changing. Social psychology thus becomes a form of historical undertaking, since all we can ever do is try to understand and account for how the world appears to be at the present time. In this paper can be seen the beginnings of the Gergen’s later work on social psychology, history and narrative.

Gergen’s paper was written at the time of what is often referred to as ‘the crisis in social psychology’ (e.g. see 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 the manipulation of people. 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 grew up 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 as a discipline therefore emerged as an empiricist, laboratory-based science which 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 worried by 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 decontextualised laboratory behaviour, ignored the real-world contexts which give human actions meaning. A number of books were published, each in its own way trying to redress the balance, by proposing alternatives to positivist science and focussing upon the accounts of ordinary
people (e.g. Harré and Secord, 1972) and by challenging the oppressive and ideological uses of psychology (e.g. Brown, 1973; Armistead, 1974). These concerns are clearly apparent today in the work of social psychologists in social constructionism.

**Postmodernism**

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'. 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 of and rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism, the intellectual movement which preceded it (and exists alongside it, generating much argument and debate) and which in many ways 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 search for truth, 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, and in which it was not the responsibility of individual human beings to discover the truth about life or to make decisions about the nature of morality. Science, as the antidote to the dogma of the mediaeval period, was born in the Enlightenment period. 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 led to much discussion 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. Classical architecture (i.e. that of the Romans and Greeks) was based upon the use of particular mathematical proportions (for example the 'golden section') which were thought to lie at the heart of beautiful forms, and modern architecture too embodied the assumption that a good design in some way expressed the underlying function of the building.

In sociology, the search for rules and structure was exemplified by Marx, who explained social phenomena in terms of the 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 which postulate such structures are known as 'structuralist'; the (later) rejection of the notion of rules and structures underlying forms in the real world is thus known as 'poststructuralism', and the terms 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism' are sometimes used interchangeably. The common feature of all of 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 (e.g. for Marx it was class relations), and therefore recommendations for social change were based upon this principle (in this case, revolution by the working class).

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 which 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 and the objects it represented equal to that of, say, the works of Leonardo or Michelangelo. 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 necessarily as good as the next, and the meanings that the original author might have intended were therefore irrelevant.

Postmodernism also rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories or metanarratives, and emphasises instead the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety
of situation-dependent ways of life (sometimes referred to as pluralism). It argues that we (in the west) are now living in a postmodern world, a world which can no longer be understood by appeal to one over-arching system of knowledge (such as a religion). Developments in technology, in media and mass communications mean that we are now living in a condition where there are available to us many different kinds of knowledge (such as 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 altering the underlying structures of social life through the application of a grand theory or meta-narrative. 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.

As we shall see, the flavour of these ideas has been absorbed by much of social constructionism in the social sciences. Its multi-disciplinary background means that it has drawn its ideas from a number of sources, and where it has drawn on work in the humanities and literary criticism, its influences are often those of French intellectuals such as Foucault and Derrida. Its cultural backdrop is postmodernism, but it has its own intellectual roots in earlier sociological writing and in the concerns of the ‘crisis’ in social psychology. Social constructionism is therefore a movement which has arisen from and is influenced by a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FOR SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM?

Having laid out the theoretical framework, it is now possible to see what some of its implications are. In the remainder of this introduction, I shall outline the questions that will be the concern of the rest of this book, and indicate in which chapters they will be dealt with.

The rejection of essentialism and the questioning of commonsense ways of understanding human beings is tackled in chapter 1, using the idea of ‘personality’ as a vehicle. The aim here is to question traditional psychology’s understanding of the person sufficiently to open the way for an alternative, social constructionist account. If essentialism is rejected, where should we look for our explanations of human behaviour and experience? Social constructionists focus upon language, and in chapter 2 I examine the role of language in our thinking and our sense of ourselves as persons. This is continued in chapter 3, when I look at the notion of ‘discourses’ and their role in the construction of social life. Different discourses construct social phenomena in different ways, and entail different possibilities for human action. So why do some discourses, some ways of representing the world, appear to receive the label of ‘truth’ or ‘common sense’? This raises the issue of power relations, because some ways of representing the world appear to have an oppressive or constraining effect upon some groups in society. The relationship between discourse and power is examined in chapter 4, but this concern with power raises a problem for social constructionism. If social constructionism abandons the idea of ‘truth’ and of a reality that can be directly apprehended by human beings, how can we be justified in saying that some people in society are ‘really’ oppressed – is ‘oppression’ not just another discourse, just another way of looking at the world? The gap between reality and people’s everyday understanding of the world and their place in it is often discussed in terms of ‘ideology’. The problem of the status of reality and the possible role for the concept of ideology in social constructionism is addressed in chapter 5.

Many believe that one of the aims of social science is, or should be, ultimately to facilitate social change. Within the social constructionist framework, what possibilities for social change are there? Can individual people make a difference, or do you have to change the structure of society? The answer to this question partly depends on how you conceptualise the relationship between the individual and society, and this is the focus of chapter 6. And what notion of ‘the individual’ are we left with anyway? Does the person still have ‘agency’? As the full impact of social constructionism on the concepts of traditional psychology becomes clear, it is obvious that a radically different concept of personhood, or ‘subjectivity’, is offered by social constructionism to the ones we have been used to. In chapters 7, 8 and 9, I look at three concepts of the person as made possible by different approaches within social constructionism.
Finally, as social scientists we must address the important question of what it might mean to practise social science within a social constructionist framework. In chapter 10, I look at the way that the theory informs (or should inform) research practice, and illustrate the kind of research (typically in ‘discourse analysis’) that has been performed. This chapter also includes some guidelines, in the form of ‘worked examples’, for how to carry out discourse analysis.

Throughout the book, I draw attention to the problematic areas in social constructionism and to the issues that need to be resolved if it is to be taken seriously as an approach to social science with useful things to say about how we might change ourselves and our lives.

A WORD ABOUT WORDS

Like any other area, social constructionism abounds with words and phrases that are unfamiliar to many people, and their meaning may be hard to grasp at first. In reading more advanced social constructionist texts, students are often confused by the terms they meet with, and I have to say that I consider a fair amount of what is written to be unnecessarily difficult and obscure. Throughout this book I have explained the meaning of terms that I think may be new to readers coming from traditional social science, particularly psychological, backgrounds. The relationship between the different terms and concepts is also a problematic one. Are all poststructuralists necessarily social constructionists? Is poststructuralism part of postmodernism? Does anti-essentialism or anti-realism make you a social constructionist? The answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this book, and in any case they are questions which are part of the debates and arguments which make social constructionism the rapidly changing, dynamic body of thinking that, currently, it is. To aid readers in their struggle for understanding, I have provided a brief glossary of common terms at the back of the book.

Chapter 1

Where do you get your personality from?

Social constructionism involves challenging most of our common-sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in. This means that it does not just offer a new analysis of topics such as ‘personality’ or ‘attitudes’ which can simply be slotted into our existing framework of understanding. The framework itself has to change, and with it our understanding of every aspect of social and psychological life.

The idea of ‘personality’ is a good place to begin, since it has a central place in our understanding of ourselves and others. It is fundamental to our concept of what it means to be a person. Social constructionism is counter-intuitive; it is precisely that which we take for granted which is rendered problematic by this approach, and with regard to our notions of personhood this means that the very idea that we exist as separate, discrete individuals, that our emotions are personal, spontaneous expressions of an inner self we can call our ‘personality’, is fundamentally questioned.

My aims in this chapter are, firstly, to challenge the common-sense view of personality, and in doing so to lay the way for an alternative, social constructionist, view, and, secondly, to draw attention to a number of central features of a social constructionist view of the person.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF PERSONALITY

The notion of ‘personality’ is one which is so firmly embedded in our thinking in contemporary western society that we hardly, if ever, question it. It seems to us undeniable the case that the people we know have very different personalities, and that these