THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

Meaning and perspective in the research process

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ALLEN & UNWIN
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Preface

This book emerges from several years of teaching a subject entitled Qualitative Research Methods. I have been guided by what students in that subject, and students whose research I have supervised, have found useful. I thank them for their feedback.

Some of the authors quoted in this book wrote at a time when there was little awareness of the oppression borne along in language. They quite happily write of 'man' when they mean women and men. They make use of the generic masculine whenever they need pronouns. Since my readers need no help to recognise and deplore these usages, I have refrained from interrupting the text with [sic] many times over to point them out.

My wife, Christina, is a musician. She has rifled through the text for the odd allusion to music and art.

My sons, Martin and Luke, are technologists, one an audio engineer and the other on the way to becoming an electronic engineer. Some time or other, they tell me, they might be tempted to look at Chapter 2.

"Life's unfair!" my daughter, Mikaila, declared at the age of six. In this same vein, ten years on, she feels Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 may have something of interest if she ever gets around to reading them.

The book is dedicated to them, all the same.

Michael Crotty
April 1998
INTRODUCTION:  
THE RESEARCH PROCESS

...many arrows, loosed several ways,  
Fly to one mark...

William Shakespeare, Henry V

They call it 'scaffolded learning'. It is an approach to teaching and  
learning that, while careful to provide an initial framework, leaves it to  
the learner to establish longer term structures.

What is presented here is offered in this spirit. It is to be seen as in  
no way a definitive construction of the social research process but merely  
a framework for the guidance of those wishing to explore the world of  
research.

Research students and fledgling researchers—and, yes, even more  
seasoned campaigners—often express bewilderment at the array of meth-
odologies and methods laid out before their gaze. These methodologies  
and methods are not usually laid out in a highly organised fashion and  
may appear more as a maze than as pathways to orderly research. There  
is much talk of their philosophical underpinnings, but how the method-
ologies and methods relate to more theoretical elements is often left  
unclear. To add to the confusion, the terminology is far from consistent  
in research literature and social science texts. One frequently finds the  
same term used in a number of different, sometimes even contradictory,  
ways.

In response to this predicament, here is one reasonably clear-cut way  
of using terms and grasping what is involved in the process of social  
research. It is obviously not the only way in which these terms are used,
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nor is it being suggested that it is the only defensible way to use them. Equally, it is not the only way of analyzing and understanding the research process. This is scaffolding, not an edifice. Its aim is to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own building; that is, as they move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research purposes.

FOUR ELEMENTS

As a starting point, it can be suggested that, in developing a research proposal, we need to put considerable effort into answering two questions in particular. First, what methodologies and methods will we be employing in the research we propose to do? Second, how do we justify this choice and use of methodologies and methods?

The answer to the second question lies with the purposes of our research—in other words, with the research question that our piece of inquiry is seeking to answer. It is obvious enough that we need a process capable of fulfilling those purposes and answering that question.

There is more to it than that, however. Justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective.

It also reaches into the understanding you and I have of what human knowledge is, what it entails, and what status can be ascribed to it. What kind of knowledge do we believe will be attained by our research? What characteristics do we believe that knowledge to have? Here we are touching upon a pivotal issue. How should observers of our research—for example, readers of our thesis or research report—regard the outcomes we lay out before them? And why should our readers take those outcomes seriously? These are epistemological questions.

Already our two initial questions have expanded. We find ourselves with four questions now:

• What methods do we propose to use?
• What methodology governs our choice and use of methods?
• What theoretical perspective lies behind the methodology in question?
• What epistemology informs this theoretical perspective?

At issue in these four questions are basic elements of any research process, and we need to spell out carefully what we mean by each of them.

INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

• Methods: the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.
• Methodology: the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.
• Theoretical perspective: the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.
• Epistemology: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.

In social research texts, the bulk of discussion and much of the terminology relate in one way or another to these four elements. What one often finds, however, is that forms of these different process elements are thrown together in grab-bag style as if they were all comparable terms. It is not uncommon to find, say, symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism simply set side by side as ‘methodologies’, ‘approaches’, ‘perspectives’, or something similar. Yet they are not truly comparable. Lumping them together without distinction is a bit like talking about putting tomato sauce, condiments and groceries in one basket. One feels compelled to say, ‘Hang on a moment! Tomato sauce is one of many forms of condiment. And all condiments are groceries. Let’s do some sorting out here.’ Similarly, one may feel urged to do some sorting out when confronted by items like symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism all lumped together.

Ethnography, after all, is a methodology. It is one of many particular research designs that guide a researcher in choosing methods and shape the use of the methods chosen. Symbolic interactionism, for its part, is a theoretical perspective that informs a range of methodologies, including some forms of ethnography. As a theoretical perspective, it is an approach to understanding and explaining society and the human world, and grounds a set of assumptions that symbolic interactionist researchers typically bring to their methodology of choice. Constructionism is an epistemology embodied in many theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism as this is generally understood. An epistemology, we have already seen, is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. What all this suggests is that symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism need to be related to one another rather than merely set side by side as comparable, perhaps even competing, approaches or perspectives.

So there are epistemologies, theoretical perspectives and methodologies.
If we add in methods, we have four elements that inform one another, as depicted in Figure 1.

![Diagram of research process]

One or other form of constructionism is the epistemology found, or at least claimed, in most perspectives other than those representing positivist and post-positivist paradigms. As we have just noted, the epistemology generally found embedded in symbolic interactionism is thoroughly constructionist in character. So, if we were to write down the four items we are talking about, we would be justified in drawing an arrow from constructionism to symbolic interactionism to indicate this relationship. Ethnography, a methodology that sprang in the first instance from anthropology and anthropological theory, has been adopted by symbolic interactionism and adapted to its own purposes. For that reason, our next arrow may go from symbolic interactionism to ethnography. Ethnography, in turn, has its methods of preference. Participant observation has traditionally been accorded pride of place. So, out with the pen for yet another arrow. Here, then, we have a specific example of an epistemology, a theoretical perspective, a methodology and a method, each informing the next as suggested in Figure 2.

The textbooks describe several epistemological positions, quite a number of theoretical stances, many methodologies, and almost countless methods. An attempt to list a representative sampling of each category might result in something like Table 1. (But note the several 'et ceteras' occurring in this table. It is not an exhaustive listing.)

To denote another typical string, an arrow could start with 'objectivism'. Objectivism is the epistemological view that things exist as meaningful entities independently of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects ('objective')

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectivism</td>
<td>Positivism (and post-positivism)</td>
<td>Experimental research</td>
<td>Sampling</td>
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<td>Subjectivism</td>
<td>Interpretivism</td>
<td>Survey research</td>
<td>Measurement and scaling</td>
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<td>(and their variants)</td>
<td>Symbolic interactionism</td>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
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<td>Heuristics</td>
<td>Hermeneutics</td>
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<td>Critical inquiry</td>
<td>Action research</td>
<td>non-participant</td>
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<td>Feminism</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<td>Postmodernism etc.</td>
<td>Feminist standpoint research</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
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<td>etc.</td>
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<td>Content analysis</td>
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<td>Conversation analysis</td>
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truth and meaning, therefore), and that careful (scientific?) research can attain that objective truth and meaning. This is the epistemology underpinning the positivist stance. Research done in positivist spirit might select to engage in survey research and employ the quantitative method of statistical analysis (see Figure 3). Once again the arrows go across the columns from first to last.

**Figure 3**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>objectivism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▶ positivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ survey research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ statistical</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
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</tbody>
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What purpose can these four elements serve?
For one thing, they can help to ensure the soundness of our research and make its outcomes convincing. Earlier we recognised the need to justify the methodologies and methods employed in our research. Setting forth our research process in terms of these four elements enables us to do this, for it constitutes a penetrating analysis of the process and points up the theoretical assumptions that underpin it and determine the status of its findings.

How might we outline our research proposal in these terms?

**Research Methods**

First, we describe the concrete techniques or procedures we plan to use. There will be certain activities we engage in so as to gather and analyse our data. These activities are our research methods.

Given our goal of identifying and justifying the research process, it is important that we describe these methods as specifically as possible. To this end, we will not just talk about ‘carrying out interviews’ but will indicate in very detailed fashion what kind of interviews they are, what interviewing techniques are employed, and in what sort of setting the interviews are conducted. We will not just talk about ‘participant observation’ but will describe what kind of observation takes place and what degree of partici-

**Introduction: The Research Process**

We now describe our strategy or plan of action. This is the research design that shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes.

What is called for here is not only a description of the methodology but also an account of the rationale it provides for the choice of methods and the particular forms in which the methods are employed. Take ethnographic inquiry, for instance. Ethnographic inquiry in the spirit of symbolic interactionism seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people’s overall worldview or ‘culture’. In line with this approach, the researcher strives to see things from the perspective of the participants. It is this that makes sense of the researcher’s stated intention to carry out unstructured interviews and to use a non-directive form of questioning within them.

**Theoretical perspective**

Next we describe the philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology. We attempt to explain how it provides a context for the process and grounds its logic and criteria.

Inevitably, we bring a number of assumptions to our chosen methodology. We need, as best we can, to state what these assumptions are. This is precisely what we do when we elaborate our theoretical perspective. Such an elaboration is a statement of the assumptions brought to the research task and reflected in the methodology as we understand and employ it. If, for example, we engage in an ethnographic form of inquiry and gather data via participant observation, what assumptions are embedded in this way of proceeding? By the very nature of participant observation, some of the assumptions relate to matters of language and issues of intersubjectivity and communication. How, then, do we take account of these assumptions and justify them? By expounding our theoretical perspective, that is, our view of the human world and social life within that world, wherein such assumptions are grounded.

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that grounds these assumptions in most explicit fashion. It deals directly with issues such
as language, communication, interrelationships and community. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 4, symbolic interactionism is all about those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community, becoming persons in the process. At its heart is the notion of being able to put ourselves in the place of others—the very notion we have already expressed in detailing our methodology and have catered for in the choice and shaping of our methods.

**Epistemology**

Finally, we need to describe the epistemology inherent in the theoretical perspective and therefore in the methodology we have chosen.

The theoretical perspective we have described is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge, therefore, and embodies a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing, that is, how *we* know what we know. Epistemology deals with 'the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis' (Hamlyn 1995, p. 242). Maynard (1994, p. 10) explains the relevance of epistemology to what we are about here: 'Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate. Hence our need to identify, explain and justify the epistemological stance we have adopted.

There are, of course, quite a range of epistemologies. For a start, there is objectivism. Objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness. That tree in the forest is a tree, regardless of whether anyone is aware of its existence or not. As an object of that kind ('objectively', therefore), it carries the intrinsic meaning of 'tree-ness'. When human beings recognize it as a tree, they are simply discovering a meaning that has been lying there in wait for them all along. We might approach our piece of ethnographic research in that spirit. Much of the early ethnography was certainly carried out in that spirit. In this objectivist view of 'what it means to know', understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying and, if we go about it the right way, we can discover the objective truth.

Another epistemology—constructionism—rej ects this view of human knowledge. There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Isn't this precisely what we find when we move from one era to another or from one culture to another? In this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning.

We will be discussing objectivism in the context of positivism and post-positivism. We will deal with constructionism at some length (Chapter 3) since it is the epistemology that qualitative researchers tend to invoke. A third epistemological stance, subjectivism, comes to the fore in structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist forms of thought (and, in addition, often appears to be what people are actually describing when they claim to be talking about constructionism). In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject. Here the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning. It is tempting to say that in constructionism meaning is constructed out of something (the object), whereas in subjectivism meaning is created out of nothing. We humans are not that creative, however. Even in subjectivism we make meaning out of something. We import meaning from somewhere else. The meaning we ascribe to the object may come from our dreams, or from primordial archetypes we locate within our collective unconscious, or from the conjunction and aspects of the planets, or from religious beliefs, or from . . . That is to say, meaning comes from anything but an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed.

Much more can be said about possible epistemological stances, and the three we have referred to are not to be seen as watertight compartments. Hopefully, enough has been said here for us to recognize that epistemology bears mightily on the way we go about our research. Is there objective truth that we need to identify, and can identify, with precision and certitude? Or are there just humanly fashioned ways of seeing things whose processes we need to explore and which we can only come to understand through a similar process of meaning making? And is this making of meaning a subjective act essentially independent of the object, or do both subject and object contribute to the construction of meaning? Embedded in these questions is a range of epistemological stances, each of which implies a profound difference in how we do our researching and how we present our research outcomes.
What about ontology?

In the research literature there is frequent mention of ontology and you might be wondering why ontology does not figure in the schema developed to this point.

Ontology is the study of being. It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such. Were we to introduce it into our framework, it would sit alongside epistemology informing the theoretical perspective, for each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding what is (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding what it means to know (epistemology).

Ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together. As our terminology has already indicated, to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of meaningful reality. Because of this confluence, writers in the research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually. Realism (an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind) is often taken to imply objectivism (an epistemological notion asserting that meaning exists in objects independently of any consciousness). In some cases we even find realism identified with objectivism. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) certainly posit a necessary link between the two when they claim that 'if, for example, a 'real' reality is assumed, the posture of the knower must be one of objective detachment or value freedom in order to be able to discover "how things really are" and "how things really work"'.

In the chapters that follow, you and I will be listening to a large number of scholars who disagree with this position. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, for instance, frequently invoke a 'world always already there', but they are far from being objectivists.

True enough, the world is there regardless of whether human beings are conscious of it. As Macquarrie tells us (1973, p. 57): 'If there were no human beings, there might still be galaxies, trees, rocks, and so on—and doubtless there were, in those long stretches of time before the evolution of Homo sapiens or any other human species that may have existed on earth! But what kind of a world is there before conscious beings engage with it? Not an intelligible world, many would want to say. Not a world of meaning. It becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it.

From this point of view, accepting a world, and things in the world, existing independently of our consciousness of them does not imply that meanings exist independently of consciousness, as Guba and Lincoln seem to be saying. The existence of a world without a mind is conceivable. Not all beings are necessarily conscious, or at least in a kind of term, of themselves being conscious. The notes of a piano string, or of a single atom, may be not conscious, or at least in a kind of term, of being conscious. But we have already seen that the world is not made of consciousness. There are many worlds, and many kinds of worlds. It is not the case that consciousness is the only kind of world.
issues can be dealt with adequately without complicating our four-
column schema further by expressly introducing ontology.

IN ALL DIRECTIONS

Back we go to our arrows. We have been drawing arrows from left to
to right—from one item in one column to another item in the next column
to the right. We should feel very free to do this.

First of all, there are few restrictions on where these left-to-right arrows
may go. Any limitations that exist would seem to relate to the first two
columns. We need to rule out drawing an arrow from constructionism
or subjectivism to positivism (or, therefore, post-positivism), since pos-
itivism is objective by definition. Without a thoroughly objectiveist
epistemology, positivism would not be positivism as we understand it
today. Nor would we want to draw an arrow from objectivism or subjec-
tivism to phenomenology. Constructionism and phenomenology are so
tertwined that one could hardly be phenomenological while espousing
either an objectivist or a subjectivist epistemology. And postmodernism
well and truly jettisons any vestiges of an objectivist view of knowledge
and meaning. Other than that, as we draw our arrows from column to
column, it would seem that 'the sky's the limit'. Certainly, if it suits
their purposes, any of the theoretical perspectives could make use of any
of the methodologies, and any of the methodologies could make use of
any of the methods. There are typical strings, to be sure, and we have
noted two of them in Figure 2 and Figure 3, but 'typical' does not mean
'mandatory'.

Secondly, we can draw arrows from a particular item to more than one
item in the column to the right. Historically, objectivism, construction-
ism and subjectivism have each informed quite a number of different
perspectives. Similarly, one theoretical perspective often comes to be
embodied in a number of methodologies. Symbolic interactionism is a
case in point. It has informed both ethnography and grounded theory
and we might well draw arrows from that theoretical perspective to each
of those methodologies. Again, while critical inquiry will certainly be
linked to action research, we can also draw an arrow from critical inquiry
to ethnography. Yes, the critical form of inquiry has come to be embodied
in ethnography too, transforming it in the process. Now it is no longer
a characteristically uncritical form of research that merely seeks to
understand a culture. It is critical ethnography, a methodology that
strives to unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces. In the same way,
there can be a feminist ethnography or a postmodernist ethnography.

INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Still, we should not be so carried away with our sense of freedom in
drawing arrows from left to right that we forget to draw arrows in other
directions as well. Our arrows can fly from right to left too. In terms of
what informs what, going from left to right would seem a logical
progression. At the same time, in describing our piece of research, we
found our starting point in methods and methodology. This suggests that,
to mark the chronological succession of events in our research, the arrows
may need to be drawn from right to left as well.

Certainly, they may. Not too many of us embark on a piece of social
research with epistemology as our starting point. 'I am a constructionist.
Therefore, I will investigate . . .' Hardly. We typically start with a
real-life issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be
solved, a question that needs to be answered. We plan our research in
terms of that issue or problem or question. What, we go on to ask,
are the further issues, problems or questions implicit in the one we start
with? What then, is the aim and what are the objectives of our research?
What strategy seems likely to provide what we are looking for? What
does that strategy direct us to do to achieve our aims and objectives?
In this way our research question, incorporating the purposes of our re-
search, leads us to methodology and methods.

We need, of course, to justify our chosen methodology and methods.
In the end, we want outcomes that merit respect. We want the observers
of our research to recognise it as sound research. Our conclusions need
to stand up. On some understandings of research (and of truth), this
will mean that we are after objective, valid and generalisable conclusions
as the outcome of our research. On other understandings, this is never
realisable. Human knowledge is not like that. At best, our outcomes will
be suggestive rather than conclusive. They will be plausible, perhaps
even convincing, ways of seeing things—and, to be sure, helpful ways
of seeing things—but certainly not any 'one true way' of seeing things.
We may be positivists or non-positivists, therefore. Either way, we need
to be concerned about the process we have engaged in; we need to lay
that process out for the scrutiny of the observer; we need to defend that
process as a form of human inquiry that should be taken seriously. It is
this that sends us to our theoretical perspective and epistemology and
calls upon us to expound them incisively. From methods and methodol-
ogy to theoretical perspective and epistemology, then. Now our arrows
are travelling from right to left.

Speaking in this vein sounds as if we create a methodology for
ourselves—as if the focus of our research leads us to devise our own ways
of proceeding that allow us to achieve our purposes. That, as it happens,
is precisely the case. In a very real sense, every piece of research is
unique and calls for a unique methodology. We, as the researcher, have to develop it.

If that is the case, why are we bothering with the plethora of methodologies and methods set forth for us so profusely that they seem like William James’s ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’? Why don’t we just sit down and work out for ourselves how we are to go about it?

In the end, that is precisely what we have to do. Yet a study of how other people have gone about the task of human inquiry serves us well and is surely indispensable. Attending to recognized research designs and their various theoretical underpinnings exercises a formative influence upon us. It awakens us to ways of research we would never otherwise have conceived of. It makes us much more aware of what is possible in research. Even so, it is by no means a matter of plucking a methodology off the shelf. We acquaint ourselves with the various methodologies. We evaluate their presuppositions. We weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Having done all that and more besides, we still have to forge a methodology that will meet our particular purposes in this research. One of the established methodologies may suit the task that confronts us. Or perhaps none of them do and we find ourselves drawing on several methodologies, moulding them into a way of proceeding that achieves the outcomes we look to. Perhaps we need to be more inventive still and create a methodology that in many respects is quite new. Even if we tread this track of innovation and invention, our engagement with the various methodologies in use will have played a crucial educative role.

Arrows right to left as well as left to right. What about arrows up and down? Yes, that too. Renowned critical theorist Jürgen Habermas carried on a debate with hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer over many years and out of that interplay there developed for Habermas a ‘critical hermeneutics’. Here we have critical theory coming to inform hermeneutics. In our four-column model, the arrow would rise up the same column (‘theoretical perspective’) from critical inquiry to hermeneutics. Similarly, we can talk of critical feminism or feminist critical inquiry, of postmodernist feminism or postmodernist critical inquiry. There is plenty of scope for arrows up and down.

**THE GREAT DIVIDE**

In the model we are following here, you will notice that the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research occurs at the level of methods. It does not occur at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective. What does occur back there at those exalted levels is a distinction between objectivist/positivist research, on the one hand, and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other. Yet, in most research textbooks, it is qualitative research and quantitative research that are set against each other as polar opposites. Just as the student of Latin is taught very early on via the opening lines of Caesar’s Gallic Wars that ‘All Gaul is divided into three parts’, so every beginning researcher learns at once that all research is divided into two parts—and these are ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’, respectively.

Our model suggests that this divide—objectivist research associated with quantitative methods over against constructionist or subjectivist research associated with qualitative methods—is far from justified. Most methodologies known today as forms of ‘qualitative research’ have in the past been carried out in an utterly empiricist, positivist manner. This is true, as we have already noted, of the early history of ethnography. On the other hand, quantification is by no means ruled out within non-positivist research. We may consider ourselves utterly devoted to qualitative research methods. Yet, when we think about investigations carried out in the normal course of our daily lives, how often measuring and counting turn out to be essential to our purposes. The ability to measure and count is a precious human achievement and it behoves us not to be dismissive of it. We should accept that, whatever research we engage in, it is possible for either qualitative methods or quantitative methods, or both, to serve our purposes. Our research can be qualitative or quantitative, or both qualitative and quantitative, without this being in any way problematic.

What would seem to be problematic is any attempt to be at once objectivist and constructionist (or subjectivist). On the face of it, to say that there is objective meaning and, in the same breath, to say that there is no objective meaning certainly does appear contradictory. To be sure, the postmodernist world that has grown up around us calls all our cherished ambitions into question, and we are invited today to embrace ‘fuzzy logic’ rather than the logic we have known in the past with its principle of contradiction. Nevertheless, even at the threshold of the 21st century, not too many of us are comfortable with such ostensibly blatant contradiction in what we claim.

To avoid such discomfort, we will need to be consistently objectivist or consistently constructionist (or subjectivist).

If we seek to be consistently objectivist, we will distinguish scientifically established objective meanings from subjective meanings that people hold in everyday fashion and that at best ‘reflect’ or ‘mirror’ or ‘approximate’ objective meanings. We will accept, of course, that these subjective meanings are important in people’s lives and we may adopt...
qualitative methods of ascertaining what those meanings are. This is epistemologically consistent. It has a downside, all the same. It makes people's everyday understandings inferior, epistemologically, to more scientific understandings. In this way of viewing things, one cannot predicate of people's everyday understandings the truth claims one makes for what is scientifically established.

If we seek to be consistently constructionist, we will put all understandings, scientific and non-scientific alike, on the very same footing. They are all constructions. None is objective or absolute or truly generalisable. Scientific knowledge is just a particular form of constructed knowledge designed to serve particular purposes—and, yes, it serves them well. Constructionists may indeed make use of quantitative methods but their constructionism makes a difference. We need to ask ourselves, in fact, what a piece of quantitative research looks like when it is informed by a constructionist epistemology. What difference does that make to it? Well, for a start, it makes a big difference to the truth claims proffered on its behalf, all the more so as one moves towards subjectivism rather than constructionism. No longer is there talk of objectivity, or validity, or generalisability. For all that, there is ample recognition that, after its own fashion, quantitative research has valuable contributions to make, even to a study of the farthest reaches of human being.

Is this scaffolding proving helpful? If so, let us go on to examine the items in some of its columns. We will confine ourselves to the first two columns. We will look at epistemological issues and issues relating to theoretical perspectives.

As already foreshadowed, the epistemological stance of objectivism will be considered in the context of positivism, with which it is so closely allied. Constructionism, as the epistemology claimed in most qualitative approaches today, deserves extended treatment. Our discussion of the constructionist theorising of knowledge will set it against the subjectivism only too often articulated under the rubric of constructionism and found self-professedly in much structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thought.

After our discussion of positivism, the theoretical perspectives we go on to study are interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism and postmodernism. Thinking about postmodernism will make it necessary for us to delve also into structuralism and post-structuralism.

As we discuss these perspectives and stances, we should remind ourselves many times over that we are not exploring them for merely speculative purposes. You and I will allow ourselves to be led at times into very theoretical material indeed. Nevertheless, we will refuse to wear the name of being abstract intellectualisers, divorced from experience and action. It is our very inquiry into human experience and action that sends us this far afield. The long journey we are embarking upon arises out of an awareness on our part that, at every point in our research—in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers—we inject a host of assumptions. These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying.

Performing this task of explication and explanation is precisely what we are about here. Far from being a theorising that takes researchers from their research, it is a theorising embedded in the research act itself. Without it, research is not research.
CONSTRUCTIONISM: THE MAKING OF MEANING

What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falseness to the world that lives beyond?

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, Essays

Constructionism is well removed from the objectivism found in the positivist stance. In some areas it seems to have replaced objectivism as the dominant paradigm. If this is indeed the case, and to the extent to which it is the case, we are witnessing the end of a very long tradition. Objectivism—the notion that truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any consciousness—has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, was carried along in Scholastic realism throughout the Middle Ages, and rose to its zenith in the age of the so-called Enlightenment. The belief that there is objective truth and that appropriate methods of inquiry can bring us accurate and certain knowledge of that truth has been the epistemological ground of Western science. While it would be extremely premature to sound the death knell of this centuries-old tradition, foundationalism of this kind has certainly come under heavy attack and constructionism is very much part of the artillery brought against it.

What, then, is constructionism? It is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGFUL REALITY

In the constructionist view, as the word suggests, meaning is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. As writers like Merleau-Ponty have pointed out very tellingly, the world and objects in the world are indeterminate. They may be pregnant with potential meaning, but actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them. How, such thinkers ask, can there be meaning without a mind?

Accepting that the world we experience, prior to our experience of it, is without meaning does not come easily. What the 'commonsense' view commends to us is that the tree standing before us is a tree. It has all the meaning we ascribe to a tree. It would be a tree, with that same meaning, whether anyone knew of its existence or not. We need to remind ourselves here that it is human beings who have construed it as a tree, given it the name, and attributed to it the associations we make with trees. It may help if we recall the extent to which those associations differ even within the same overall culture. 'Tree' is likely to bear quite different connotations in a logging town, an artists' settlement and a treeless slum.

What constructionism claims is that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all.

You may object that you cannot imagine a time when nothing existed in any phenomenal form. Were there not volcanoes, and dust-storms and starlight long before there was any life on Earth? Did not the sun rise in the East and set in the West? Did not water flow downhill, and light travel faster than sound? The answer is that if you had been there, that is indeed the way the phenomena would have appeared to you. But you were not there: no one was. And because no one was there, there was not—at this mindless stage of history—anything that counted as a volcano, or a dust-storm, and so on. I am not suggesting that the world had no substance to it whatsoever. We might say, perhaps, that it consisted of 'worldstuff'. But the properties of this worldstuff had yet to be represented by a mind. (Humphrey 1993, p. 17)

From the constructionist viewpoint, therefore, meaning (or truth) cannot be described simply as 'objective'. By the same token, it cannot be described simply as 'subjective'. Some researchers describing themselves as constructionists talk inasmuch as meanings are created out of whole cloth and simply imposed upon reality. This is to espouse an out-and-out subjectivism and to reject both the existentialist concept of humans as beings-in-the-world and the phenomenological concept of intentionality. There are strong threads within structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thought espousing a subjectivist epistemology but constructionism is different. According to constructionism, we do not create
meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world.

As Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty repeatedly state, the world is 'always already there'. The world and objects in the world may be in themselves meaningless; yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning and need to be taken seriously. It is surely important, and liberating, to distinguish theory consistent with experienced reality from theory that is not. Objectivity and subjectivity need to be brought together and held together indissolubly. Constructionism does precisely that.

In this respect, constructionism mirrors the concept of intentionality. Intentionality is a notion that phenomenology borrowed from Scholastic philosophy and in its turn has shared with other orientations. It was the renowned nineteenth-century psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano who invoked the Scholastic concept of intentionality. Brentano's student and acknowledged founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl went on to make it the pivotal concept of his philosophy.

Brentano recalls (1973, p. 88) that, in medieval philosophy, all mental phenomena are described as having 'reference to a content, direction toward an object'. Consciousness, in other words, is always consciousness of something. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

It is important to note that 'intentionality' and 'intentional' as used here have nothing to do with purpose or deliberation. The root stem of these words is the Latin tendere, which means 'to tend'—in the sense of 'moving towards' or 'directing oneself to'. Here 'in-tending' is not about choosing or planning but about reaching out into (just as 'ex-tending' is about reaching out from). Intentionality means referentiality, relatedness, directedness, 'aboutness'.

The basic message of intentionality is straightforward enough. When the mind becomes conscious of something, when it 'knows' something, it reaches out to, and into, that object. In contrast to other epistemologies at large towards the end of the nineteenth century, intentionality posits a quite intimate and very active relationship between the conscious subject and the object of the subject's consciousness. Consciousness is directed towards the object; the object is shaped by consciousness. As Lyotard expresses it:

There is thus no answer to the question whether philosophy must begin with the object (realism) or with the ego (idealism). The very idea of phenomenology puts this question out of play: consciousness is always consciousness of, and there is no object which is not an object for. There is no immanence of the object to consciousness unless one relativistically assigns the object a rational meaning, without which the object would not be an object for. Concept or meaning is not exterior to Being: rather, Being is immediately concept in itself, and the concept is Being for itself. (1991, p. 65)

Later phenomenologists, working within the context of an existentialist philosophy, make the process far less cerebral. Not only is consciousness intentional, but human beings in their totality are intentionally related to their world. Human being means being-in-the-world. In existentialist terms, intentionality is a radical interdependence of subject and world.

Because of the essential relationship that human experience bears to its object, no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object. Experiences do not constitute a sphere of subjective reality separate from, and in contrast to, the objective realm of the external world—as Descartes' famous 'split' between mind and body, and thereby between mind and world, would lead us to imagine. In the way of thinking to which intentionality introduces us, such a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective is untenable. Subject and object, distinguishable as they are, are always united. It is this insight that is captured in the term 'intentionality'.

To embrace the notion of intentionality is to reject objectivism. Equally, it is to reject subjectivism. What intentionality brings to the fore is interaction between subject and object. The image evoked is that of humans engaging with their world. It is in and out of this interplay that meaning is born.

It may be helpful to consider what literary critic and linguistics exponent Stanley Fish has to say. In a well-known essay (1990), Fish recalls a summer program in which he was teaching two courses. One explored the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism. The other was a course in English religious poetry. The sessions for both courses were held in the same classroom and they followed one after the other.

One morning, when the students in the first course had left the room, Fish looked at a list of names he had written on the blackboard. It was the assignment he had set for the students. The people listed were authors whose works the students were expected to consult before the next class. One of the names listed had a question mark after it, because Fish was not sure whether it was spelled correctly.

Fish went to the board, drew a frame around the names and wrote 'p. 43' above the frame. When the students in the second course filed
into the room for their class, what confronted them on the blackboard was what we see in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

Fish began this second class for the day by drawing the students' attention to the list of names. He informed them that it was a religious poem of the kind they had been studying and invited them to interpret it.

The students were equal to the task. The first student to speak commented on the shape of the poem. The poem was a hieroglyph, he surmised, but was it in the shape of an altar or a cross? After this promising start, other students were not slow to follow suit. Jacobs' came to be related to Jacob's ladder, an Old Testament allegory for the Christian's ascent into heaven. It is linked in the list to 'Rosenbaum'—rose tree in German and surely an allusion to the Virgin Mary, who is often depicted as a rose without thorns and promotes Christians' ascent into heaven through the redemptive work of her son, Jesus. Redemption is effected above all through Christ's suffering and death, symbolised in his being crowned with thorns (corrupted to 'Thorne'?). The reference to Levi (see 'Levin') is not surprising: the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe and Jesus, after all, is the Great High Priest of the New Testament. 'Ohman' could be given at least three readings (hence the question mark!): it might be 'omen' or 'Oh Man!' or simply 'Amen'. The students also noted that both Old and New Testaments are represented in the poem, three of the names being Jewish, two Gentile, and one ambiguous.
they contrast sharply with interpretations that prove oppressive. There are even interpretations that may be judged fulfilling and rewarding—in contrast to interpretations that impoverish human existence and stunt human growth. 'Useful', 'liberating', 'fulfilling', 'rewarding' interpretations, yes. 'True' or 'valid' interpretations, no.

There is another lesson that Fish's example drives home, even if Fish does not make it explicit. It is something we have already noted. The object may be meaningless in itself but it has a vital part to play in the generation of meaning. While Fish's students are innovative in making sense of the list of names conceived as a religious poem, the particular names that happen to be on the list play a key role. The students, Fish observes (1990, p. 184), 'would have been able to turn any list of names into the kind of poem we have before us now'. What he does not point out, though he would surely agree, is that they would make different sense of a different list. With different names to engage with, the religious significances they develop would not be the same. It is therefore not a question of conjuring up a series of meanings and just imposing them on the 'poem'. That is subjectiveism, not constructionism. The meanings emerge from the students' interaction with the 'poem' and relate to it essentially. The meanings are thus at once objective and subjective, their objectivity and subjectivity being indissolubly bound up with each other. Constructionism teaches us that meaning is always thus.

No mere subjectivism here. Constructionism takes the object very seriously. It is open to the world. Theodor Adorno refers to the process involved as 'exact fantasy' (1977, p. 131). Imagination is required, to be sure. There is call for creativity. Yet we are not talking about imagination running wild or untrammelled creativity. There is an 'exactness' involved, for we are talking about imagination being exercised and creativity invoked in a precise interplay with something. Susan Buck-Morss (1977, p. 86) finds in Adorno's exact fantasy 'a dialectical concept which acknowledged the mutual mediation of subject and object without allowing either to get the upper hand'. It is, she insists, the attention to the object that 'separated this fantasy from mere dream-like fabrication'.

Bringing objectivity and subjectivity together and holding them together throughout the process is hardly characteristic of qualitative research today. Instead, a rampant subjectivism seems to be abroad. It can be detected in the turn of phenomenology from a study of phenomena as the immediate objects of experience into a study of experiencing individuals. It is equally detectable in the move taking place in some quarters today to supplant ethnography with an 'autoethnography'.

Description of researchers as briqueleurs is also a case in point. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have made 'researcher-as-briqueleur' the leitmotif of the massive tome they have edited. They devote some columns to it in their opening chapter, refer to it in each of their introductions to the various sections of the book, and return to it in their concluding chapter. Denzin's own chapter 'The art and politics of interpretation' also invokes the notion of the researcher-as-briqueleur.

Denzin and Lincoln begin their treatment of the researcher-as-briqueleur by citing Lévi-Strauss's The Savage Mind. This is to the effect that the briqueleur is 'a Jack of all trades, or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p. 2). Now the idea of a Jack (or Jill?) of all trades or a do-it-yourself person certainly puts the spotlight on the multiple skills and resourcefulness of the individual concerned. This is precisely what Denzin and Lincoln seek to emphasise from start to finish. Briqueleurs, as these authors conceive them, show themselves very inventive in addressing particular tasks. The focus is on an individual's ability to employ a large range of tools and methods, even unconventional ones, and therefore on his or her inventiveness, resourcefulness and imaginativeness. So the researcher-as-briqueleur 'is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks' and 'is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms (feminism, Marxism, cultural studies, constructivism) that can be brought to any particular problem' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p. 2).

Given this understanding of briqueleur, it is not surprising that Denzin and Lincoln should characterise briquelage as 'self-reflexive', a description they draw from Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg (1992, p. 2) writing about cultural studies. When the Jacks and Jills of all trades learn that a job has to be done—they have just finished their carpentry around the door and have painted the ceiling, and now they learn that the toilet is blocked and requires some rather intricate plumbing work—yes, such briqueleurs would tend to be self-reflexive. 'Can I do it?' becomes the burning question.

Interestingly, the briqueleur described by Denzin and Lincoln is not the briqueleur described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, even though he is the principal reference they give for the notion. The words they quote to describe the briqueleur, 'a Jack of all trades, or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person', come from a translator's footnote (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 17). In that footnote, the sentence cited is preceded by the statement, 'The "briqueleur" has no precise equivalent in English'. And the sentence quoted is not given in full. The rest of the sentence reads: 'but, as the text makes clear, he [the briqueleur] is of a different standing from, for instance, the English "odd job man" or handyman'.
What we find in Lévi-Strauss’s text, in fact, is a very different understanding of bricolage. Consequently, the ‘analogy’ drawn from it (to use Lévi-Strauss’s term) carries a very different message. In The Savage Mind, the bricolage is not someone able to perform a whole range of specialist functions or even to employ unconventional methods. It is the notion of a person who makes something new out of a range of materials that had previously made up something different. The bricolage is a makeshift artisan, armed with a collection of bits and pieces that were once standard parts of a certain whole but which the bricolier, as bricoleur, now conceives as parts of a new whole. Lévi-Strauss provides an example. The bricolage has a cube-shaped piece of oak. It may once have been part of a wardrobe. Or was it part of a grandfather clock? Whatever its earlier role, the bricolage now has to make it serve a quite different purpose. It may be used as ‘a wedge to make up for the inadequate length of a plank of pine’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 18). Or perhaps it ‘could be a pedestal—which would allow the grain and polish of the old wood to show to advantage’ (1966, pp. 18–19).

Engaged in that kind of project, bricoleurs are not at all ‘self-reflexive’. To the contrary, they are utterly focused on what they have to work with. The question is not, ‘Can I do it? Do I have the skills?’. Rather, the question is, ‘What can be made of these items? What do they lend themselves to becoming?’. And answering that depends on the qualities found in the items to hand. It is a matter of what items are there and what are not. It is a matter of the properties each possesses—size, shape, weight, colour, texture, brittleness, and so on. The last thing bricoleurs have in mind at this moment is their own self. Imaginativeness and creativity are required, to be sure, but an imaginativeness and creativity to be exercised in relation to these objects, these materials. An ice cream cartoon, two buttons, and a coat hanger—I’m supposed to make something of that? Self-reflexive? No; not at all. Nothing is further from self-reflexive than bricolage. There the focus is fairly and squarely on the object. True bricoleurs are people constantly musing over objects, engaged precisely with what is not themselves, in order to see what possibilities the objects have to offer. This is the image of the bricolier to be found in Lévi-Strauss.

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could ‘signify’ and so

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A dialogue with the materials. Interrogating all the heterogeneous objects. Indexing their possible uses. This preoccupation with objects is mirrored in Lévi-Strauss’s assertion that the bricolage might therefore be said to be constantly on the look out for “messages” (1966, p. 20).

In their last page of text (1994, p. 584), Denzin and Lincoln come to acknowledge just a little of all this. They state that ‘bricolage are more than simply jacks-of-all-trades; they are also inventors’. They write of bricoleurs having to ‘recycle used fabric’, to ‘cobble together stories’. Even here, however, the emphasis remains on the bricolier’s inventiveness as ‘the demand of a restless art’. In this further exposition of the bricolier, there is still no hint of Lévi-Strauss’s preoccupation with objects.

Why such preoccupation with objects? Because they are the limiting factor. They are, warns Lévi-Strauss, ‘pre-constrained’. The possibilities they bear ‘always remain limited by the particular history of each piece and by those of its features which are already determined by the use for which it was originally intended or the modifications it has undergone for other purposes’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p. 19). The uses to which they might be put must accord with what they are. The ability needed by the bricolier is the ability to ‘re-vision’ these bits and pieces, casting aside the purposes which they once bore and for which they were once designed and divining very different purposes that they may now serve in new settings.

In short, the image of the researcher-as-bricoleur highlights the researcher’s need to pay sustained attention to the objects of research. This is much more to the fore than the need for versatility or resourcefulness in the use of tools and methods. Research in constructivist vein, research in the mode of the bricolier, requires that we not remain straitjacketed by the conventional meanings we have been taught to associate with the object. Instead, such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation.

It is precisely this preoccupation with the object that we find in Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. In Benjamin’s form of inquiry, Adorno claims (1981, pp. 240–1), ‘the subjective intention is seen to be extinguished’ and the ‘thoughts press close to its object, seek to touch it, smell it, taste it and so thereby transform itself’. Benjamin, in fact, is driven to ‘immerse himself without reserve in the world of multiplicity’. Adorno is the same.
THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

What is ultimately most fascinating in Adorno’s Negative Dialectics is the incessantly formulated appeal that thought be conscious of its non-sovereignty, of the fact that it must always be moldable by material that is by definition heterogeneous to it. This is what Adorno calls the ‘mimetic moment’ of knowledge, the affinity with the object. What interests him most of all is to impose on thought respect for the nuance, the difference, individuation, requiring it to descend to the most minuscule and infinitesimal detail. (Terzian 1985, p. 95)

A focus of this kind on the object is hardly characteristic of our times. ‘No age has been so self-conscious’, writes E.M. Cioran. What he calls our ‘psychological sense’ has transformed us into spectators of ourselves. He finds this reflected in the modern novel, wherein he finds ‘a research without points of references, an experiment pursued within an unfailing vacuity’. It does not look outwards to an object. ‘The genre, having squandered its substance, no longer has an object.’ (Cioran 1976, pp. 139–40).

To the narrative which suppresses what is named, an object, corresponds an anesis of the intellect, a meditation seamless content ... The mind discovers itself reduced to the action by virtue of which it is mind and nothing more. All its activities lead it back to itself, to that stationary development which keeps it from catching on to things. (Cioran 1976, p. 141)

Far removed from what Cioran is describing here, constructionism does not suppress the object but focuses on it intently. It is by no means a stationary development. It is meditation with content. It well and truly catches on to things.

Constructionism is not subjectivism. It is curiosity, not conceit.

'SOCIAL' CONSTRUCTIONISM

If seeing interpretation as a making of meaning does not condemn us to subjectivism, it does not condemn us to individualism either. We have to reckon with the social origin of meaning and the social character with which it is inevitably stamped.

Fish emphasises that ‘all objects are made and not found’ but adds at once that ‘the means by which they are made are social and conventional’. These means are institutions which ‘precede us’ and in which ‘we are already embedded’ and ‘it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make’. Functioning as ‘a publicly available system of intelligibility’, these institutions are the source of the interpretative strategies whereby we construct meaning (Fish 1990, p. 186).

Where Fish invokes ‘a publicly available system of intelligibility’, anthropologist Clifford Geertz speaks of ‘a system of significant symbols’. Geertz is talking, of course, about culture and he presents the meaningful symbols that constitute culture as an indispensable guide to human behaviour. What, in Geertz’s view, would we do without them? Certainly we would not be ‘clever savages’, as in Golding’s Lord of the Flies. Nor would we be the ‘nature’s noblemen’ who in Enlightenment thought lurk beneath the trappings of culture. Nor, again, would we be ‘intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves’, as classical anthropological theory seems to imply. We would be none of these, Geertz insists. Rather, we would be ‘unworkable monstrosities’ (Geertz 1973, p. 49).

Unworkable? Yes, unworkable. Without culture we could not function. Culture has to do with functioning. As a direct consequence of the way in which we humans have evolved, we depend on culture to direct our behaviour and organise our experience. In the past, Geertz points out, we have tended to see culture as ‘complexes of concrete behaviour patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters’. To view culture primarily in this light is to consider it the outcome of human thought and action. We need to reverse this way of viewing culture. Culture is best seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and behaviour. It is ‘a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”)—for the governing of behaviour’ (Geertz 1973, p. 44).

In this view of the role of culture, human thought emerges as ‘basically both social and public’.

Thinking consists not of ‘happenings in the head’ (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G.H. Mead and others, significant symbols—words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels—anything, in fact, that is engaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. (Geertz 1973, p. 45)

Fish has told us that the institutions constituting our publicly available system of intelligibility precede us. We come to inhabit this pre-existing system and to be inhabited by it. Similarly, in describing culture as a system of significant symbols, Geertz emphasises that, from the point of view of any particular individual, ‘such symbols are largely given’. They are already current in the community when the individual is born and
they remain in circulation—with some changes, to be sure—after the individual dies (Geertz 1973, p. 45).

Thus, while humans may be described, in constructionist spirit, as engaging with their world and making sense of it, such a description is misleading if it is not set in a genuinely historical and social perspective. It is clearly not the case that individuals encounter phenomena in the world and make sense of them one by one. Instead, we are all born into a world of meaning. We enter a social milieu in which a 'system of intelligibility' prevails. We inherit a 'system of significant symbols'. For each of us, when we first see the world in meaningful fashion, we are inevitably viewing it through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture. Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and, by the same token, leads us to ignore other things.

The social constructionism we are talking about here is all-encompassing and we need to be careful not to restrict its ambit. For one thing, it is not to be taken here in an ideational sense only. It is not just our thoughts that are constructed for us. We have to reckon also with the social construction of emotions (Harré 1986). Moreover, constructionism embraces the whole gamut of meaningful reality. All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception.

Not everyone agrees. There are some who take social constructionism to mean that social realities, and only social realities, have a social genesis. Natural or physical realities do not. In other words, they understand social constructionism as denoting 'the construction of social reality' rather than 'the social construction of reality'. The wording used by The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology to describe social constructionism suggests this standpoint. Social constructionists, we are told, 'emphasize the idea that society is actively and creatively produced by human beings', social worlds being 'interpretative nets woven by individuals and groups' (Marshall 1994, p. 484). An even more explicit account is offered by Greenwood:

Physical and social phenomena . . . differ in one essential respect. Chairs may exist independently of our knowing that they do; our knowledge of the existence of chairs is not constitutive of their existence. In contrast, social phenomena do not exist independently of our knowledge of them . . . Social realities, therefore, are constructed and sustained by the observation of the social rules which obtain in any social situation by all the social interactions involved . . . Social reality is, therefore, a function of shared meanings; it is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life. (1994, p. 85)

That social realities are socially constructed is something of a truism. The most ardent positivist would find that hard to contradict. What distinguishes constructionism, setting it over against the objectivism inherent in the positivist stance, is its understanding that all meaningful reality, precisely as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. The chair may exist as a phenomenal object regardless of whether any consciousness is aware of its existence. It exists as a chair, however, only if conscious beings construe it as a chair. As a chair, it too 'is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life'.

The 'social' in social constructionism is about the mode of meaning generation and not about the kind of object that has meaning. The object involved in the social constructionist understanding of meaning formation need not involve persons at all (and therefore need not be 'social' in that sense). The interaction may be, say, with the natural world—the sunset, the mountains, a tree. Natural objects may be, but it is our culture (shorthand in most cases today for a very complex mix of many cultures and subcultures) that teaches us how to see them—and in some cases whether to see them. 'A way of seeing is a way of not seeing', feminist author Ann Oakley sagely advises (1974, p. 27). Accordingly, whether we would describe the object of the interaction as natural or social, the basic generation of meaning is always social, for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive human community.

Accordingly, not only the social scientist but equally the natural scientist has to deal with realities that, as meaningful realities, are socially constructed. They are on an equal footing in this respect. British sociologist Anthony Giddens appears to disagree. He makes the following distinction between the natural world and the social world:

The difference between the social and the natural world is that the latter does not construe itself as 'meaningful'; the meanings it has are produced by men in the course of their practical life, and as a consequence of their endeavours to understand or explain it for themselves. Social life—of which these endeavours are a part—on the other hand, is produced by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstruction of frames of meaning whereby they organize their experiences. (Giddens 1976, p. 79)

What is Giddens postulating here? He is asserting that, while humans do not create the natural world but have to make sense of a 'world always already there' (Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's phrase, not Giddens'), the very existence of social phenomena stems from human action. Consequently, the process of bringing these social realities into
being is one with the process of interpreting and reinterpreting them. Unlike the natural world, then, social realities are meaningful by virtue of the very act that brings them into existence. Natural realities are not.

Giddens's purpose in making this distinction is to offer a basis for his concept of the 'double hermeneutic' in which social scientists have to engage. Social scientists have the task, first of all, of 'entering and grasping the frames of meaning involved in the production of social life by lay actors' as well as the subsequent task of 'reconstituting these within the new frames of meaning involved in technical conceptual schemes' (Giddens 1976, p. 79). Natural scientists, he believes, do not have the same task to face. They merely construct a 'theoretical meta-language, a network in which the meaning of scientific concepts is tied-in to the meaning of other terms'. That is all they have to worry about. They are faced with a 'single level of hermeneutic problems'. Social scientists are not so lucky. They have two interpretative levels to face. They must contend with a double hermeneutic: 'There is a two-way connection between the language of social science and ordinary language', writes Giddens (1979, p. 12). 'The former cannot ignore the categories used by laymen in the practical organization of social life.'

Natural science, as Giddens sees it, can do what social science cannot do. It is able to ignore the categories used by people in everyday life and avoid or minimise ordinary language, using its own scientific meta-language instead. The natural scientist comes to the task of studying nature with something of a tabula rasa.

Blakie (1993, p. 36) warmly espouses these views of Giddens. He says that the natural scientist studies nature 'as it were, from the outside'. The scientist then has 'to invent concepts and theories to describe and explain'. Contrasting with this, in Blakie's view, is the study of social phenomena. Here we are talking about 'a social world which people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities' and which they are 'constantly involved in interpreting'. They develop meanings for their activities together', concludes Blakie. 'In short, the social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives.'

How sustainable is this understanding of things? Our discussion to this point suggests that our knowledge of the natural world is as socially constructed as our knowledge of the social world. The world of meaning into which we are born is a world of trees as much as it is a world of kinship, law, finance or nationalism. Understanding of trees is not something we come to individually 'in the course of our practical life'. As we have already considered, we are taught about trees. We learn that the trees are trees and we learn what trees should mean to us. In infancy and childhood we learn the meaning of trees from the culture in which we are reared. Trees are given a name for us and, along with the name, all kinds of understandings and associations. They are a source of livelihood if the setting for our childhood is a logging town. They constitute a focal point of lively aesthetic pleasure if we grow up within an artists' colony. They are the subject of deep reverence, fear perhaps, if we come to adulthood within an animist community. They may have very little meaning at all if we come from a slum neighbourhood in which there are no trees.

So the natural scientist does not come to the study of trees with a clean slate. To be sure, scientists have to lay aside much of the language they bring with them so as to study trees in a 'scientific' manner. They come to view trees, or whatever other natural phenomena they happen to be studying, within a particular horizon. But their starting point, inevitably, is the everyday understanding abroad in their culture. Blakie talks of scientists inventing concepts and theories to understand and explain natural phenomena. In fact, they bring many of the concepts and much of the theory with them to the task. The so-called theoretical meta-language is not a language existing in itself, distinct from the language spoken in the streets. It is ordinary language adapted to serve a specific purpose. What Blakie says of the social world is true of the natural world too: people develop meanings together and it is already interpreted before the scientist arrives.

The social world and the natural world are not to be seen, then, as distinct worlds existing side by side. They are one human world. We are born, each of us, into an already interpreted world and it is at once natural and social.

Conformism or critique?

It would seem important to distinguish accounts of constructionism where this social dimension of meaning is at centre stage from those where it is not. Using 'constructionism' for the former and 'constructionism' for the latter has echoes in the literature, even if the terminology is far from consistent. For example, after referring to the objectivist view that the facts of the world exist independently of us as observers, Schwandt (1994, p. 125) states that constructivists are 'deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective'. Constructivists, he adds, 'emphasise the instrumental and practical function of theory construction and knowing.'
This constructivism is primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist position and Schwandt contrasts it with a genuinely social constructionism:

Kenneth and Mary Gergen also challenge the idea of some objective basis for knowledge claims and examine the process of knowledge construction. But, instead of focusing on the matter of individual minds and cognitive processes, they turn their attention outward to the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge. Acknowledging a debt to the phenomenology of Peter Berger and Alfred Schütz, Kenneth Gergen (1985) labels his approach 'social constructionism' because it more adequately reflects the notion that the world that people create in the process of social exchange is a reality sui generis.

Contrary to the emphasis in radical constructivism, the focus here is not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes. (1994, p. 127)

It would appear useful, then, to reserve the term constructivism for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on 'the meaning-making activity of the individual mind' and to use constructionism where the focus includes 'the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning'.

We might apply this distinction to the views of Giddens and Blackie which we have just been discussing. In these terms, Giddens and Blackie seem to have a constructivist view of scientific knowledge of the natural world but a constructionist view of scientific knowledge of the social world. The natural scientist constructs knowledge of the natural world by engaging with it in scientific mode, but the social world is already interpreted 'before the social scientist arrives'. What our considerations to date support is a constructionist view of both.

Whatever the terminology, the distinction itself is an important one. Constructivism taken in this sense points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. This shaping of our minds by culture is to be welcomed as what makes us human and endows us with the freedom we enjoy. For all that, there are social constructionists aplenty who recognise that it is limiting as well as liberating and warn that, while welcome, it must also be called into question. On these terms, it can be said that constructivism tends to resist the critical spirit while constructionism tends to foster it.

Developing a critical spirit vis-à-vis our inherited understandings is no mean feat. For a start, there is the phenomenon of rejection to be reckoned with. We tend to take 'the sense we make of things' to be 'the way things are'. We blithely do that and, just as blithely, hand on our understandings as quite simply 'the truth'. Understandings transmitted in this way and gaining a place in our view of the world take deep root and we find ourselves victims of the 'tyranny of the familiar'. Inherited and prevailing understandings become nothing less than, in William Blake's time-honoured phrase, 'mind-forg'd manacles'.

Another aspect of the process can be described as sedimentation. Layers of interpretation get placed one upon another like levels of mineral deposit in the formation of rock. No longer is it a question of existential engagement with realities in the world but of building upon theoretical deposits already in place. In this way we become further and further removed from those realities, our sedimented cultural meanings serving as a barrier between us and them. For this reason, Ortega y Gasset describes inherited and prevailing meanings as 'masks' and 'screens' (1963, pp. 59–63) and warns us that, instead of engaging with the world, we find ourselves 'living on top of a culture that has already become false' (1958, p. 100).

Culture, the purest product of the live and the genuine, since it comes out of the fact that man feels with an awful anguish and a burning enthusiasm the relentless needs of which his life is made up, ends by becoming a falsification of that life . . .

Thanks to culture, man has gotten away from himself, separated himself from himself; culture intervenes between the real world and his real person. (Ortega y Gasset 1958, pp. 99–101)

Kurt Wolff agrees: our received notions blind us to reality (1989, p. 326). For Gabriel Marcel they are 'closed systems in which thought imprisons us' (1964, p. 35). John Wild, using the same metaphor, speaks of our 'imprisonment in a world of our own construction' (1955, p. 191). As we shall see in the next chapter, it is awareness of this restrictiveness inherent in cultural understandings that drives the phenomenological endeavour to go 'back to the things themselves'.

The critical tradition, encountered today most markedly in what we know as critical theory, is even more suspicious of the constructed meanings that culture bequeaths to us. It emphasises that particular sets of meanings, because they have come into being in and out of the give-and-take of social existence, exist to serve hegemonic interests. Each set of meanings supports particular power structures, resists moves
towards greater equity, and harbours oppression, manipulation and other modes of injustice and unfreedom.

Not everyone acknowledges the restrictive and oppressive aspects of our cultural inheritance. Many rest content with celebrating the boon without recognising the burden. For some, in fact, the social origin of our ways of understanding the world and living within it is enough to guarantee their objectivity and validity. Nurse researcher Patricia Benner writes in this vein:

No higher court for the individual exists than meanings or self-interpretations embedded in language, skills, and practices. No laws, structures, or mechanisms offer higher explanatory principles or greater predictive power than self-interpretations in the form of common meanings, personal concerns, and cultural practices shaped by a particular history. (1985, p. 3)

Such an optimistic reading of culture stands in sharp contrast to the suspicion of culture found in the critical tradition and in large segments of the phenomenological movement. John Breenkman draws our attention to the ‘restless consciousness . . . that senses in every work of culture the fact and the effects of social domination’ (1987, p. 3). Here Breenkman is expressly reflecting the attitude of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s own language (1969, p. 256) is even more trenchant: ‘There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’.

Already we are seeing the bifurcation that occurs within constructionist social science and in research emanating from it. We shall be exploring the interpretivist paradigm in the next two chapters. Notwithstanding the critique immanent in some hermeneutics and central to the traditional phenomenological movement, interpretivism is overwhelmingly oriented towards an analytical exploration of cultural meaning. In contrast, critical theory, along with many streams of feminist and postmodernist research, invites us to a much more critical stance.

This tension within constructionist research reflects its tortuous history.

The term ‘constructionism’, particularly ‘social constructionism’, derives largely from the work of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) and from Berger and Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality (1967). The ensuing development took the form of a ‘sociology of knowledge’. Nevertheless, the idea already had a long history when Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann took it up and can be found, for example, in both Hegel and Marx.

Marx’s premise is to the effect that ideology is linked to the economic ‘base’ of society. Those who own the means of production in any society have the power to effect the kind of consciousness that obtains in that society. In his 1859 Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx insists:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures are erected and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. (1961, p. 67)

Social being determines consciousness. Marx’s focus on economic power imbues his maxim with a note of radical critique. This critical spirit continues in the phenomenological movement emerging around the turn of the twentieth century. Of this movement Franz Brentano was the precursor, Edmund Husserl the founder, and Martin Heidegger an eminent exponent. Thoroughly imbued with—and, indeed, predicated upon—the spirit of social constructionism, the phenomenological movement declared itself from the start a philosophy of radical criticism, albeit with none of the economic determinism with which orthodox Marxism is so often charged. Phenomenology became existentialist in purpose and orientation after it was taken up by Ortega y Gasset, a self-professed existentialist (O’Connor 1979, p. 59) and Heidegger, who consistently denied that he was existentialist but presented human beings in existentialist terms for his own purposes. Existential phenomenology, spearheaded in France by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is militantly anti-idealist and thoroughly constructionist.

The critical thrust of constructionism was also maintained with vigour in parallel developments on the other side of the Atlantic. The early exponents of American pragmatism—Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey—were constructionist and critical. Unfortunately, pragmatism came to be popularised in forms that may have left it constructionist but effectively obscured its critical character. So effectively, and so quickly, was this accomplished that at various points the earlier pragmatists themselves came to be charged with the sins of their followers.

Thus we find Lewis Mumford describing the pragmatism of James and Dewey as an ‘attitude of compromise and accommodation’—as ‘pathetic’ acquiescence, even (1950, pp. 39, 49). Social critic Randolph Bourne, himself a pragmatist and an associate of Dewey, similarly deplores the uncritical character he sees pragmatism assuming in his contemporaries, including his erstwhile mentor. He wants pragmatism’s openness,
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optimism and progressivism to be tested 'inch by inch'. It is not enough, Bourne claims, merely to clarify the values we hold. We must rage and struggle until new values come out of the travail' (Bourne 1977, p. 345).

In Bourne's view, as Walter makes clear (1989, p. 58), 'mere eagerness for action and effectiveness, the realist's search for influence', is a vulgar pragmatism'. Mumford too looks for 'the values that arise out of vision' and depletes the inability of a pragmatism like Dewey's 'to recognize the part that vision must play'. The lack of vision and the consequent lack of values mean 'a maceration of human purposes', Mumford claims (1950, p. 48). 'We are living on fragments of the old cultures, or on abortions of the new.'

Bourne made his comments in the context of the United States' entry into World War I. Much later, during World War II, Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer accused pragmatism of being ineffective and accommodating even vis-à-vis the Holocaust. Horkheimer directed this 1944 diatribe at Dewey in particular, as the source of the 'most radical and consistent form of pragmatism' (1974, p. 48). According to Ross Posnock, Horkheimer succeeded in creating a rift that has reified into a general assumption among historians that pragmatism and critical theory are irreconcilable' (1991, p. 79).

These charges against pragmatism are harsh and, insofar as they are levied against the founders of pragmatism, betray a simplistic and distorted reading of pragmatism. Still, it needs to be noted that many followers of Peirce, James and Dewey have themselves been simplistic and distorting in what they put forward in the name of pragmatism. In their case, allegations of conformism and compromise can be said to be well founded. It must also be said that the rhetoric of some of the earlier pragmatists readily lent itself to misinterpretation.

One of the great names in the history of pragmatism is philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). It is from the thought of Mead that symbolic interactionism was born. Symbolic interactionism is pragmatism in sociological attire. In Mead's thought, every person is a social construction. We come to be persons in and out of interaction with our society. The 'Me'—the self as constructed via the 'generalised other'—plays a central role in the process. Mead's social behaviourism embodies a thoroughly social point of view. In the Meadian analysis, human behaviour is social in origin, shaped by social forces, and permeated by the social even in its biological and physical aspects. Consequently, Mead wants us to 'see the world whole'. Our ability to do that is developed socially through 'entering into the most highly organised logical, ethical, and aesthetic attitudes of the community' and coming to recognise 'the most extensive set of interwoven conditions that may determine thought, practice, and our fixation and enjoyment of values' (Mead 1964, p. 337). While Mead's thought is carefully nuanced, it has proved only too easy for his followers to slip from this account of the social genesis of the self to the grateful, unquestioning stance towards culture adopted by most interpretivist researchers today.

Here, then, is the dichotomy we discover within constructionist research. Whatever Mead's own thought, the symbolic interactionism that derives from him envisages a world far removed from that of critical inquirers. The world of the symbolic interactionist, like that of pragmatism as commonly conceived, is a peaceable and certainly growthful world. It is a world of intersubjectivity, interaction, community and communication, in and out of which we come to be persons and to live as persons. As such, it contrasts with the world that the critical theorist addresses. The world of the critical theorist is a battleground of hegemonic interests. In this world there are striking disparities in the distribution of power: some people have dominant power; others have far less power; most have no power at all. This is a world torn apart by dynamics of oppression, manipulation and coercion. Research methodologies basing themselves on the one and the other of these two envisaged worlds will be very different methodologies addressing very different purposes.

It may need to be re-emphasised that the chasm in constructionist thought being pinpointed here is between the critical approach and popularised versions of pragmatism. In its origins and its high points, pragmatism has more than enough in common with both phenomenology and critical theory for fruitful dialogue to take place. There are signs that a dialectic of this kind is emerging.

REALISM AND RELATIVISM

Social constructionism is at once realist and relativist.

To say that meaningful reality is socially constructed is not to say that it is not real. As we have noted earlier, constructionism in epistemology is perfectly compatible with a realism in ontology—and in more ways than one.

Stanley Fish underlines the reality of our social constructions when commenting publicly on the so-called Sokal Affair of 1996. It is no contradiction, Fish points out in the New York Times (21 May 1996), to say that something is socially constructed and also real. He draws an example from baseball. 'Balls' and 'strikes' are certainly socially constructed. They exist as such because of the rules of the game. Yet they
are real. Some people are paid as much as $3.5 million to produce them or prevent their production! They are constructions, and may change in their nature tomorrow if the powers that be decide to change the rules, but they are real, nonetheless.

Accordingly, those who contrast 'constructionism' and 'realism' are wide of the mark. Realism should be set, instead, against idealism. Idealism, we have already noted, is the philosophical view that what is real is somehow confined to what is in the mind, that is, it consists only of 'ideas' (to use the word employed by Descartes and his contemporaries). Social constructionism does not confine reality in this way.

Secondly, we should accept that social constructionism is relativist. What is said to be 'the way things are' is really just 'the sense we make of them'. Once this standpoint is embraced, we will obviously hold our understandings much more lightly and tentatively and far less dogmatically, seeing them as historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than eternal truths of some kind. Historical and cross-cultural comparisons should make us very aware that, at different times and in different places, there have been and are very divergent interpretations of the same phenomena.

A certain relativism is in order, therefore. We need to recognise that different people may well inhabit quite different worlds. Their different worlds constitute for them diverse ways of knowing, distinguishable sets of meanings, separate realities.

At the very least, this means that description and narration can no longer be seen as straightforwardly representational of reality. It is not a case of merely mirroring 'what is there'. When we describe something, we are, in the normal course of events, reporting how something is seen and reacted to, and thereby meaningfully constructed, within a given community or set of communities. When we narrate something, even in telling our very own story, it is (again in the normal course of events) the voice of our culture—its many voices, in fact—that is heard in what we say. A consideration of central importance, surely. Yet not all approaches to social inquiry and analysis professing to be constructionist have been equally successful in keeping it in view.

It has become something of a shibboleth for qualitative researchers to claim to be constructionist or constructivist, or both. We need to ensure that this is not just a glib claim, a matter of rhetoric only. If we make such a claim, we should reflect deeply on its significance. What does it mean for our research to be constructionist and constructivist? What implications does being constructionist/constructivist hold?