Unit 1, Reading 1

Constructive social work

Nigel Parton and Patrick O'Byrne

> Curiosity. To me it evokes 'concern'; it evokes the care one
> takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find
> strange what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to
> break up our familiarities; a fervor to grasp what is
> happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the
> traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.
>
> (Foucault, 1989, p.198)

Introduction

The central purpose of this opening chapter is two-fold: first to
outline what we mean by *constructive social work* and what we see
as some of its central elements; and second to discuss the
perspectives associated with *constructionism* which we see as
providing important theoretical frameworks for developing such an
approach to practice. Before doing so, however, we outline why we
feel it is important to engage in such a task at the present time.
Why do we need a *constructive* approach to social work practice
now?

While we believe it is an exaggeration to say that social work in the
United Kingdom is currently in 'crisis' (Clarke, 1993), there can be
little doubt that over recent years social work has been subject to
considerable criticism and is currently undergoing major change and
reconfiguration (Parton, 1996; Parton, 1998a) which is likely to
continue well into the new millennium following the publication of
the White Paper (1998) *Modernising Social Services*. In particular it

seems that practitioners are subject to a range of increasingly detailed procedures, targets, outcome measures and managerial oversights which have the effect of undermining both their professional skills and morale. As one of us has argued elsewhere: 'Increasingly it feels as if social work does not have a core theoretical knowledge base, and that there is a hole at the centre of the enterprise' (Parton, 1994b, p.30). There has been a failure to articulate and develop concepts and theories *for* practice in recent years which has done a considerable disservice not only to practitioners but, more crucially, the people with whom they work. In particular we have not built on a range of insights and concepts which had previously been derived from detailed analysis of what goes on between social worker and service user. Our central aim in this book is to help both practitioners and those in the social work academic to *(re)value* the importance of developing detailed and critical analysis of the meaningfulness of language and narrative between social worker and service user and to offer social workers ways of using narrative to construct change. Such a (re)orientation is of real urgency in that while there are various calls, for example in the White Paper (1998) *Modernising Social Services*, for practitioners to be 'user-centred', for partnership, empowerment and promoting independence, practitioners are given few clues as to the skills they require and the knowledge and theory they can use to do this.

The significance of such a task has recently been underlined by Olive Stevenson in her reflections on fifty years of child welfare practice in England and Wales since the Children Act 1948. While we have some major reservations with her analysis we do feel the issues to which she draws attention are important.

The reorganisation of social services, the expansion of training, the growing influence of sociological critiques and the increased

awareness of broader social policy issues are all seen by Stevenson to have contributed to the demise of enthusiasm for psychodynamic theory on social work courses: 'The 1960s saw the beginning of a decline; not only were there "too many" ways of understanding on offer to the intending social worker, they were often inadequately applied to the day-to-day work and sometimes taught from a position of hostility, masquerading as rational criticism, to the business of social work' (Stevenson, 1998b, pp.84–5).

She argues that the marginalising and general undermining of psychodynamic theory led to a major problem which has dogged both training and practice ever since – 'the failure to develop an indigenous, coherent body of practice theory *for* social work' (Stevenson, 1998a, p. 156, our emphasis). More particularly, and of direct relevance for our purposes here, she argues that 'it is not an exaggeration to see in the 1960s the beginning of a decline in the search for *meaning* which dogs us today, when *comprehensive assessments* may be devoid of theoretical substance' (Stevenson, 1998b, p. 84, original emphasis). While there has since been a proliferation of theories available (see, for example, Howe, 1987; Payne, 1997; Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 1998), according to Stevenson the problem 'remains the same as in the 1960s and 1970s: how to enable social workers to select, apply and integrate theory so that they address their work in child welfare more purposefully' (Stevenson, 1998b, p. 93).

We would argue, however, that the explanations for the changes in social work, particularly how it is practised in state agencies, are much more complex than Stevenson allows for, nor is it adequate to hark back to a 'golden age' in the post-war period. What is significant, however, is that the failure to develop theory *for* practice in recent years that she points to is somehow emblematic of the situation social work finds itself in. It is as if social workers

are deployed to process *needs* in an essentially bureaucratic way and slot human misery into categories or *risk* and vulnerability. As David Howe has argued (1992, 1996), social work has become legalised and proceduralised where manuals, guidelines and lines of accountability are carried out in a functional way almost to the exclusion of any creativity or skill in dealing with human relationships. As we will argue in the next chapter, there has been a failure to recognise the complex nature of social work. We would suggest, however, these failures to develop helpful and relevant theories *for* practice are as much a consequence as they are a cause of the changing nature of social work.

Recent years have witnessed something of a re-emergence of interest in trying to build on the earlier psychodynamic and ego psychological approaches in terms of the development of psychosocial relationship-based theories and an understanding of attachment for social work (Howe, 1995a; Howe, 1997; Howe, 1998; Howe and Hinings, 1995; Howe, Brandon, Hinings and Schofield, 1999). That is not our purpose here, however, for in many respects Stevenson is over-dismissive of certain developments particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s in terms of various writers' attempts to move beyond the psychodynamic approach. Far from being negative and hostile to social work we can see the impact of ideas associated with interactionism, labelling and deviancy theory, particularly the work of Erving Goffman (1968a, 1968b, 1971), Howard Becker (1963, 1964) and Ronald Laing (1965, 1971; Laing and Esterson, 1970) – as well as the neo-Marxism of the radical social work movement (Bailey and Brake, 1975) – as helping practitioners see that not only were their interventions influenced by a variety of social and political factors but that social work interventions were not necessarily in the interest of the client. Similarly, the 1980s and 1990s saw a growing

awareness of the importance of sexuality, gender, race, disability and age as well as social class as key factors in increasing exclusion, oppression and discrimination, and of the fact that social workers can play a key role in developing anti-discriminatory and empowering practice (see Thompson, 1997 and 1998, for a discussion of these issues).

There was also evidence in the 1970s and 1980s of others writing about what happened at the interpersonal, detailed level of exchanges between client and worker and in the process moved beyond the problems associated with adopting the traditional casework model based on the psychodynamic approach. They emphasised the importance of trying to make sense of how people understand their day-to-day experiences and how this affects how they act and feel towards other people. There was the development of an explicitly 'client-centred' approach which tried to articulate the art of helping in social work (Jordan, 1970, 1972, 1979; Brandon and Jordan, 1979; Wilkes, 1981; England, 1986) and which emphasised the use of self, the nature of and quality of the relationship, the understanding of experience, the search for meaning, the importance of communication and the transactional nature of the relationship between the social worker and the client and that an understanding of and use of language was central. The nature of this writing was such that neat and clear-cut theoretical models were not developed. However, it was on this terrain that the potential for developing theory *for* practice could have been developed and in many respects it is from this tradition that we can see the clearest connections and roots of what we are trying to develop here. Unfortunately since the mid-1980s such a tradition has been all but lost from the literature. At the heart of such an approach was the attempt to help the service-user recognise and understand themselves and bring about change both of meaning

and the perception of experiences. To do so, however, required the worker to engage in detailed awareness and use of the social work process and sensitive acknowledgement of the nature, limitations and potentials of their own role and authority. Crucially it saw social work as more than the application of either science or technique and that the skills required were qualitatively different from those needed to be an organisational functionary.

Constructive social work

What, therefore, do we understand by *constructive social work*? We have chosen the term for two reasons. First, we are drawing on what have come to be called constructionist and narrative approaches for both analysing and understanding social work and more particularly for developing our theoretical insights *for* practice. In many respects this can be seen as our major task.

Second, however, we have chosen the term *constructive* to reflect our wish to try and provide a perspective which is explicitly positive and tries to build on what is distinctive about social work and what we see as its major strengths – but which are in danger of being lost in the current climate. While we are using the term metaphorically we do not want to lose its literal meaning, for the core idea of *construction*, from the Latin to the present day, is that of *building* or of *putting together*. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *construction* as 'the action or manner of constructing' while *constructive* is defined as 'having a useful purpose; helpful'. These are ideas which we want to articulate and capture. The term *constructive* as we use it here is thus theoretical and metaphorical – both are important.

We are also clear that, while social work is an increasingly complex activity which has a range of allegiances and accountabilities, for us here the key focus is work *with* the service user, and it is the

failure, over recent years, to address how we can make sense of the face-to-face encounters of the work that has been missing and which we see as in urgent need of attention.

While we feel the approach we are developing here has wide potential for the way practitioners think about their work for example within the agency, with other agencies, organisations and professionals, work with communities and the wider society it is work with individuals and their immediate relationships that we concentrate on in this book. We do so for two reasons. First, because it is work with individuals and their immediate environment which, certainly in the United Kingdom, continues to be the focus of most social work; and second, because we feel this is an area which, in recent years, has received little attention. What is it that clients and users find most useful and helpful in their contact with social workers?

There are now numerous studies available which have attempted to identify what those on the receiving end of social work and the human services more generally have found most useful and helpful. David Howe (1993) has reviewed a wide cross-section of studies covering a sixty-year period which includes more traditional evaluations, studies which asked consumers about their experiences, and the work of those who have written personally about their experiences. A similar task has been carried out by Seligman (1995) in the United States. The central message that comes across time and time again is that it is not the particular model or techniques used by the social worker or counsellor which are significant but the quality and value of the experience. The key themes which users identify for success are summarised by Howe as 'accept me, understand me and talk with me'. This is not simply saying that good social work is about establishing a 'relationship', important though this is, but that the way we understand and come

to terms with difficult and painful experiences is through talk. *Talk* and *language* are key to making sense and taking control. It is the 'making sense' which is important, no matter what it looks like and where it comes from. A client who wishes to re-form the self and make sense of what is going on needs to immerse himself or herself in talk, for it is via *language* that the individual self is formed. As Howe demonstrates, it is less the specific procedures and techniques and more the opportunity to engage in an active *conversation* about oneself that brings about understanding and change. Users say clearly that what they value is the experience of talking which gives them the opportunity to better control and cope with their life and try and change it accordingly. Howe concludes his study by arguing:

> If one distils and distils the messages that are contained in the accounts given by clients of their experiences of counselling and therapy – the need for acceptance and regard, and the search for understanding and meaning – it might be possible to claim that one is left with one very condensed but none the less quintessential observation: *clients seek to control the meaning of their own experience and the meanings that others give to that experience*. Control helps clients to cope, and it empowers. It boost self-esteem and personal confidence, and ultimately it encourages people to believe that they are valued and worthwhile human beings.
>
> (Howe, 1993, p. 195, original emphasis)

Similarly, studies of successful family therapy demonstrate that it is the strength of the therapeutic alliance with someone whom the recipients perceive as warm, trustworthy, non-judgmental and empathic which is key. It seems that telling one's story in one's own terms and having it heard respectfully is a very necessary

ingredient for change to begin to occur. It may be that the psychodynamic approach's greatest contribution had little to do with providing an understanding of the functioning of the ego, the superego and the id but the importance of the validation that a person receives simply in telling their story to an attentive listener. The idea of careful listening is a relatively new theme in family therapy and counselling (Anderson, 1987; Hoffman, 1993) but traditionally has been seen as central to the social work process for it has been recognised that listening creates a space for thinking and reflection (Rees and Wallace, 1982; Fisher, 1983). For example, the traditional 'principles of social work' espoused by Biestek (1961) include good individualised listening, as well as: availability; being non-judgmental and non-directive; and working on the basis of trust and confidentiality.

While these issues have always been central to writers who have tried to develop the 'client-centred' approaches, an explicit recognition, theoretically, of the importance of language and narrative has not been recognised. Yet ironically back in 1968 Noel Timms (1968) was arguing that it was vital that social work recognise the centrality of language to its practice. He wrote that 'it is surprising that social workers, who are largely dependent on language, should have given such little attention to words and to what it means to speak a language' (Timms, 1968, p. 1), particularly as at the time the activity was often characterised as an attempt to 'cure through talk', and their case records contained in summary or verbatim form accounts of innumerable conversations with their clients. He felt there was a major incongruity which needed to be rectified – social work's lack of any systematic critical attention to language when words play such a crucial role in both social work education and practice.

He went beyond identifying this incongruity, however, and located language in a theoretical framework which in many respects can be seen to prefigure versions of constructionism which were to emerge some years later. He argued that language plays a critical part in the constitution of our social life, not simply in its description. This was true whether we are concerned with public relationships, with those of a more intimate nature, or, with what he described as 'man's *[sic]* relationship with himself' (p. 4). He saw language as key in the creation and maintenance of human relations. For 'language is the medium through which man becomes conscious of his inner self and at the same time it is the key to the understanding of his outer relationships. It unites him with, but also differentiates him from, others' (p. 4). Unfortunately the issue and challenge which Timms identified has rarely been addressed since.

It seems we have become so concerned about assessing, managing, planning, monitoring and accounting that we have lost the core of what social workers and social work have to offer in terms of the narrative and interactional processes involved. We need a way of bringing language, listening and talking back in but in a way which is theoretically informed and usable so that we recognise it for what it is – central to social work. As we will demonstrate, understanding as a collaborative process is a core idea in constructionism. Here meaning and understanding are matters of negotiation between the participants in conversation and thus the understanding of and use of language is seen as central to the helping process. What, however, do we understand by constructionism for the purposes of informing theory *for* practice?

Some central themes in constructionism

While constructionist perspectives have only recently begun to enter social work in any explicit sense (Rodwell, 1990, 1998; Witkin, 1991; Atherton, 1993; Laird, 1993; Dean, 1993: Rodwell and Wood,

1994; Thyer, 1994; Franklin, 1995; Jokinen *et al.*, 1999), it is important to recognise that they have become increasingly widespread in various areas of Western intellectual life over a number of years. They have been central to some of the most important developments and heated debates in literacy studies, philosophy, history, socio-legal studies, anthropology, sociology and psychology. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that there is one single stance or position that can exemplify the work of those that it would be reasonable to include under the umbrella term 'constructionism'.

However, while Mike Lynch is critical of attempts to assert that there is something deeper and more coherent to the various writers and approaches which are happy to use the term he does assert that 'nothing could be more definitive of constructionism than the thesis that social identities depend on audience ascriptions' (1998, p. 14). This is perhaps well illustrated by telling a story related by Sarbin and Kitsuse (1994, p. 2) about three baseball umpires who are reflecting on their professional practice of calling balls and strikes. The first, a self-confident realist, says, 'I call 'em the way they are', to which the second, who leans towards phenomenological analysis, says, 'I call 'em as I see 'em', and the third closes the discussion with 'They ain't nothin' until I call 'em', thus alluding to her/his constructionist sympathies. The contrast between the realist umpire and the social constructionist umpire illustrates Lynch's point that audience, or as in this case umpire, ascription is key to social identity. Similar stories can be told about all games; for example in soccer is a foul always a foul or does it depend on whether the referee calls something a foul? Constructionist umpires or referees would argue that it doesn't exist until they call it and, in calling it, assign meaning to it. While such

stories may seem inappropriately 'playful' they do illustrate what is distinctive about constructionism.

A little closer to our concerns, constructionist perspectives have become increasingly common in the sociological study of social problems in the United States and are particularly associated with the work of Spector and Kitsuse (1987) which has itself led to considerable theoretical debate (Holstein and Miller, 1993; Miller and Holstein, 1993). However, such an approach has a much longer heritage (see Waller, 1936) and in 1941 Fuller and Myers argued that:

> A social problem is a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm which they cherish. Every social problem thus consists of an *objective condition* and a *subjective definition*. The objective condition is a verifiable situation which can be checked as to existence and magnitude (proportions) by impartial and trained observers. The subjective definition is the awareness of certain individuals that the condition is a threat to certain cherished values.
>
> (Fuller and Myers, 1941, p. 320, original emphasis)

However, while Fuller and Myers suggested that objective conditions are not sufficient on their own to explain why something should become a social problem, they stopped short of arguing that objective conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient. Yet as Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1973) subsequently argued, it is the *assertion* that a problem exists that is key. The focus for analysing the emergence and maintenance of issues as social problems thus becomes the way that claims-makers *construct* certain areas of social life as problematic. Such an approach informed a study that one of us carried out in the early 1980s into the problem of child abuse (Parton, 1985). There are also studies

which analyse the way practitioners – whether these be police, doctors or whoever – actively construct aspects of everyday life as problems in the micro-sense by doing *social problems work* (see, for example, Miller, 1992; Holstein and Miller, 1997).

There are now a number of research studies which explicitly use constructionist methodologies for analysing and trying to make transparent what is going on in social work encounters with clients and in social work practice more generally (see Hall, 1997; Jokinen *et al*., 1999; Karvinen *et al*., 1999; Parton, Thorpe and Wattam, 1997; Pithouse, 1998, for example). The central message of this research tends to be that, far from being neutral, rational and scientific, social work practice is not only variable but is inherently moral and manipulative and invariably not in the interests of the service users. The emphasis in such research tends to be to *deconstruct* practice and thus demonstrate it is not nearly as benign as may be assumed. However, the practical contributions of such research to developing *constructive* practice is rarely made apparent.

Perhaps the key event in introducing the notion of 'social constructionism' to a much wider academic audience was the publication in 1967 of Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality*, and while a number of commentators have argued that they developed a particular version of social constructionism, the choice of 'social constructionist' in the title was to prove a useful hook for subsequent writers to hang their own ideas on to. Berger and Luckman took issue with images of society which were dominant in social theory in the post-war period and which they saw as excessively rationalistic and functional, giving little room for individual freedom and agency. They were concerned that something had gone terribly wrong with the Enlightenment project such that, probably unintentionally, most social theories had

become antihumanistic and were overly concerned with the impersonal laws of social order rather than how order was an outcome of human action, choice and creativity.

They set themselves two tasks. First, to specify the main premises and concepts that clarify the nature of everyday life. Drawing from the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1975) and Alfred Schutz (1962–6), they introduced a range of concepts such as intentional consciousness, multiple realities, the practical attitude, intersubjectivity and so on, in order to frame everyday life as a fluid, multiple, precariously negotiated achievement in interaction. Their second and perhaps prime aim was to offer a general theory of the social origins and maintenance of social institutions. Their principal thesis was that individuals in interaction create social worlds through their linguistic, symbolic activity for the purpose of providing coherence and purpose to an essentially open-ended, unformed human existence. Society is neither a system, a mechanism, nor an organism; it is a symbolic construct composed of ideas, meanings and language which is all the time changing through human action and imposing constraints and possibilities on human actors themselves.

What such an approach does is to emphasise the *processes* through which people define themselves (their identities) and their environments. People do so by participating in their social worlds, interacting with others, and assigning meaning to aspects of their experience. *Constructing* social realities is seen as an ongoing aspect of people's everyday lives and relationships.

In more recent years, such approaches have increasingly recognised the *rhetorical* aspects of construction, in that it is partly a process of *persuading* one's self and others that one rendering of social reality is more legitimate or credible than any other.

While constructionism made a relatively late entry into psychology there are now numerous examples where such thinking is making a direct impact. Michael Billig (1987) and more recently John Shotter (1993) have, for example, analysed thinking as a rhetorical process where conservation and language are key to understanding identity. Thinking is seen not as a private or personal activity, but as a micropolitical and interactional process concerned with and categorising everyday life and developing arguments that justify preferred realities and courses of action. Similarly, Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that language orders our perceptions and makes things happen. They suggest that what they call social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories existing in the social and natural world, they actively *construct* a version of those things. They do not just describe things, they *do* things and thus have social and political implications. Therefore relating this back to our earlier analysis, social problems and personal troubles are versions of events or situations which people use to justify some courses of action and to undermine others. Constructions thus have real implications for all concerned both practically and politically.

John Shotter's work in social psychology is of particular interest, especially when he argues that 'our talk (and our writing) about talk is beginning to take a dialogical or a conversational turn' (Shotter, 1993, p. 1) His basic premise is that it is within the dynamically sustained context of actively constructed relations that what is talked about gets its meaning. Thus, instead of focusing upon how individuals come to know the objects and entities in the world around them, we should be more interested in how people first develop and sustain ways of relating themselves to each other in their talk, and then, from within these ways of talking, make sense of their surroundings. He calls his approach a *rhetorical-responsive*

version of social constructionism because the account of language he offers is a communicational, conversational or dialogical account in which people's responsive understanding of each other is primary. A part of what we must learn in growing up, if we want to be perceived as speaking (and writing) authoritatively about so-called factual matters, is how to *respond* to the others around us should they challenge our claims. This includes *conversations* with ourselves. We must *speak* with an awareness of the possibility of such challenges, and be able to reply to them by justifying our claims. This is a *rhetorical* rather than a referential or representational form of language because rather than merely claiming to depict or reflect a state of affairs or an external reality, talk and language can have the effect of *moving* people to action and changing their views and perceptions. Language can be seen as not just constituting reality but actively changing it.

Shotter calls the approach rhetorical because rhetoric makes use of metaphors which otherwise can seem unconnected. Rhetoric gives intelligible linguistic form to otherwise merely sensed feelings or tendencies shared between speakers (and writers) and their audiences.

This version of constructionism argues that we need to understand language as a communicational, conversational or dialogical process in which people's responsive understanding of each other is primary. What matters is not so much the conclusions arrived at as the terms within which arguments are conducted. For to talk in new ways it to *construct* new forms of social relations, and to *construct* new forms of social relations is to *construct* new ways of being for ourselves.

The 'postmodern' turn

More recently the interest in constructionism has been further stimulated by the emergence in both North America and Britain of a variety of perspectives which have been termed 'postmodern' and which have again only begun to enter the social work domain in recent years (Aldridge, 1996; Dominelli, 1996; Fawcett *et al*., 2000; Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995; Gorman, 1993; Healy, 1999; Howe, 1994; Leonard, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997; Lloyd, 1998; McBeath and Webb, 1991; Meinert, Pardeck and Murphy, 1998; Pardeck, Murphy and Chung, 1994; Parton, 1994a, 1994b; Peese and Fook, 1999; Pietroni, 1995; Pozatek, 1994; Rojek, Peacock and Collins, 1988; Sands and Nuccio, 1992). While it is not our intention to discuss how we see developments and debates associated with constructionism relating, conceptually and theoretically, to those associated with 'postmodernism', it is important to note that there are a number of similar themes. This is not surprising when we recognise that numerous theorists are bracketed under both headings and a number of writers seem to use the terms almost interchangeably. For us, however, we see social constructionism as being concerned with a more particular methodological stance, whereas 'postmodernity' is, potentially, much more fundamental in its implications – theoretically, politically, and practically. However, concerns related to 'postmodernity' have provided a fertile context in which an interest in constructionism can flourish. Similarly, constructionist perspectives themselves can be seen to make a significant contribution to underlining the concerns to which debates about 'postmodernity' themselves draw attention (for two interesting parallel texts on these issues, see Good and Velody, 1998; Velody and Williams, 1998).

The term 'postmodernity' was first used in the 1930s but became increasingly common in the areas of literature, architecture,

philosophy and the arts more generally from the 1060s onwards (Turner, 1990; Featherstone, 1988) and came to particular prominence with the publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984. While perhaps 'postmodern' perspectives are united by a number of cultural projects which proclaim a commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference, it is perhaps their critiques of modernity which have provided most influential and contentious.

Modernity as a summary term is seen to refer to the cluster of social, economic and political systems which emerged in the West with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. Unlike the pre-modern, modernity assumed that human order is neither natural nor God-given, but is vulnerable and contingent. However, by the development and application of science, nature could be subject to human control. The distinguishing features of modernity are seen to be: the understanding of history as having a definite and progressive direction; the attempt to develop universal categories of experience; the idea that reason can provide a basis for all activities; and that the nation state could coordinate and advance such developments for the whole society. The guiding principle of modernity is the search to establish reliable foundations for knowledge. It aims to identify the central truths about the world but also assumes that truth does not reside on the surface of things but is hidden by appearances. The two crucial elements of modernity in the post-Enlightenment period were thus seen as the progressive union of scientific *objectivity* and politico-economic *rationality* (our emphasis, Parton, 1994a).

In the modern 'frame' the goal is to produce knowledge about a chosen aspect of the physical or social world by which we can claim *greater certainty*. At that point we can confer a sense of truth about that knowledge, and also confer on the people producing knowledge

(for example, scientists or professionals) the status of holder-of-truth and expert about the aspect of the world. 'In short, the modernist equation is: *external reality – objective knowledge – certainty about that knowledge – claim to truth – expert status given to holder-of-truth/knowledge*. Modernist truth is indeed bound to certainty, external reality and objective knowledge. And modernism both relies on (and produces) a clear splitting of the subject who want to know, and the object which is being observed for knowledge and truth' (Flaskas, 1997, p. 5, original emphasis).

Increasingly, however, there is a recognition that we now inhabit a world which has become disorientated, disturbed and subject to doubt. The pursuit of order and control, the promotion of calculability, belief in progress, science and rationality and other features which were so intrinsic to modernity are being undermined by a simultaneous range of unsettling conditions and experiences. In part this is related to the major social, economic and cultural transformations that have characterised recent times in terms of globalisation, the increasing significance of media and the widening networks of information technology which transform and transmit knowledge, the changes in modes of consumption and production and the increased awareness of risk and uncertainty. More fundamentally, however, it is related to changing notions of ontology (who we are and our sense of being) and epistemology (how we know what we know).

It is argued that modernism's promise to deliver order, certainty and security has been unfulfilled and increasingly it is felt there are no transcendental and universal criteria of truth (science), judgement (ethics) and taste (aesthetics). The overriding belief in reason and rationality is disappearing as there is a collapse of consensus related to any 'grand narratives' (overarching theories or explanations) and their articulation of progress, emancipation and

perfection and what constitutes the centres of authority and truth. The rejection of the idea that any one theory or system of belief can ever reveal the truth, and the emphasis on the plurality of truth and 'the will to truth', captures some of the essential elements associated with 'postmodernity'. While contemporary times have been called variously 'late modern', 'post-industrial', and 'post-traditional' as well as 'postmodern', there is wide agreement on the key elements of social transformation under discussion in terms of: the increasing *pace* of change; the growing significance of *difference*, *plurality* and the growth of various new political movements and strategies; and the pervasive awareness of *relativities*, the opening up on individual 'choice' and 'freedom' and, which will become central for our purposes, the *increasing awareness of the socially constructed nature of reality*. Following Smart, 'postmodern' means contingency and ambivalence. To put it another way, it means living without illusions and with uncertainty' (Smart, 1999, p. 16).

'Postmodernity' is thus characterised by the fragmentation of modernity into forms of institutional pluralism, marked by increasing awareness of difference, contingency, relativism and ambivalence – all of which modernity sought (and claimed) to have overcome. It is this constant and growing questioning of modern approaches and modern resolutions that has been diagnosed as symptomatic of the 'postmodern' condition (Parton, 1994a); and it is the conception of 'postmodernity' as the condition of modernity coming to its senses, emancipated from false consciousness which is seen as key (Bauman, 1992). Truth thus now takes the guise of 'truth' and is centred neither in God's word (as in the pre-modern) nor human reason (as in the modern) but is decentred and localised so that many 'truths' are possible, dependent on different times and different places.

In many respects the modern, because of its reliance on allegedly universal categories and neutral rationality, is not seen as necessarily humanitarian, progressive or emancipatory as was often assumed, but can be exploitative and repressive because of its failure to recognise difference. There is a failure to recognise the nature, consequences and implications of relying on totalising belief systems whether these be capitalist, socialist, patriarchal, ablist, colonial, or whatever. The views, experiences and interests of white, middle-class, able-boded males have invariably been embedded in ideas, theories and approaches but presented as if they were universal, objective and neutral.

In the 'postmodern' there is thus a considerable destabilisation of a core assumption of modernism – that the way something is represented closely reflects its underlying reality. For if nothing is inherently or immutably true nothing is inherently or immutably real. In a world where everything is increasingly mediated and relayed via complex systems of representation, the symbols that are used have a life of their own and take on their meaning, not on the basis of what reality they are meant to represent, but the context in which they are used. It is in this sense that Baudrillard (1983, 1990) argues that the distinctions between concepts and objects, representations and reality, and theory and practice no longer hold – if they ever did. Perhaps most crucially 'the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths' (Rorty, 1979, p. 359).

An understanding of language is thus central to approaches which are sympathetic to the 'postmodern'. This is the thesis, originally advanced by Wittgenstein (1963) and developed by Lyotard (1984), that knowledge can only be derived from 'language games'. Instead of merely being a tool that points to objects, language mediates everything that is known. Far from having a separate existence,

reality is embedded in interpretation so that 'truth' is a product of language not reality. We cannot transcend interrogation and assume that reality is simply waiting to be discovered; it emerges from the linguistic acts of persons. An understanding of the part that language plays in the formation of human selves, human thought and human subjectivity thus underpins 'postmodern' perspectives.

Questions about knowledge, difference, power and subjectivity have also been central preoccupations of feminism and other theoretical and political movements which, in more recent years, have tried to give voice to the marginalised and excluded sections of society. Feminists, for example, have contested what counts as knowledge and *truth* and have demonstrated how language constructs sexism and have elaborated notions of power which locate it within the everyday and the local. The importance of *difference* has been further recognised via the recognition of the range of experiences amongst women, particularly arising from their ethnicity and social class (Butler and Scott, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Williams, 1996). Theoretical developments in different areas have thus helped underline some of the central themes in 'postmodernism'.

However, because there are probably as many forms of 'postmodernism' as there are 'postmodernists' there are many divergent and even contradictory possibilities that are opened up. Within this diversity, as far as the social sciences are concerned, Rosenau (1992) has delineated two broad orientations which we feel are helpful in taking our thinking forward: the *sceptical* 'postmodernists' and the *affirmative* 'postmodernists'.

She argues that *sceptical* 'postmodernists' offer a distrustful, pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment of contemporary times characterised by fragmentation, disintegration, meaninglessness, an absence of moral parameters and social chaos. She calls this the

22

dark side of 'postmodernism', the 'postmodernism' of despair that speaks of the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth and the abrogation of the order of representation. It is concerned about the destructive character of modernity and points to unsurpassable uncertainty where everything is alienating, hopeless and ambiguous and where no social, political or practical project is worthy of commitment. If, as the sceptics claim, there is no truth then all we are left with is parody and play – the play of words and meaning.

While the *affirmative* 'postmodernists' agree with the sceptics' critique of modernity, particularly in terms of science and rationality, they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the possibilities of the 'postmodern' age and are positively oriented towards the importance of *process*. They are much more open to the potential for practical actions and are not just concerned with *deconstruction* but with *reconstruction*. While they seek a tentative approach to practice there is a central recognition that normative choices and trying to *build* practical and political coalitions and collaboration lies at the heart of everyday life. In recognising that subject(s) can only be understood in context(s) it recognises the importance of interdependence and the social and political cultures in which we live. It is not the death of the subject that is of greatest interest so much as the recognition of the diverse nature of subjectivities which is the focus. Following Bauman (1992, 1993), there is a recognition that in opening up individuals to the possibilities of choice and responsibility they are truly made up as moral. Rather than seeing the disappearance of the subject it is argued there has been a widening in the constructability of identities from ascriptive and natural (in the pre-modern), to socially acquired and quasi-natural (in the modern), to chosen and socially negotiated (in the 'postmodern') (Hollis, 1985). Because of

the intimate relationship between language and reality, persons are seen as placed in positions where they can create their own destiny. They are given agency, for through the exercise of will persons are able to invent reality.

It is not so much that persons have to struggle to find meaning within a melange of meaningless, but they are placed at the centre of reality. Instead of making sense out of events, persons invent options and make them real. Persons are deemed to have the possibilities of positive freedoms and positive choices and the ability to re-moralise and re-invent their personal and social worlds.

While it is clearly difficult to accommodate *sceptical postmodernism* with social work, perspectives offered by *affirmative postmodernism* are much more suggestive in helping us to think about and open up *constructive* approaches to practice – particularly the emphasis on 'truth re-definition'. It is interpretative and prioritises receptivity, dialogue, listening to and talking with the other. It reveals paradox, myth and story, and persuades by questions, hints, metaphors and invitations to the possible rather than by relying on science and trying to approximate truth.

Conclusions

So what are some of the key themes of constructionism which we are looking to build on in the following chapters? Viv Burr (1995) has usefully summarised what she identifies as the key characteristics of social constructionist approaches. While we will return to some of the dilemmas that such an approach poses for social workers, and how we feel they can be addressed and taken forward towards the end of the book, they provide a helpful provisional statement for us at this point in our argument and help us bring together some of the ideas we have been discussing in this chapter.

Firstly, constructionism insists that we develop a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world including ourselves. It suggests we should be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically reveal its nature to us in any straightforward way. It *problematises* 'the obvious', the 'real' and, crucially, the 'taken-for-granted'.

It challenges the view that conventional knowledge is based upon unbiased observation and that we can therefore easily separate subject and object, the perceived and the real. It is therefore highly suspicious of what is referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science – the assumption that the nature of the world can be revealed simply by observation and that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears and the categories that we use to divide and interpret it.

Secondly, such categories and concepts are seen as historically and culturally specific and therefore vary over time and place. Particular forms of knowledge are not only the products of their history and culture and are therefore artefacts of it but there are thus numerous forms of knowledge available. We cannot assume that *our* ways of understanding are necessarily the same as others' and are any nearer the truth.

Thirdly, knowledge of the world is developed between people in their daily *interactions* such that we should be centrally concerned with the *social processes* whereby this comes about and can be changed. These *negotiated* understandings can take a variety of different forms which thereby invite different kinds of action. However, while constructions of the world sustain some patterns of action they also exclude others. Thus rather than being able to separate knowledge and action they are intimately interrelated.

Fourthly, because the social world, including ourselves as people, is the product of social processes, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature to the world 'out there'. There are no essences inside things or people which are hidden and which make them what they are. Constructionism is not just saying that one's culture has an impact on our nature nor even that our nature is a product of the environment or social context. It is not simply a question of 'nature' or 'nurture', as both see the person as having some definable and discoverable essence – this is not consistent with constructionism.

Ian Hacking (1999) has recently argued that while there are various approaches to and forms of social constructionism there are some central underlying assumptions that are held to. Social constructionists, when considering x – which may be a problem, a category, a trouble or whatever – take the view that: (1) in the present state of affairs, x is taken for granted, so that x *appears* inevitable; but that (2) x need not have existed or need not be as it is, it is not determined by the nature of things and is thus not inevitable; and further (3) that x is quite bad as it is and therefore (4) we would be much better off if x were done away with or at least radically changed. While it is not necessarily the case that if you hold with (1) and (2) then (3) and (4) should follow, it is our view that problematising and criticising with a view to change and transformation are central to the approach we take here and are key elements to *constructive social work*. The four underlying assumptions of social constructionism outlined by Hacking very much inform our approach.

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