1 Introduction

> … problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. (Wittgenstein, 1953, aphorism 109)

There have been curious rumblings of late in the social sciences and the helping professions that draw from them. Increasing numbers of academics have called into question the notion that the social sciences could do for the helping professions what the natural sciences have done for engineering or biomedicine. Even the language used for articulating such notions has become suspect, as communications theorists and linguistic philosophers have turned our most fundamental social reality – being in conversation with each other – into a matter of critical reflection. At the same time, larger cultural issues have come to the fore. Where are women and minority culture people represented in the so-called universal knowledge of 'man' to be applied in helping others? The very foundations of what seemed a secure knowledge base have been under assault. New helping practices, and ways of thinking about them, have been emerging that look positively anarchic compared to orderly helping protocols and received social scientific knowledge about humans, and humans in interaction. The ideals of enlightenment science, applied to human endeavours and concerns, if you go along with the critics, come up short in delivering the equivalents of the kinds of understandings and practices that get bridges built, or people on the moon. Worse, social scientists have been accused of 'othering' people in ways that reduce them to what cybernetician Heinz von Foerster terms 'trivial machines' (e.g., 2003). When extended to the thinking and conversational practices of helping professionals, these traditional assumptions about humans and what it means to engage them often translate clients into providers of needed information and passive recipients of professional understandings and directives. This approach to helping practice, and to the social sciences that support it, continues to flourish. But, a sizeable minority of therapists, educators, human relations experts, organizational development professionals and others have begun to engage clients in new ways, as 'new' ideas about humans and change have emerged.

Therapeutic talk or discourse has traditionally been seen as secondary to the actual business of therapy – a necessary conduit for exchanging information between therapist and client, but seldom more. Therapy primarily developed, as have most applied sciences (such as medicine and engineering), by mapping particular experiential domains in ways responsive to human intervention. The role

that discourse plays in such mapping and intervening endeavours – whether by scientists or lay folk – has only recently been recognized as a focus for analysis and intervention. This recognition serves to remind us that the phenomena of our experience cannot objectively announce their meanings and implications to us. Talk is not a neutral 'tool' used to get 'the real work' done: talk is where the real work of therapy happens (Friedman, 1993; Maranhão, 1986).

At the same time, there has been a clear increase over the past few decades in the number of people in academic psychology adopting what we can loosely term 'qualitative methods' in their investigations, using these to elucidate how humans conduct their everyday affairs. Yet such investigators are very much second-class citizens within the pecking order of their discipline, which defines itself as a science, firmly committed to the formulation of research questions that can be empirically pursued by quantitative measurements in a hypothetico-deductive framework of experimentation at the individual level, or through quantifiable survey and questionnaire methods across groups of individuals at the social level. Science is good – look what it has done for human living conditions – and consequently any work outside the dominant paradigm cannot be as good. Yet there is a contradiction at the root of this preferential valuing of the experimental approach over any other, for it is a judgement that cannot be decided by performing an experiment. Worse, a contradiction would remain even if this judgement were capable of being decided in this way: unless those conducting an experiment are able to tell what, through their actions, they are responsible for finding and what would have happened anyway, then experiments would not be a viable method of finding out anything. A sense of responsibility as to the outcomes of one's actions is fundamental to conducting experiments, and successful scientists gain their reputations on that basis (otherwise why would scientists cite research by author and date?).

In addition, there has been a growing sense over the past fifty years that simplistic and determinist accounts of human activity are just that. In a changing world there has arisen a more pressing concern with issues of rights, relationships and seemingly arbitrary changes in how lives and perceptions are transformed over time. Such changes clearly do not occur as a result of biological processes, but as a result of the differing ways that meanings are constructed and reconstructed through peoples' histories in interacting with each other: how people experience the world and make sense of it is primarily the product of socio-cultural processes. Further, these processes have their human roots in history rather than biology. It is more the case that 'knowledge and social action go together' in development (Burr, 2003: 5), rather than that knowledge is separate from action and somehow informs it. And further, there has been the recognition that there is a political component to social science in general and psychology in particular – that 'facts' are not neutral and out there waiting to be discovered, so as to guarantee one overarching account of 'this is the way things are'. Instead, such 'facts' are constructed in fields of activities, and worked up into ideologies that benefit some people while disempowering others.

These issues as to the political status of facts and the ideologies they enable are of crucial importance in a world undergoing globalization. Many different indigenous groups have identified an oppressive aspect to the colonial use of the behavioural sciences when they have been variously imposed upon them. Their own values have been disrespected, because they were held to be based on superstitions, and not on science. Worse might follow in the future as the developed economies of the west play out their new roles in interacting with those of the developing countries rooted in very different indigenous traditions. A new imperialism is potentially very dangerous here. Cultural clashes at the level of not understanding each other's mundane behaviours are potentially explosive. A pivotal event in western–Asian relations occurred in February 1972. President Richard Nixon of the USA was making a state visit to China, at a time when the Vietnamese war was in progress. At the state banquet in Nixon's honour, the Chinese premier selected morsels from the communal dish for Nixon with his own chopsticks. By this action, Premier Chou extended to Nixon a great honour, for to make this action signalled that Nixon was 'one of the family'. From Nixon's cultural perspective, the act was an insult: 'I am quite capable of making my own choices, and your personal chopsticks are contaminated: please, at least, use the public utensils, but don't presume to make choices for me.' The misunderstanding was, fortunately, resolved successfully, but the potential for affront is clear. The potential for worse consequences is heightened if the principles of western, empirical facts about the social psychology of human nature are imposed on people emerging from very different cultural backgrounds.

This same point applies within, not just between, cultures. Western cultures have a range of helping professions that have particular codes of practice. Typically, such practices have developed as applications of a knowledge base that is seen as foundational. For example, in education, theories of learning are hypothesized and then evaluated for their practical applications. The key has been that practitioners can point to such a body of knowledge to warrant the continued use of such practices. One such foundational assumption has been that human and social problems can be 'correctly' identified and then correspondingly addressed with interventions derived from such knowledge. The scare quotes around 'correctly' underscore how theory-driven and tautological this whole approach to explaining and addressing problems can be. None of this is news to practitioners. In recent decades, new practices tied to new theories (for which there is empirical support) have proliferated. Psychotherapy illustrates this well with its over 400 recognized approaches. Which one of these should we nail our colours to? They cannot all be correct, can they? On this point Lynn Hoffman (2002), a prominent figure in the history of family therapy, offers a radical insight: that we have reached a social constructionist era in therapy (e.g., Strong and Paré, 2004; Gubrium and Holstein, 2007), where instead of continuing to develop and adhere to particular models of practice we should set them aside for useful and ethically sound ideas.

The worries we have just raised are generally regarded by those who practise a scientific behavioural science as those of 'the looney fringe', people who have been

mistakenly lured into various sets of unreliable ideas – such as post-structuralism or postmodernism. But the points we have raised above are rooted in a deeper history, nowhere more intensely concentrated than in a methodological debate in Germany in the mid-1800s: the *Methodenstreit* (literally, 'strife over methods'). Initially confined to the field of economics, it became spread out across the entire gamut of the social sciences. The debate was centred on exactly the issues we have been noting above: can the human sciences be pursued with the same methods that are used in the natural sciences? The debate revolved around the issues we recognize today: 'understanding' (which is sought in the human sciences) versus 'explanation' (which is sought in the natural sciences). It is not a debate that has been fully resolved, partly because in everyday culture we, as English speakers, do not clearly distinguish these two terms.

Consider the following statements:

David is depressed because he has just lost his job.
David is depressed because of an imbalance in the chemistry of his brain.

In everyday parlance, both of these statements offer us some kind of explanation as to why David is depressed, but, at the same time, we would feel that both offer us a way of understanding why he is in that state. Yet, these are very different kinds of statements. The first tells us about David's situation as a person immersed in experiences of his world that mean certain things for him; the second tells us about how particular chemicals alter his mood. What has never been properly resolved, even today, is how David's experiences may have been structured in such a way that losing his job might lead to a chemical imbalances that alter his mood; while the same event in another's life might lead to a different set of chemicals being released that result in his becoming euphoric; or in yet another have no discernible effect whatsoever. And why no resolution?

Any answer here is necessarily multi-faceted and imprecise. Experience, or subjectivity, is at the root of things. In our historically inherited ways of looking at the world, experiences are subjective, difficult to investigate, and since they come with wide variations of mood, difficult to do much about if we, or others, report them as problematic. People's reactions to situations require normative evaluations: is it more normal for David to be depressed at losing his job; his colleague to be ecstatic; or a third person not to apparently give a damn? Having made a judgement that David's or the others' experiences of their situations need to be changed (and on what grounds can that decision be made?), what can be done about it that might have any reasonable chance of success? Could he perhaps be talked out of it? But if it is the case that David's state can be diagnosed, against objective criteria, as suffering from depression, this then leads us to an objectively revealed remedy: change the imbalance of his chemicals with the appropriate drug. The pragmatic and economic payoff is a no-brainer.

Taking this second route as the preferred one has a good hundred years of history behind it in the behavioural sciences. Behaviourism supplanted mentalistic views, and thus got rid of the problematic issues associated with retaining

any reference to experience and subjectivity in accounts of behaviour. Behaviour became something that was objectively observed, and thus amenable to quantification and predictive control. And there is no denying that this is a very effective tactic for constructing ways of predicting and controlling rat and pigeon behaviour. Then, as concerns grew in the 1950s in psychology as to whether it was completely satisfactory to explain behaviour without any recourse to 'intervening variables' operating inside an organism to mediate the link between a stimulus and response, the climate of the day borrowed ideas from the high technology of the day, and came up with a psychology of information processing, which is still a major component of the academic discipline today.

There can be no denying the apparent successes of a cognitivist account of memory, perception, social judgement, and so on. But, and it is a big but, the very characteristics that define being a human being – that we are blessed with conscious experience – are, because of the nexus of historical chance we have alluded to above, not even entertained in this view of 'how things are'. It follows, then, that when a psychological paradigm is adopted for practical purposes to help sort out characteristically human problems, the people and institutions being addressed are considered in a highly impoverished way, and the effort involved not only fails to deliver on its promises, but often actually alienates those it seeks to help. As Patrick McGoohan, Number 6 in the cult 1960s British TV series, *The Prisoner*, continually railed: 'I am not a number, I am a free man.'

When we began writing this book, we had what we thought were two fairly straightforward aims. One was to outline some of the sources that have recently come together in the social sciences to rehabilitate the fact that people – and presumably other animals – actually do have a meaningful experience of the world. This rehabilitation was one we thought we could pin a simple label to: 'Social Constructionism'. This is the claim that we are not just individually encapsulated information processors, but are inherently social beings who go through a remarkable process of becoming enculturated adults and experience the world in all its glories and disappointments: simply put, we are humans who are constructed through our inherent immersion in a shared experiential world with other people. In addition, we were convinced that 'what is really going on' in human affairs, and in the ways we come to be part of them, carry them on, and pass them on to our children, was a much more mysterious – and challenging – process to get a handle on than the dominant paradigms ever considered. We wanted to bring out the other side of the *Methodenstreit* debate that seems to have dropped out of view: that psychology needs to be about how people make sense of and influence each other in the great project of constructing and conserving the ways our intersubjective experiences constitute our lives as we live them.

Our second aim was to convey a flavour of how these hidden currents of thought can be picked up, and are being picked up, in the practices of brave and innovative practitioners who share, often intuitively, some of the worries we have as to how the practical application of psychology is being more and more constrained, in counter-productive ways, by the headlong prescription of so-called expert

knowledge as the only legitimate way to be able to call oneself a professional. If we are not autonomous, encapsulated, information processors, then what are the consequences of the alternative view of who we might be, as socially constructed beings, for how any informed interventions might be carried out? These two aims remain the organizing principles inherent in our narrative here. But many more strands, tangents and pointers to future dialogues have emerged in the process of our collaborative writing. This book is both longer than it was intended to be, and shorter than it needs to be. It has been composed by two people coming together from shared sensibilities to undertake a project that seemed like a straightforward, 'good idea' at the time. In writing together, we have come to be more aware that what we separately took to cohere in our backgrounds, and what we thought we shared, was more of a chimera than a fact. But at the same time, through our arguments, we have come to a different feeling of shared sensibilities, and a different appreciation of the practice of what we want to call 'socially constructing ways of going on', in keeping a conversation productive, and in re-igniting age-old debates as a contribution to an ongoing conversational sustenance of cultural life.

With respect to our title – 'Social constructionism: sources and stirrings' – the 'sources' component will be fairly clear: we have aimed to present some core ideas that have developed in often unrelated efforts that we find useful to our own efforts of elucidating 'what's going on, and how can it be assisted to keep going on in more respectful ways'. On 'stirrings', our conversations about our sources have certainly stirred us up in the course of combining our ideas into what we hope has some coherence as a narrative. We have felt pressured, on a number of occasions, to strive for at least a semblance of coherence, because that is something readers of books expect. But, at the same time, we have not been seeking an authoritative coherence that we could then, as experts, hold out as a party line that must be obeyed. Social constructionism appears to us, at this point, to be very much a work in progress. It is here that we have found our two initial aims were not as simple as we first suspected: social constructionism has more sources and resources than we expected, and quite often those who might think of themselves as social constructionists appear to be unaware of them. Thus our intention is more to stir up ideas for you, as the reader, to interact with, and evaluate as to how they might, or might not, be taken up in your own work.

What is social constructionism?

There is no one school of social constructionism. Rather, it is a broad church. There are, though, some expansive tenets that hold it together. First, it is concerned with meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities. With respect to meaning, the focus is on how it is that a symbolically based language does what it does, which is to provide a very different quality of social experience for two people who speak the same language as compared to two people who are speaking different languages. We have an immediate grasp

of what is being said in the former case; we just hear noise in the latter case. Our grasp may be partial and unclear, and there is thus a need to continue a conversation back and forth, until what is being said becomes clearer, and we can say, 'OK, now I understand.' Over developmental time, new skills in interrogating symbols to reach understandings become possible: we might talk through an argument to ourselves in private, or wrestle with the assembly instructions for some piece of knock-together furniture. But these private activities retain a conversational structure. Second, then, is the view that meaning and understanding have their beginnings in social interaction, in shared agreements as to what these symbolic forms are to be taken to be.

Third, ways of meaning-making, being inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to particular times and places. Thus, the meanings of particular events, and our ways of understanding them, vary over different situations. These variations can be trivial: people wish to present themselves as fashionably dressed, for example, and clearly what is regarded as fashionable varies within cultures over time (compare how people are dressed in photographs in 1900 and in 2000) and across space (how the President of the United States dresses as compared to the King of Saudi Arabia). On the other hand, they can be much more substantive. Hepworth (1999), for example, has pointed out how western ways of making sense of self-starvation have changed quite markedly over historical time: medieval women who adopted this practice were regarded as saints who were shedding their attachment to worldly pleasures and sustaining themselves on heavenly rather than physical nourishment. These women did not relate to their experience through the modern discourse of 'anorexia'. Similarly, the Delphic Oracle was revered for hearing the voices of Gods, rather than positioned as 'schizophrenic'. Such Oracles were revered as 'blessed' rather than marginalized as 'ill'. The different discourses in which their experiences were available to be constituted and made sense of place both of these historical examples in very different relations to very different problems from their modern counterparts.

Fourth, and following from this, most social constructionists have an uneasy relationship with 'essentialism': that is, with the idea that one of the major goals of psychology is to uncover the essential characteristics of people. If people fashion who they are within their varying socio-cultural traditions, then they are instrumental in creating the discourses they use to define themselves. Thus, people are self-defining and socially constructed participants in their shared lives. There are no pre-defined entities within them that objective methods can seek to delineate but, rather, our ways of making sense to each other are constructed to yield quite different ways of being selves. This is similar to saying that there is no inherent model inside a piece of clay that a potter works to reveal, as this time a cup, this time a plate, this time a vase: the actions of the potter work with the physical properties of the clay to create the resulting forms. In this sense, social constructionists are interested in delineating the processes that operate in the socio-cultural conduct of action to produce the discourses within which people construe themselves. This is not to deny that humans have certain propensities,

of course, but it is to claim that many of these propensities are rather amorphous, like clay, to begin with. We do appear, for instance, to have a special interest in human faces from very early on in our lives, and this interest is intrinsic to the establishment and growth of our relationships with others. But those relationships come to be structured and conducted in very different ways, and place very different moral demands upon people, across time and space.

As a result of this anti-essentialist sentiment, social constructionism has an uncomfortable relationship with ideas about realism, and hence with science, and is often characterized, pejoratively, for being relativistic. The arguments that have been conducted around this conceptual nexus of terms has, in our view, largely generated more heat than light, and we are not saying much about the issues at this point. They will, however, inevitably rear their heads as we go on, as they did for us in marshalling our material. We will move to what we took as an unlikely position when we first started. One of the trends over the past fifty years or so has been the movement in some quarters from an enlightenment concern to uncover *the* truth about the world to a post-enlightenment suspicion of such a (or any) metanarrative. The shift is, in many senses, one from a world of investigation dominated by questions of epistemology – what is the best way to uncover the nature of this world we live in? – to questions of ontology – what sorts of worlds can we live in, and by what criteria can we decide how one might be preferable to another? This nexus of concern has led to the critical comment by the socio-biologist Richard Dawkins (1995: 31–2): 'Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you a hypocrite.' Now, we could develop our own critique here as to why this throwaway line totally misses the point, but in fact we find ourselves ending up wanting to rewrite it: 'Show us a social constructionist at 30,000 feet and we'll show you a genuine scientist.' There is, though, a lot of ground to cover before getting to that position. This is an unexpected outcome for us, especially as it runs counter to what is the fifth, and perhaps final, point of agreement among social constructionists.

This fifth point is the adoption of a critical perspective to the topics at hand, that is, a concern with revealing the operations of the social world, and the political apportioning of power that is often accomplished unawares, so as to change these operations and replace them with something that is more just (this being opposed to traditional theorizing which seeks only to explain and understand these processes). This sense of 'critical' gets its modern impetus from Marx in the eleventh of his 'Theses on Feuerbach': 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in certain ways; the point is to change it.' This is not meant to equate social constructionism with Marxism, but the shared sensibility is clear, as in this position statement by Ken Gergen (1994a: 53):

> The [social constructionist] is little likely to ask about the truth, validity, or objectivity of a given account, what predictions follow from a theory, how well a statement reflects the true intentions or emotions of a speaker, or how an utterance is made possible by cognitive processing. Rather, for the [social constructionist], samples of language are integers within patterns of

> relationship. They are not maps or mirrors of other domains – referential worlds or interior impulses – but outgrowths of specific modes of life, rituals of exchange, relations of control and domination, and so on. The chief questions to be asked of generalised truth claims are thus, how do they function, in which rituals are they essential, what activities are facilitated and what impeded, who is harmed and who gains by such claims?

We do not dissent from this. But we have come to feel that there is more that a social constructionist stance can offer to the social sciences than just political critique in the pursuit of greater social justice. Our provisional view is that there is more to social reality than language: that there is a pre-linguistic domain to human social experience – more precisely a pre-predicative intersubjectivity – that provides the possibility for discursive life (as Gergen indicates above – language is an outgrowth of 'something'). It is in this context that we see stirring in the sources of social constructionism we discuss here a major potential within the social sciences: a preliminary, just now becoming graspable, sense of the very fabric within which human lives are constituted. We have our lives in what Schutz (Chapter 3 below) terms 'the lifeworld', and because we live 'in it' it is something very difficult to notice, and hence to investigate by the methods we have inherited from a very different tradition of objective methods. The sensibilities that inform social constructionism provide, we strongly suspect, the necessary perspectives to reveal and clarify a new foundation for inquiring into, and understanding, human 'nature' (which is both a paradoxical and exciting aspect of contemporary constructionism).

Others, of course, approach social constructionism differently. Danziger (1997b), for example, has suggested that social constructionist thought has two strands. He saw a 'dark' and largely Continental strand that draws heavily on the works of Foucault and subsequent post-structural and postmodern thought, with a concern for issues of power, the articulation of subjectivity, the relativity of knowledge, and the exercise of these with respect to gender, subjectivity and colonialist discourses, for example. Then there is a 'light', and predominantly Anglo-American strand that is rooted in more traditional and pragmatic concerns that stem from the dominant empirical tradition, while rejecting much of the Cartesian baggage that tradition brings with it: How does everyday life work? How is discourse done? Why are traditional accounts drawn from a psychology based on experimental procedures and statistical analyses of the relations between dependent and independent variables lacking in their descriptions and explanations of 'what's going on'? If we are anywhere, we are very much on the 'light side' of this divide. But while we largely present 'light-side' constructionist thinkers, our constructionism focuses on recognizing multiple possibilities for meaning and transformative action where some convention or taken-for-granted understanding or habit has held sway.

We approach this book from the perspective that there is a discernible and important counter-narrative one can trace back from contemporary social constructionism. While these ideas have received enough attention to endure in

libraries and in obscure corners of the social sciences and humanities, they typically have shown up in piecemeal fashion (if at all) in the thinking of today's social constructionists. Deciding on what would go into our story was a challenge. How does one place the eighteenth-century ideas of Vico in the same narrative as those of Merleau-Ponty; or consider philology alongside performative notions of discourse? We see a convergence of thought in contemporary social constructionism as it is variously practised. What animates our story of constructionism is a very different view of being human than the one associated with current psychology or neuroscience. The sources of social constructionism we will relate show humans engaged in constructing and living by their own constructions. But, importantly, people are not talking heads, and so we trace phenomenological notions of embodied cognition through to their corporeal and social implications that are coming to be termed 'situated cognition'. Related to this strand in our narrative is another that sees meaning as performed, or reflexive – quite a different conception of human communication and judgement from one that sees them as comprised of information transmission, reception and processing.

An extension of this strand is one some associate with macro differences in how humans relate to physical reality and each other – in Foucault's notion of discourses or Wittgenstein's language games. A further strand arises from our interest in social practice where we turn to the micro, and look at what is brought to and transpires in and from dialogic interactions. Finally, running behind what we review is a correspondingly and dramatically different view of human science. Our aim is to share our sense of these different strands, or sources, of social constructionist thought and practice as we narrate our way through contributions made by thinkers for whom a modern approach to human science was coming up short. We think there is much in their strands of thought to inspire, confound, integrate, critique and adapt in ways you can re-author from our story.

In writing this 'counter-narrative' our aim has been to reach two primary groups of readers: those seeking an overview of thinkers and ideas informing the breadth of contemporary social constructionist thought; and practitioners (therapists, educators, organizational development consultants, etc.) seeking more solid footing in the challenging conceptual quicksand of social constructionism. To this end, we have adopted a chronological and thematic narrative, emphasizing links between ideas and the people and historico-cultural contexts within which such ideas make sense. Metaphorically speaking, we present a story of tributaries of thought, each having practical applications, with all converging on a common stream of thought and related practice. For us, modern psychology missed a chance to relate to everyday, human experience when it veered away from meaning and how it is socially (and variously) constructed, sustained, modified and negotiated. The lives, ideas and applications we relate thus show a focus on humans as social beings making sense of their experience by using what humans before and around them constructed and kept as meaningful.

There are, perforce, other stories and characters with which we could have peopled our plot. Where, might one ask, are postcolonial (Said, Bhabha) and feminist