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DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONISM

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INTRODUCTION

Discursive constructionism (henceforth sometimes DC) is most distinctive in its foregrounding of the epistemic position of both the researcher and what is researched (texts or conversations). It studies a world of descriptions, claims, reports, allegations and assertions as parts of human practices, and it works to keep these as the central topic of research rather than trying to move beyond them to the objects or events that seem to be the topic of such discourse. It is radically constructionist in that it is sceptical of any guarantee beyond local and contingent texts, claims, arguments, demonstrations, exercises of logic and procedures of empiricism and so on. In this sense it can be described as anti-foundationalist and poststructuralist. It takes seriously the work in rhetoric and the sociology of scientific knowledge that highlights the contingent, normative and constructive work that goes into, say, logical demonstrations, mathematical proofs or experimental replications. Like much work in the sociology of scientific knowledge is methodologically relativist in that it systematically avoids starting with one party's version of events, actors or structures as true or given (Ashmore, 1989).

Although DC appears to have a narrow topic – discourse – its power comes from its central role in human affairs. Discourse is the fundamental medium for action. It is the medium through which versions of the world are constructed and made urgent or reworked as trivial and irrelevant. For social scientists working with DC the study of discourse becomes the central way of studying mind, social processes, organizations and events as they are continually made live in human affairs.

This chapter will be organized into three sections. The first overviews the central elements of discursive constructionism and highlights what makes it distinctive from alternative constructionisms. The second section describes the operation of discursive constructionism as an

analytic project that studies the procedures through which versions are built, established and made independent of their authors. This will be illustrated through an extended analysis of fact constructional in a single account. The third section explores the power of a discursive constructionist approach by considering its operation in realms that on first sight appear to defy discourse constructionist analysis: death and furniture, social structure and context, embodiment, emotion and experience. In each case discursive analyses are offered that illustrate the radical power and potential of this approach.

ELEMENTS OF DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONISM

Discourse is most simply defined as texts and talk as parts of social practices (Potter, 1996). That is, it works with the sense of discourse as a verb rather than a noun. Thus discourse in DC can include conversations, arguments, talk in work settings, professional client interaction, the various situations where interaction is mediated and supported by technology (phones, visual displays, instruments etc.), and any occasion where people are doing things involving some form of interaction. Occasionally DC will work with open ended interviews, but these will be treated as interactional events rather than as places where participants' views can be excavated (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). This commitment to discourse involves considering the live delivery of talk with its stress and emphasis, silence and overlap. Although it does not have to be exclusively verbal and linguistic, there is a commitment to approaching non-discursive material via the orientations of participants. The focus on discourse rather than language signals an approach that is focused on action and practice rather than linguistic structure.

DC does not adopt the extended notion of discourse used in some of Foucault's work. For example, at points in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Foucault treats discourse variously as including institutions, institutional practices (e.g. for dealing with abnormality), the archived set

of 'statements' that embody the founding of the institution, the rules of inclusion and exclusion, the physical architecture of prisons, decisions about sentencing, scientific criminology, moralizing and philanthropy. DC has a more restricted notion of discourse; however, that does not mean that the sort of analytic work involved in DC might not address several of the phenomena that for Foucault constitute a discourse, nor that it might not draw on some of Foucault's insights about institutions, practice and the nature of subjectivity. The virtue of the notion of discourse in DC is its precision and its fittedness to a particular analytic practice.

DC draws on conversation analytic (CA) methods and findings. It is distinctive from CA, however, precisely because of its foregrounding of construction as an issue. Nevertheless, in considering how versions are assembled in talk and texts its practice parallels that of conversation analysis. There are differences in the approach taken to cognition, with some conversation analysts being willing to consider cognition as a realm to be connected to interaction rather than something studyable as an object in and for interaction in the manner of discursive constructionism (Potter & te Molder, 2005). So the differences are subtle and, as Wooffitt (2005) shows, there are important areas of overlap. Indeed, in the past few years conversation analytic work has started to bring to fore the kinds of epistemic issues that have been at the centre of discursive constructionism (e.g. Clift, 2006).

One way of understanding discursive constructionism, is as research tradition where epistemics are perpetually live for both researchers and researched and where any conclusions may apply just as much to the researcher's own discourse as the discourse under study. In this sense, DC is a reflexively mature practice. Indeed, DC itself is an approach whose justification is not foundational. It is warranted by a weave of arguments and illustrations, and stands insofar as it can counter or improve on or reinterpret analyses from alternative perspectives that work

with assumptions that are realist, positivist, symbolic interactionist, social cognitionist or whatever. Note that DC is not a programme that suggests that social phenomena do not have objectivity reality (Hammersley, 2003); to deny such things would be as realist a move as endorsing them (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995). Rather DC consider the role of 'phenomena' in terms of the different descriptions, glosses, categories and orientations offered by social actors (Potter, 2003).

This approach to constructionism was developed by the discourse analytic tradition within the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g. Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984) and within the broader discourse analytic tradition that developed within social psychology (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987 – see Hepburn, 2003 for an overview). This chapter will draw in particular on the systematic manifesto for a discursive constructionism by Jonathan Potter (1996). The chapter offers a constructionist and inevitably constructive account of a range of work in discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis. The latter approaches are not always identified as constructionist – however, this chapter is working with a specific sense of constructionism and a specific reading of parts of those literatures (see Wooffitt, 2005).

Senses of construction

Discursive constructionism works with two senses of construction. On the one hand, discourse is construct*ed* in the sense that it is assembled from a range of different resources with different degrees of structural organization. Most fundamentally these are words and grammatical structures, but also broader elements such as categories, metaphors, idioms, rhetorical commonplaces and interpretative repertoires. For example, how is a description manufactured in a way that presents something that has been done as orderly and unproblematic?

People are extremely skilled builders of descriptions; they have spent a lifetime learning how to do it. Part of the analytic art of DC is to reveal the complex and delicate work that goes into this seemingly effortless building.

On the other hand, discourse is construct*ive* in the sense that these assemblages of words, repertoires and so on put together and stabilize versions of the world, of actions and events, of mental life and furniture. For example, how does one party in a relationship counselling session construct a version that presents the breakdown of a long term relationship as primarily the responsibility of the other party, who might be the one most in need of counselling and under most pressure to change (Edwards, 1995)? Crucially, then, discursive constructionism is dynamic; these assemblages of symbolic resources that construct versions are organized for action rather than some abstract principle of accurate description.

In DC discourse is understood as *situated*. First, it is situated in the sequential environment that is basic to interaction. It follows on, and orients to, the immediately prior talk, and provides the environment for what immediately follows. In the case of texts, they may be invoked as a part of some practice. The screen prompts may be voiced by the dispatcher in an emergency 911 call; some elements of a medical record may be referenced in a multiprofessional team meeting to allocate elderly care; a newspaper report may be invoked or quoted in an argument about extremism and asylum. Second, discourse is situated institutionally. It is generated within, and gives sense and structure to, practices such as news interviews, air traffic instructions and family meals. Third, discourse is situated rhetorically. That is, constructions in talk are often built in a way that counters relevant alternatives.

Linguistic and Discursive Constructionism

Let us try further to clarify this sense of construction by contrasting it to the influential linguistic constructionism of Benjamin Whorf (1956). Famously linguistic constructionism, incorporating the work of the linguist Sapir as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, stimulated a large body of psychological research. The idea was that linguistic categories constructed the *perceptual* world for language users in a speech community. Thus Inuit tribes could '*see'* fine distinctions between different kinds of snow as a result of the elaborate snow vocabulary that they have available that allowed them to (mentally) categorize wet snow, snow that had just fallen, snow that had frozen hard and so on. This kind of constructionism is linguistic (as it depends on the available linguistic categories) but is also cognitivist (as the construction processes are taken to operate at the level of perception and cognition).

Whorf worked for a firm that assessed insurance risks and he used this as an example to illustrate linguistic constructionism. Employees of a company had described a set of drums as 'empty' and therefore safe; but the drums were actually 'full' of inflammable gasoline vapour. The employees' use of linguistic categories such as empty structured their understanding in a misleading manner; if they had used a different category – 'full' – their would have understood the drums as presenting much more of a risk. In Whorf's view language constructs the *perception* of the world.

The discursive constructionism outlined in this chapter takes a different approach to the operation of categories. Stimulated by work in ethnomethodology and particularly the writings of Harvey Sacks (1992) it considers categories not as templates for perception and information processing but as resources for action. As Derek Edwards (1991) puts it, categories are for talking (not for seeing, thinking, reasoning). DC is not treating language as a grid or system of

classification lying between a static individual perceiver and the world; rather language operates in social practices. That is precisely why we are writing about *discursive* rather than *linguistic* constructionism.

Returning to Whorf's gasoline drums Edwards (1994) wonders what the employees who talked to Whorf were *doing* with their descriptions. For example, in the context of an insurance claim the categorization 'the drums were empty' might be offered as an *account*. That is, not as direct report of a way of seeing the world but as a practical move in a particular piece of institutional interaction where blame (whose fault was the fire) and practical consequences (who is going to pay for the damage) are paramount. The point is not that Whorf's employee respondents are not describing the world and classifying it in a way that offers a particular construction. Rather it is that we need to understand the way the construction is oriented to the particular actions. These actions are situated in what the employees said to Whorf and in the institutional practices of insurance assessment; the description 'empty' rhetorically counters the relevant alternative that they are 'full' of dangerous vapour.

Discourse, Construction and Cognition

In Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) original manifesto for social constructionist sociology they offer what in more recent sociology of scientific knowledge would be glossed as a 'symmetrical' stance to knowledge (Collins, 1981). That is, they were concerned with what *passes as* knowledge regardless of its validity from the perspective any social group. This symmetrical stance is a key element in the discursive constructionism described here.

For example, when approaching legal discourse from a DC perspective we are not required to know the outcome of the trial, whether witnesses were lying, whether an acquitted defendant was actually guilty. All these practical matters are for the various actors involved to

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argue over using the resources at their disposal (see e.g. Drew, 1992). Just as sociologists of science need not know physics better than physicists to study physics, so DC researchers do not need to know the law, say, better than lawyers to study legal discourse. The domain of study is discourse practices and the constructive work embedded in those practices. None of this is to say that (a) work on legal discourse might not have broader implications including implications for the verdicts of trials; (b) DC researchers might not develop a sophisticated understanding of legal practices; (c) that the researchers might personally have strong opinions about, say, the outcome of specific trials or issues such as politics or gender in sentencing, as these latter things come into the courtroom in terms of categories and orientations that are appropriate objects of study. The point of methodological relativism here is to avoid research being based on a particular version of the law, or a particular side in court cases, which risks turning it into a social science restatement of any current legal status quo (see Potter, 1996, ch.1). Berger and Luckmann had an important early grasp of the general requirement for this kind of symmetry.

However, when Berger and Luckmann consider specific cases they do so by starting with the phenomenology of individual experience:

> The reality of everyday life is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present. This 'here and now' is the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life. What is 'here and now' presented to me in everyday life is the *realissimum* of my consciousness. (1966: 36)

That is, they offer a variety of cognitive constructionism. Instead of studying processes of constructing in texts and talk, the building of versions etc., they are working with perception and understanding.

We will outline three drawbacks of cognitive versions of constructionism. First, if construction is cognitive what is the status of what is constructed? This is the question rightly highlighted by Ian Hacking (1999). Is it a representation? Is it therefore some mental image or

picture?   And if it is a mental picture how can this be the topic of constructionist research? If it

enters into research through a description (in an open ended interview, say) this process will

itself be using *the very category system* that is central to processes of construction. Should this

further constructive process be ignored? For some critical linguists who take a broadly cognitive

constructionist approach these problems are not insurmountable (van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2006);

however, discursive constructionism avoids this set of problems by taking a practical and

interactional approach rather than a cognitive one (for comments on broadly cognitive

constructionist approaches in social psychology and sociolinguistics see Potter & Edwards, 1999,

2001).

A second drawback of cognitive constructionism is that it separates representations from

practices. The representations become things that are constructed within actors and are carried

around by actors in the form of cognitive representations. This separation makes it harder to

focus on the way the representations (constructions, versions) are built within settings to perform

particular actions. For example, we can consider, as Steven Clayman and John Heritage (2002)

do, how news interview questions can include a preface that is specifically designed to raise

issues (perhaps a topical agenda or an action agenda) that will challenge the interviewee and help

generate a revealing answer that is 'good television'. To study this Clayman and Heritage

consider the different elements that can go into the building of such a preface and how it works

as part of a broader news interview question.   This analysis does not assume that the interviewer

has a mental representation of the question preface, nor that it is something transported around

with them. DC will start with the practical and analytically available version in the question and

the rich interactional evidence that comes from studying the building of the question preface in

situ.

The third drawback of cognitive constructionism is that cognition is pervasively both the topic of talk and a resource for constructing versions. DC is ontologically indifferent to whether the versions being studied are of some historical events, of some physical or geographical objects, or are part of the mental thesaurus of some culture, although of course distinctions between these realms may at times be highly consequential in all kinds of ways in the texts or interactions being studied. One of the features of talk highlighted by discursive psychology is that descriptions of 'the world' and of 'mind' are commonly mutually implicative (Edwards, 2005). People may bolster versions of events by using cognitive constructions (good memories, direct perception, and so on) and bolster versions of their cognition (their attitude toward something or their motive for acting) by developing specific versions of how the world is.

For example, when callers to a child protection helpline develop their reasons for calling they recurrently described themselves as 'concerned' or 'worried' about a child (Potter & Hepburn, 2003). Such 'cognitive' constructions can be understood locally as building an appropriate psychological stance on the abuse for the helpline (caring, concerned, not indifferent or enjoying it) and also building a finely tuned knowledgeability. The 'concern' constructs the caller as not in a state where the abuse is certain (and they therefore should already have contacted the police or social services); rather they speak from a position of concern which can be collaboratively unpacked with the Child Protection Officer. The psychological matters here are inseparable from the practical and institutional business of the helpline. Attitude and knowledge are developed and attended to as matters of local relevance. In DC such things are studied in terms of their construction in discourse.

ACCOMPLISHING CONSTRUCTIONS

The disciplines that study the operation of discourse – some varieties of discourse analysis, some styles of rhetorical analysis, discursive psychology, major parts of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis – are constructionist insofar as they consider how talk and texts are assembled and how those assemblages work to accomplish actions. However, some of this work has focused in particular on the way descriptions are built *as* objective, *as* independent of the speaker and credible (Potter, 1996; Smith, 1978; Wooffitt, 1992). This work studied the practical task of accomplishing a construction that can shrug off its own constructed status. Potter (1996) distinguishes the *action orientation* of talk and texts from their *epistemological orientation*. The former body of work is focused on action orientation (how discourse accomplishes actions) while the latter work is focused on epistemological orientation (how discourse is built as factual). Of course, in practice this distinction is heuristic rather than absolute. The construction of facts is itself done actively and the accomplishment of actions continually implicates epistemic issues (cf. Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

Given the space limitations of a single chapter we will give a single illustrative example that brings together, and introduces, a range of the phenomena of fact construction in a compact way. This section will focus on the epistemological orientation of talk in a description of some strange events. In his path breaking work on fact construction Wooffitt (1992) focused on accounts of paranormal events. One of the features of accounts of ghosts, poltergeists, UFOs and other extraordinary events is that when they are delivered to researchers or other 'non-believers' they are built to resist scepticism. And precisely because they have so much work to do to build a convincing description of events they provide an exquisite natural laboratory for the study of fact construction. We have chosen the following example as it packs in a range of features of

fact construction in a relatively short extract. The extract is transcribed using Gail Jefferson's

(2004) now standard system for representing the elements of speech (emphasis, overlap, etc.)

that have been found to be interactionally live. This might seem unfamiliar or confusing at first

but, as we show, these features of delivery are analytically consequential.

Carrie's Story

```
 1   Interviewer:   Okay, so when you're ready can you tell

 2                  me about your paranormal experience

 3                  in your own words.

 4                  (0.4)

 5   Carrie:        Oka:y, (.) UM (.) my house has got

 6                  quite (.) a lot've (0.6) em stori:es,

 7                  (0.2)

 8   Carrie:        Um main one was prob'lly whe:n (.) I

 9                  woke up in the morning, (0.4) a:n:d um

10                  I (0.2) >sorta< looked out in the garden.

11                  ((tape disruption)) (and there was) a

12                  figure, (.) standi:ng (0.5) quite far (up)

13                  my garden (0.2) um: in a sor've night

14                  dress, (0.2) .hh a:n my instant reaction

15                  was: (.) it was: my mother:, (0.2) .hh

16                  um an:d  I sord've >I din't look< (0.3)

17                  that lon:g, (.) but I went into: my parents'

18                  bedroo:m, (.) and my mum was in bed?

19                  (0.2)

20   Carrie:        .hh an >so I was like< (.) that's a bit

21                  weir:d, (.) but (.) it was kind of (0.3)

22                  (0.4) (the reason) why >it really freaked
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23              me out a lot< was cos it was like a figure

24              in a night dress:, like looking

25              up at my bedroo:m?

26              (0.2)

27  Carrie:     .hh [an::d that's quite sc]ar:y I think.

28  Interviewer:    [ ° o o h : : : : : ° ]

29  ((29 secs omitted; story about unexpected luck with dice))

30  Carrie:     .hh A:N:D: (0.2) U:H: once me and my

31              sister were- (.) u:m in the kitchen

32              cooking, (0.3) a::nd: (0.2) u:hh (0.4)

33              we both star'ed laugh:ing because there

34              was >sor've like< (.) a really: (0.9)

35              like <really deep growly> noise?

36              (0.2)

37  Carrie:     .Hh (.) an: we were both laughing

38              and going- I >said to her y'know<

39              why di'you make that noise.

40              (.)

41  Carrie:     and she got really freaked ou:t an

42              said that (0.2) I'd made it.

43              (0.2)

44  Carrie:     .h an it's because< it came from

45              right (.) (th'other) side of our

46              fa:ces,

47              (0.2)

48  Carrie:     .hh an it was like a properly (0.7)

49              scary kin've animal growling noise,

50              (0.4) .hh umm and we got quite
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51		freaked out.
52		(0.3)
53	**Carrie:**	U::m (0.2)
54	**Int:**	Ur↑::uh:.
55		(0.2)

There are a large number of different discourse practices that are involved in the construction of versions that can be treated as solid or independent of the speaker. For simplicity, and somewhat arbitrarily we have divided them into three classes: category entitlement and interest management, the discursive psychology of mind/world relationships, practices of narration.

Category entitlement and interest management

One of the things that Sacks emphasised in his early work on conversation was the relationship of categories to particular kinds of speaker entitlements (Sacks, 1992). For example, it is the *witness* to a horrific auto accident who has the right to the bad experience (to feel awful, have their day ruined). Categories can be normatively tied to a range of different psychological states and characteristics, including knowledge. In some cases this is explicit and institutionally warranted – doctors know about medicine through training, exams and practice. Other categories are much more permeable and occasioned, with their memberships open to being worked up, undermined or discounted in a range of ways. For example, the categories 'witness' and 'ordinary person' do not require a uniform, a membership certificate or other official and public category ratification. However, they are associated with particular kinds of knowledgeability.

On the one hand, categories can often entitle speakers to knowledge; on the other, interests can undermine or discount that entitlement. The notion of interests (and related notions such as stake) can be used to suggest that a speaker (in their individual or institutional capacity) has something to gain or loose; they have a *stake* in a course of action that the description relates to. Indeed, descriptions can be pervasively heard against a backdrop of potential competences, projects, motives and allegiances. They can be understood as the product of prejudice or stupidity or a huge variety of other things that can undercut or reinterpret claims. Speakers pervasively attend to the potential for their talk being treated as interested, particularly (but not exclusively) in situations of conflict or dispute. At times interests that are counter to what might be expected in making a claim may be invoked ('stake inoculation' – see Potter, 1996).

We will illustrate these features of the work of construction with examples from Carrie's account above. First note how in line 6 Carrie does not restate (either in the same words or new but equivalent words) the Interviewer's description 'paranormal experience'. The formulation Carrie uses is the much less epistemically committed 'stories'. Moreover, these are tied to the house rather than the speaker. At the outset of the account, then, the speaker avoiding explicit references that presuppose the reality of, or belief in, the paranormal event. Wooffitt (1992) found this kind of 'oblique reference' to be a recurrent feature of the openings of paranormal accounts.

In a similar way in line 14, Carrie describes her *first* reaction to the figure in the garden is that it is her mother. That is, she presents her first reaction as a mundane or ordinary one, the kind of reaction that *anyone* might have. Note also that it is presented as 'instant' – something that came naturally rather something that is thought through. In terms of categories and interests we can see these kinds of descriptive practices as presenting the speaker as acting from a

category of 'mundane persons' and not from the sort of category (sci fi nut? mystic?) that might have an interest in the reality of paranormal events (cf. Sacks, 1984). One of the features of these descriptive practices is that they are inexplicit – neither the categories nor the interests are spelled out in a way that might draw attention to them or open them to easy counter.

Other details of the account work in the same way. Note how Carrie and her sister are described as cooking in the kitchen – the sort of mundane activity that ordinary people engage in. And, rhetorically and relevantly, they are *not* described as talking about ghosts and apparitions or their fascination with the occult. Then when the noise happens Carrie describes their first reaction as laughter. That is, their reaction is to something they immediately see as ordinary rather than strange or frightening. More generally, these descriptive practices illustrate the important and subtle attention that can be paid to category entitlement and interest management in factual accounts.

The discursive psychology of mind/world relationships

One of the features of the way talk and texts operate that has been highlighted in discursive psychology is that there are complex reflexive relationships between descriptions of the world and descriptions of mental states (Edwards, 2005). As speakers provide reports of events which attend to issues of causality, action and accountability in those events so, simultaneously, they are inevitably displaying or managing their own accountability in the provision of the report. This means that constructions of mind and constructions of reality operate together as parts of practices.

When we write about 'constructions' this term can suggest something simple like a picture or vignette of some kind. However, one of the features that conversation analytic work in particular has emphasised is the importance of considering not merely reports of mental states

and furniture, but *displays* of those things. Thus understanding, stance, confusion, become

things that are displayed through talk in a variety of ways and in doing so they make available

inferences about actions, events, structures and so on. The structuring here can be complex. For

example, Edwards (2000) developed Anita Pomerantz's (1986) work on extreme case

formulations (ECFs) that are constructions of events that use extreme expressions such as

always, brand new, as good as it gets, perfectly and so on. Edwards shows up the way such

formulations can be ways of doing 'nonliteral' (not accountably accurate) but instead can be used

to display some speaker investment in, or stance to, what is described. For example, an ECF can

be used to display a commitment or caring stance to what is described.

The materials in Carrie's story above are a narrative account of events rather than

elements in an action such as an invitation. Nevertheless, we can consider the role of the mutual

implications between reality and psychology as developed in the account. Note, for example, the

mental state construction 'freaked out' on 22. Freaked out is an idiomatic and somewhat

extreme construction of the speaker's mental state; as such it implicates some feature of the

world that is responsible for the freaking out, and provides at least an outline construction of

some of its features – it is capable of invoking a state of being freaked out. The point here is

simple, but fundamental: the psychological construction works to build the reality.

There are two more things to note about this that have broader relevance to studying

construction in action. First, note that Carrie's (retrospective) construction of her mental state as

'freaked out' does not just work to build the reality of the strange or paranormal object. It also

simultaneously constructs herself as someone who is freaked out by weird or strange events.

That is, her response is a normal or mundane one; it simultaneously constructs the object as

having that effect and her identity as someone who is a member of the appropriate category to give credible or perhaps disinterested accounts of paranormal events.

Second, note the interactional organization here. All of this work with categories, interest management and displays of inferentially rich mental states unfolds interactionally. Although what Carrie produces is a story (or perhaps a series of stories) on a topic, it does not exist as an abstract text set against the interaction. It is elicited by a very specific question and it is recipient designed throughout. While a Bakhtinian perspective might tune us into the dialogic nature of even written texts such as novels, the conversation analytic understanding of recipient design combined with the attention it focuses on recipiency is particularly revealing.

Thus we can note that the first part of the story comes to a potential completion at the point where Carrie describes finding her mum in bed (line 18). It is at this point that the instant, mundane explanation of the figure in the garden is revealed as wrong (to Carrie in the story narration, and to the Interviewer in 'story time'). This completion is underscored by the questioning intonation on the term 'bed' that indicates that some response is appropriate. However, what we see at this transition relevant place is a brief but significant silence. The 0.2 seconds on line 19 is enough to cue Carrie that no response from the Interviewer is forthcoming and indeed she continues after a brief inbreath. What Carrie does is continue with spelling out the upshot of the mum being in bed that the Interviewer failed to do (maybe because they have been inattentive or because they are following the interview guidelines to interact only minimally). It is 'weird' (another psychologically inferential category) and then an upgrade to 'freaked out'. However, even after this, the Interviewer fails to come in at a new appropriate position for a response (line 26) and Carrie spells out the upshot one further time 'that's quite scary'.

It is only at this point, and in overlap, that the Interviewer produces an extended and expressive news receipt (cf. Heritage, 1984). The extreme extension of the news receipt may mark the lateness of the recognition of what is precisely newsworthy here; and the quietness is a way of providing emphasis this is perhaps appropriate for the ghost story genre. (Something similar happens on 52-54 where the Interviewer responds late, but again does an exaggerated and expressive news receipt). As before, we see the psychological display in the news receipt is a reflexive marker of the nature of the object of the story, and shows the way it is here being jointly constituted.

Practices of narration

When speakers assemble narrative descriptions of actions and events there are a wide range of resources they can draw on to construct and manage the factuality of what is described. For example, the apparatus of footing that Goffman (1981) deliniated is available for marking the positions and views of a set of narrative characters in a set of consequentially different ways (as origin of a view, for example, or relayer of another's view). Wooffitt (1992) found in his study of paranormal accounts that 'active voicing' of the words and even thoughts of the characters in the story was a common and important element in the construction of factuality. For example, corroboration can be produced by actively voicing different characters into agreement over some state of affairs and using specific reported speech (often with vivid prosodic marking) can suggest that the speaker actually witnessed some event.

Edwards and Potter (1992) highlight the role of linguistic detail in the construction of narrative in both producing particular kinds of actions (such as criticisms or accounts) and in providing a sense of being present as a witness. A description that is detailed and vivid, perhaps offering descriptions from a place or point of view (as might be seen by a single observer) can

work through category entitlement. The category witness is one of the most powerful in factual

accounting and vivid detail is one way of showing membership of such a category.

In effect, narratives of this kind are proto forms of the novelist's art, where plot. character

and motivation can be worked up. As with novels the author is massively powerful with control

over the descriptive language used, where the narrative starts and finishes, what is included and

what is omitted (as understood from a competing narrative). In DC one of the features of

narratives is that they are seen, as other discourse practices, as embedded in particular settings

and having a particular interactional order. Conversation analysts have highlighted a range of

structural properties of narrative (Schegloff, 1997a) while discursive psychologists have

emphasised their rhetorical organization (Edwards, 1997).

Such an approach to narrative starts with stories or narratives told in settings such as

family telephone calls, relationship counselling sessions or political controversies rather than

seeing narratives as something abstract that can be elicited as a complete and decontextualized

entity such as a life story (e.g. Wortham, 2001). This approach contrasts to some other

constructionist and postmodernist positions which tend to characterize narrative in terms of ideal

templates that package descriptions of events (e.g. Gergen, 1999) and are even part of the 'deep

structure' of understanding (White, 1978). As Stokoe and Edwards (2006) show, DC resists

these proto cognitivist moves (important though the work is in other ways) in favour of

considering narratives as situated practices and purveyors of action.

The stories offered by Carrie in the example above can illustrate some of these issues.

Note first the description in lines 11-14:

```
        (and there was) a figure, (.) standi:ng
        (0.5) quite far (up) my garden (0.2) um:
        in a sor've night dress,
```

This is a description of a scene including vivid detail ('quite far up', 'night dress'). It is a description offered from an observer's point of view (note that 'quite far up' is a description given in relation to the observer). It is the kind of description, then, that works to entitle the speaker to the category of witness. The same with the description of the noise in the second story as a 'really deep growly noise' – it is not a gloss or typification, but offers a sense of the noise as it sounded.

A further element in Carrie's second story is the use of 'active voicing'. In lines 38 and 39 Carrie reports: 'I >said to her y'know< <u>why</u> di'you make that <u>noise.</u>' Here the actively voiced question neatly constructs Carrie's first mundane inference. Rather than being an inference about something paranormal it is simply that her friend had made the noise. There is a lovely detail here. Carrie inserts 'y'know' into this utterance just before the actively voiced question. It is easy to overlook such elements of talk or treat them as irrelevant clutter. However, as Edwards (1997) and others have shown they can be a consequential part of the achievement and management of shared knowledge. In this case, the 'y'know' constructs the question as just what anyone might understandably be expected to ask; Carrie would know what she was doing in asking such a question. Again, this works to establish her category membership as an ordinary person.

The final thing to note is the construction of the sister's response to the growly noise: we <u>both</u> star'ed <u>laugh</u>:ing. This pulls together a number of features of fact construction. Laughing operates to provide a world/psychology inference – it presents a stance on the sound that has the first understanding as not a paranormal one. However, the description has this as a shared immediate response, therefore has it as both consensual and corroborated. Then the reaction a few lines later is also presented as consensual – 'we got quite freaked out' (note the

'we') – and therefore the speaker uses her own construction of other's actions to corroborate her account. Again, this is the power of narrative of this kind – the author controls the content.

The general point of this discussion has been to show the way that construction can be considered as an accomplishment of speakers and writers. Given that it has such a status then one of the analytic tasks of DC is to document the procedures through which versions are solidified as factual, objective and independent of the speaker or writer. We have illustrated some of the key procedures here but this an area of research that needs much more development.

Mundane Epistemics

One area that is, and should continue to be, a major focus of work is on what might be called mundane epistemics. This is the study of knowledge and understanding as things that are practical and interactional. Emanuel Schegloff (1991) picked up from Harold Garfinkel's (1967) observation that shared knowledge can be treated as something procedural. This transformed the traditional cognitive question of mental equivalence into a *practical* question of how particular member's methods might be used to confirm (or deny) that knowledge is 'held in common'. Drawing on conversation analytic findings Schegloff notes that understanding is something that is socially organized and something that is consequentially different in different places in conversation.

Take invitations for example. One crucial point where understanding is socially live is in the turn that follows an invitation (in conversation analysis the 2nd turn). This is a place where a range of confusions can be attended to if need be. The turn that follows is also crucial because the 2nd turn may reveal understanding that the recipient finds problematic, and that they can therefore fix in the 3rd turn. In fact Schegloff (1992) suggests that 3rd turns are the last

structurally provided for place for sustaining shared understanding. He emphasises the dangers (for relationships and individuals) that can arise from letting failures of understanding go by:

> When a source of misunderstanding escapes the multiple repair space, a whole institutional superstructure that is sustained through talk-in-interaction can be compromised. And since virtually anything in the talk can be such a source of misunderstanding, the potential for trouble for that institutional superstructure can be vast. It is against those systematic potentials for subversion of social order that repair after next turn is the last structurally provided defence (1992: 1337).

In this world of mundane epistemics, common understanding is a procedural problem that is both an *analytic topic* for DC researchers and a *practical issue* for participants. Understanding is not something floating in a phenomenological space but something structurally located with differential possibilities for checking and modifying. There is no independent check on understanding outside of such procedures.

Edwards (1999) further reworks the cognitivist notion of shared knowledge. He notes that the traditional idea of shared knowledge implies agreement in mental representations of some kind. However, if agreement is *procedural* rather than *abstract* then it is something to be done, displayed, invoked or denied. Instead of being achieved through a mental calculus it is situated and defeasible; that is, it is open to reformulation and denial. This reworking of agreement supplements Schegloff's reworking of understanding. Edwards additionally notes that the knowledge that is considered to be shared is, in the practical situations of life, inseparable from descriptions. And as the central programmatic of discursive psychology has shown (picking up from Wittgenstein, sociology of scientific knowledge, post-structural philosophy) descriptions have their home as active elements of practices. The general point here is that when we consider carefully the idea of shared or agreed knowledge in practice (that is,

from the point of view of the participants in an actual situation) issues of structure, procedure and description come to the fore. In contrast, the cognitivist notion of knowledge is sustained by the world of theory or in the procedures of cognitive science where its status is achieved definitionally (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

To take one final example of mundane epistemics, Heritage and Raymond's (2005) studied the display of knowledge entitlement and authority. Heritage has shown over a series of studies the way the particle 'oh' can suggest a 'change of state'. For example, in question-answer sequences, the questioner's 'oh-receipt' can mark a change of state and ratifies the answer as news; such receipts are absent in classroom or news interview contexts where the questioner is not projecting themselves as uninformed on a topic (see Heritage, 2005). Oh receipts are bound up with epistemic issues of who knows something and who does not and they serve as an ongoing interactional marking of such matters. Note again that such analyses does not make the same assumptions as cognitive psychological work on knowledge as the practices here are public, practical and conversational and their sufficiency is for those things.

Heritage and Raymond (2005) build on this work and explore the relationship between oh-receipts and knowledge entitlement. They suggest that 'oh-receipts' can be used to build epistemic authority with respect to another speaker. Take the following:

```
        Eve:   No I haven't seen it Jo saw it 'n she said
               she f- depressed her ter[ribly
        Jon:                           [Oh it's [terribly depressing.
        Lyn:                                    [Oh it's depressing.
```

Heritage and Raymond notes that Jon and Lyn who have seen the film that is under discussion do agreement, but they oh-preface it. By doing this they suggest that they have independent access to the film and therefore, just here, that they have epistemic priority relative to Eve. Contrast the

Interviewer's news receipts in lines 28 and 54 in the paranormal account, which defer epistemic authority to Carrie. Heritage and Raymond suggest that conversation is suffused with indirect claims to authority of this kind where whose version is correct and who has the appropriate epistemic entitlement is acted out through different practices.

CONSTRUCTIONISM WITHOUT LIMITS

In this final main section we will consider some of what have often been treated as the limits of constructionist analysis. We will press the case for DC as a thoroughgoing constructionism that does not exempt certain areas from study for one reason or another. This section will thus lay out some of the arguments that discursive constructionism has provoked as well as indicating some of the areas of analytic development. We will take the issue of limits in three parts. The first will focus on basic arguments against thoroughgoing constructionism and particularly what have been called 'death and furniture' arguments. The second will focus on issues of social structure, history and context. The third will explore some of the analytic frontiers of discursive constructionism in respect to embodiment, emotion and perception.

Furniture and Death

There have been longstanding debates between the different varieties of constructionism and different forms of realism. These debates are occasioned and local with different forms of constructionism (relativism, social constructivism, discourse analysis and so on) pitted against different forms of realism (e.g. realism, critical realism, Marxist materialism, experimental psychology). Such debates pick up from longstanding philosophical disputes. Although this is a picture with utility and it has been much used it is important to recognize the reflexive relationship between the picture and the argument(s) painted within it. From a DC perspective 'the constructionism/realism' debate is a literary construction. Indeed, the DC perspective *itself*

is a literary creation, put together for this handbook, and inevitably (and usefully) systematizing and simplifying. This is consistent with its epistemic assumptions. And for all that DC is no *less* real, as sociology of scientific knowledge has shown us that such processes are generic, not just in the social and human 'soft' sciences, but across physics, astronomy and even mathematics (see Ashmore, Myers & Potter, 2002).

One of the moves in this 'debate between realism and constructionism' (relativism, anti-foundationalism) has been to offer 'bottom line' arguments that propose some bedrock of reality that places limits on what is constructed:

> When relativists start talking about the social construction of reality, truth, cognition, scientific knowledge, technical capacity, social structure and so on their realist opponents sooner or later start hitting the furniture, invoking the Holocaust, talking about rocks, guns, killing, human misery, tables and chairs. (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995, p 26).

In their influential Death and Furniture (D&F) paper Edwards, Ashmore and Potter observe that there are two related argumentative tropes – the Furniture trope (which makes reference to tables, rocks, etc. as the reality that *cannot* be denied) and the Death trope (which invokes misery, genocide, poverty etc. as the reality that *should* not be denied). D&F approached these moves in a manner consistent with its constructionist, relativist perspective. That is, rather than attempt a direct rebuttal (that would risk getting caught up in the polarities and realist tropes of the moves) it focused on their rhetoric, exposing the way they were constructed to have their effect. Furthermore, the literary form of the Death and Furniture paper was designed to draw attention to its own rhetoric in the process of its explication, conveying its argument as much in its literary form as its propositional content (and, of course, making it resist the kind of summary that sits easily in a Handbook chapter).

D&F uncovered the reflexive nature of authoring in the furniture and death tropes that carried the arguments. That is, it showed the way these emblematic arguments were literary constructions assembled in way that precisely obscures their literary basis. D&F highlights the realist's dilemma. The very act of constructing a piece of the external world (a rock, a table) that is non-represented, external, just there, is inevitably a construction, a representation in talk and text, or the semiotics of table thumping, and as such threatens immediately to turn round against the very position it is designed to support. The point to highlight here is how the discursive and epistemic basis of DC leads it to focus on the constructive work of the different arguments invoked.

Social Structure and Context

There are various approaches to issues traditionally glossed as social structure, or history or context that formulate them as objects that transcend constructionist analysis. Indeed, some approaches formulate the key problem in social analysis to be the joining of constructionist arenas to 'the real' by way of a complex set of argumentative and epistemic bolts – compare, for example, Fairclough (1995) and Burr (1999). DC offers a number of ways of treating social structure and context as part of a coherent constructionist universe rather than having them as separate realms with contrasting epistemologies. We will briefly consider three strands of argument – one that treats context as a member's concern; one that treats social structure as ongoing accomplishment, and one that explores the way social structure is formulated and constructed in accounts.

The issue of context has elicited wide-ranging debate. One traditional social science approach, sometimes glossed as positivist or realist, attempts to understand the context of discourse through historical, theoretical, statistical or ethnographic means. This is then used to

provide supposedly 'broader' or more 'macro' analyses of the discourse. In contrast, Schegloff (1997b) presses the virtues of studying context through participants' own orientations. He notes that in any interaction there are a wide variety of possible relevant contextual particulars and the crucial issue is what contextual particulars the participants *themselves* treat as relevant. It is not just that social scientists find people, according to Schegloff:

> to be characterizable as "president/assistant," "chicano/black," as "professor/student," etc. But that for them, at that moment, those are terms relevant for producing and interpreting conduct in the interaction' (1992, p. 109).

Furthermore, even when some contextual particular, structure or description has been shown to be *relevant* there is still an issue of how far it is *consequential* for the unfolding of the ongoing interaction. For example, if a particular style of questioning is found to be central to classroom teaching there is still a further analytic challenge to show how this style of questioning is institutionally produced rather than being a style common elsewhere simply drawn on in a classroom practice.

These are challenging issues for researchers and they have provoked considerable controversy (see Billig, 1999; Stokoe & Smithson, 2001; Wetherell, 1998 - and responses Schegloff, 1998, 1999). Schegloff has not presented these arguments as part of a constructionist problematic. Nevertheless, from DC they have a constructionist nucleus because they give primacy to the situated categorizations and displayed understandings of the participants and rigorously avoid the production of a privileged 'off-stage' story that situates and reframes the participants' discourse (see Stokoe, in press).

A second approach considers how social structure is an ongoing accomplishment of different parties. Rather than treating action in a setting as contextually determined by the institutional context – school, law court, therapeutic session – this approach considers the way

different parties collaboratively and actively produce the relevant structures. These structures are normative and inferential – they do not determine what goes on in, say, a medical consultation, but they do provide of the coherence of that interaction. There is a now a mature and large scale research programme of this kind and many of the arguments and issues are familiar so we will not spend a great deal of time discussing it. The classic treatments are available in Drew and Heritage (1992); methodological issues in studying institutional interaction are discussed in Heritage (2005) and for an extended research illustration see Clayman and Heritage (2002) on the news interview.

The third and final research approach here is rather different, although complementary. It considers the ways in which social structures of a various kinds are constructed in and through talk and what those constructions are used to do. Studies of this kind have covered a range of topics that invoke constructions of social structure and organization including racism (e.g. Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006), nationalism (e.g. Condor *et al.,* 2006) and family (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

For example Billig (1992) studied talk about the British royal family. He aimed to show how people drew on, reproduced and reconstructed notions of privilege, equality, the nation state and morality as they argued about the role of the royal family in the life of the nation. In particular, Billig highlighted a weave of contradictory and dilemmatic notions that were drawn on to obscure inequalities and legitimate current social arrangements. For Billig, the participants are engaged in conversational 'acts of settlement': 'common-sense talk about royalty settles ordinary people down into their place within the imagined national community' (1992: 23).

Billig suggests that common sense is fragmented in a way that trouble and conflict is rhetorically settled, and how the political status quo is perpetuated (see Billig et al., 1988). It

provides one illustration of the way that social organization and structure can be studied as a

flexible set of constructions that are drawn on as parts of broader practices of social legitimation

(see also Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In terms of our interest in systematic discursive

constructionism we see in examples such as this a version of analysis that does not take a

privileged analysts' version of social structure and uses it to situate participants' accounts.

Instead the focus is on how participants themselves invoke, describe and reconstruct social

structure in the course of their practices.

Embodiment, emotion and perception

Critics of constructionism from various perspectives have often picked up various

'psychological' domains as limits or at least challenges to constructionist analysis (see e.g. Burr,

1999). The body, perception and emotion are three central examples. In this final section we

will indicate the sorts of ways in which these domains can be addressed in DC.

One DC way into constructionism is deceptively simple, and that is to use video materials

to analyse what is going on in a way that includes its 'embodied' and 'physically situated'

nature. In itself, of course, this is not a distinctively DC approach to research. Indeed, the use of

video might seem to suggest a vision of simple empiricism. However, video materials are

analysed in DC ways that keep the participants own orientations to what is going on at the fore

(Heath, 2005). Gaze and gesture, for example, are not studied for what the *analyst* can see going

on, but for how they are coordinated with, and contributing to, the ongoing interaction for the

participants of that interaction. This approach contrasts with both traditional studies of non-

verbal behaviour that tend to see gesture in terms of information leakage that a skilled analyst

can detect behind the backs of the participants, and traditional sociological analyses of the visual,

that tend to interpret gesture and other visual elements according to theories from cultural studies

and semiotics. With respect to DC, the visual (gesture, physical settings, and so on) are not the *limits* on what is constructed; instead they are precisely and centrally part of the constructed world of ongoing interaction.

Another DC approach to embodiment is to consider bodily orientations in talk of a range of kinds. This could involve constructions of bodies and embodiment (accounts, descriptions, formulations) rather in the manner of DC studies of 'social structure' and other objects of this kind. Or it could involve meaningful bodily displays of various kinds. For example, Wiggins (2002) studied expressions of 'gustatory pleasure' and in particular the sorts of mmms that people make when eating. She showed the way the mmms are produced to deliver expressions of pleasure as spontaneous and immediate, but are also socially organized and communicative (coordinated between speakers and helping form actions such as food compliments). They can be treated as 'sensation receipts', presenting the body as itself seeming to inform the assessment. Again, instead of the body offering a solid boundary to constructionist analysis it becomes something invoked, displayed and enacted in a manner that is susceptible to DC analysis.

Emotion is similarly treated overwhelmingly in the social sciences as something emerging from the body, as something close to nature and rather distant from culture. There is a relatively small literature on the social construction of emotion (see Harré, 1986 and the discussion in Chapter **, this volume). DC research has started to explore this area of work. For example, Buttny (1993) considers some of the ways that emotion categories can be part of the formation of actions such as blamings and apologies. Edwards (1997) considered the way emotion descriptions operate in relationship counselling talk. Through a detailed examination of the different moves of the parties to the counselling Edwards shows that notions such as 'anger' and 'upset' can be used as parts of accounts which work to construct actions as reactions. This

DC approach to emotion both brings it into analysis rather than having emotion a boundary or limit, and also highlights a realm of central human business virtually bypassed by traditional cognitive and cross cultural models of emotion.

Edwards and Buttny concentrate in particular on the use of emotion descriptions and categories. Other work has considered emotion in terms of display. For example, Heath (2002) considered the use of use gesture in medical consultation as patients displayed pain and suffering, and Hepburn (2004) focused on crying and the social, communicative and interactional organization of upset.

A final domain that is sometimes seen as troubling for constructionist analysis is perception. Indeed, perception and its associated tropes are historically and tropically bound up with empiricism and other foundational epistemic systems (Rorty, 1980). Although perception has been undercut by a range of philosophical critiques from Quine through Hanson, Popper and Wittgenstein that highlight its conventional or theory laden nature (see Chalmers, 1992, for a useful review) the approach from DC has been to consider practices of seeing as topics for analysis.

Some of the most powerful research in this tradition was conducted by Goodwin and Goodwin (e.g. 1996). They have conducted a rigorous series of studies of looking, seeing and perception in the context of a range of professional settings. For example, they researched the way air traffic controllers 'see' planes as part of getting their work done. This work shows that perception is neither simple nor is it a purely mental phenomenon sitting behind cognition and causing interaction. Perception is profoundly socially organized and can be an important and consequential area for constructionist study.

In this final section we have considered the way a range of conventional limits to constructionist analysis – furniture and objects, death, social structure, context, the body, emotion, and perception – can become major topics of discursive constructionist study. Put another way, we have noted the way that these phenomena can come within the purview of constructionism rather than being rogue objects that require their own special analytic methods (phenomenology, Marxism, or whatever).

Discursive constructionism has been a literary construction of this chapter, but it is reflexively and epistemically at peace and with that status. As Davies (1998), Hepburn (2000) and Smith (1988) have shown amongst others, this reflexive construction is neither a requirement to accept that 'anything goes' (that strange realist construction) nor that constructionists are required to work without any personal commitment to social critique, feminism or visions of transformation. This is not to say that DC is a coherent and sealed system – there are a range of creative tensions between, for example, the more conversation analytic and more discourse analytic moments, or between more epistemic focused and more ontologically focused versions of constructionism. Such tensions provide one of the motors for future development.

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