Social problems: Who makes them?

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Introduction

Anti-social behaviour, homelessness, drugs, mental illness: all problems in today's society. But what makes a problem social? This course will help you to discover how these issues are identified, defined, given meaning and acted upon. You will also look at the conflicts within social science in this area.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in Sociology.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- illustrate what is social about social science
- demonstrate how certain social constructions become dominant
- distinguish how labelling something can create expectations about behaviour and actions
- give examples of inequalities that result from particular social constructions.

1 The social construction of social problems

1.1 What is 'social' about a social problem?

In the late twentieth century a list of current social problems in the UK might include poverty, homelessness, child abuse, disaffected young people and non-attendance at school, school discipline, the treatment of vulnerable people in institutional care, vandalism, road rage, lone parenting and divorce. This brief list was drawn up from news items on television and radio and in newspapers in the month that this course was being written. As you read this course, some of these may still be issues, some may have disappeared, while new problems may have attracted attention. It is not obvious what they have in common, except that they are the subject of current concern. That fact – the capturing of public interest, anxiety or concern – is probably the best place to start this discussion, since it suggests that one answer to what is 'social' about a social problem is that such problems have gained a hold on the attention of a particular society at a particular time.

There is a point in stressing the word 'particular' here. Other societies may be preoccupied by other problems: what commands public attention in Germany, the USA or China is likely to be different in at least some respects to what is a current social problem in the UK. It is also true that if we looked back at earlier historical periods, only some of the list of current social problems would be visible then. In the late nineteenth century, for example, we would find that poverty, the maltreatment of children and divorce were being discussed as social problems, but others on the list did not attract much attention. There are two possible explanations for such differences. One is that social problems change. If in the late nineteenth century there were no homeless people, then we would not expect homelessness to have been discussed as a social problem. The second reason is that what is perceived as a social problem may change. Thus there may indeed have been people who were homeless in the late nineteenth century, but their situation was perceived not as a social problem, but rather as a 'fact of life' or as the consequence of mere individual misfortune – neither of which would make it a **social** problem.

Writing in the 1950s, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, pp. 7–10) drew a distinction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'. He suggested that although there were many 'troubles' or 'problems' that individuals experienced in their lives, not all of these emerged as 'public issues' which commanded public interest and attention or which were seen as requiring public responses ('what can we do about X?'). Mills's use of the term 'personal' may be slightly misleading, since it implies that it is the difference between individual and collective experience that matters. For us, however, the important distinction is between issues that are 'private' (that is, to be handled within households, families or even communities) and those which are 'public' (that is, to be handled through forms of social intervention or regulation). One factor that may make a difference to whether things are perceived as private troubles or public issues is scale or volume. If only a few people experience some form of trouble, then it is likely to remain a private matter and not attract public concern. If, however, large numbers of people begin to

experience this same trouble – or fear they might – it may become a public issue. The process can probably best be explored with the help of an example.

1.2 From private trouble to public issue: the emergence of negative equity

In the housing market, owner-occupiers have occasionally sold their property at a price below that which they paid for it. In the early 1990s, large numbers of property owners in the UK (and particularly in south-east England) found that the market value of their houses and flats had fallen below the original purchase price. A private trouble emerged as a public issue. It was named, and became the problem of 'negative equity'. This was identified as a widespread problem rather than a matter of individual misfortune: it was seen to have causes (in the state of the economy) which lay beyond the reach of the individual. It was also identified as something that required a public response – from mortgage lenders and the government.

Can this shift of a private trouble to a public issue be understood as a consequence of the numbers of people involved?

The numbers involved provide only part of the explanation why this trouble became a public issue. Other 'troubles' involving equally large numbers of people attracted less attention and concern. For example, the continuing rise in rents for tenants of council housing and housing associations, which took place at the same time, was largely viewed as a fact of life. Furthermore, despite the attempts of housing professionals to place the issue on the public agenda, the decaying state of Britain's owner-occupied housing stock (built before 1945) continued to be defined as a personal problem facing those who happened to be living in older houses. They were expected to resolve it through their own investment in renewal and repair, rather than through any collective effort. We might suggest that a number of other features of negative equity helped it become a public issue:

- *Who was involved?* The social and political standing of those experiencing this trouble affected its visibility. Home owners were seen as innocent victims of a situation beyond their control. They were the symbolic representation of government policies designed to create a 'property-owning democracy'. Negative equity was thus a politically sensitive matter.

- *What was its claim on public attention?* Negative equity was seen as connected to matters of public policy – first, the drive to extend home ownership and, second, the contemporary management of the national economy which was associated with an initial boom and then a slump in housing prices.

- *What sort of problem was it?* Negative equity was seen as having significant social and economic consequences. It was associated with mounting personal debt, a lack of social mobility, and a fear of the future that prevented people taking risks. In particular, it was seen as causing a problem of consumer confidence: this reduced patterns of consumer spending, which in turn further threatened the prospects of economic growth. It was therefore also a political problem for the government, as it provoked extensive public discussion about the presence or absence of a 'feel-good factor', particularly among the government's erstwhile supporters.

What this brief example suggests is that the scale of a 'trouble' is not by itself a sufficient condition for understanding why the trouble becomes a public issue. We need to understand the social context in which it occurs – its links to other current issues and values. The case of negative equity also suggests that we need to think about who is involved and how they are perceived, in terms of their social standing and significance. In very simple terms, we might suggest that there are two routes to troubles becoming public issues which are distinguished by the question: **whose problem is this?**

Some troubles become social or public problems as a result of the actions of those people who experience them (or those who speak on behalf of such people). Thus, campaigns aim to capture public attention and direct it to the conditions or experiences that specific groups of people are suffering. Negative equity would be one example of this route. Other examples include campaigns to draw attention to the widespread incidence of domestic violence, despite its relative public invisibility; to raise concern about the abuse or maltreatment of vulnerable people in institutional care; or to reveal the scale of, and suffering associated with, homelessness. Such campaigns try to articulate the experience of a particular condition and demand public action to remedy it. This route is built around the argument that people **have** problems.

The second route is different, in that it is built around the argument that some people **are** problems. There are some types of people who are seen as a problem for others or for society at large (even if these people do not define themselves in the same way). For example, we might be able to identify groups of people who are seen to pose a threat or danger to society in some way: vandals, noisy neighbours, hooligans, prostitutes, the mentally ill, and so on. The demand here is that society does something about 'these people' – police them, lock them up, treat them, and so forth.

Sometimes, of course, the same problem might be identified through both these routes. If we examine homelessness as a social problem, it is possible to see its being defined as a problem that some people have and as a problem that some people are. In the first case, the problem is perceived as the lack of access to a basic human need – adequate accommodation – which results in homeless people experiencing deprivation, misery and suffering. The appeal is to a sense of **social justice**. In the second case, the problem of homelessness is perceived as a threat to everyday life: homeless people clutter city streets, are a health risk, prevent 'normal' people going about their daily business, and are associated with crime and other perceived threats to the rest of society. The appeal is to a sense of **social order**. Both routes acknowledge the importance of social differentiation, but they do so in different ways. The first implies that steps need to be taken to reverse or compensate for the inequalities or unfairness that arises from particular social arrangements, while the second implies that those who do not conform to accepted and widely understood norms – or standards – of behaviour need to be taught or helped to do so.

Figure 1: Homelessness: a shortage of adequate accommodation, or a threat to society?

Activity 1

Can you think of other social problems where both these routes are visible?

Use the grid below to help you to do this. We have taken one example, 'the mentally ill', and have filled in the first column to show you how you might answer. Try to fill in the second column, and then see if you can add two further examples.

Social problem	People *have* problems	People *are* problems
Mental illness	Mentally ill people are ill through no fault of their own and require/deserve treatment.	
	Mental illness can affect all of us (and even if we have not all suffered from it in some form, most of us will know someone who has).	
	As far as possible mentally ill people should be re-integrated into their communities, since excluding them from ordinary life is likely to make their condition worse.	

1.3 Social problems and social policy

Whether social problems emerge as issues of social justice or social order, they are usually associated with the idea that 'something must be done'. Social problems represent conditions that should not be allowed to continue because they are perceived to be problems for society, requiring society to react to them and find remedies. Where private troubles are matters for the individuals involved to resolve, public issues or social problems demand a public response. The range of possible public responses is, of course, very wide. At one extreme we might point to interventions that are intended to suppress or control social problems: locking people up, inflicting physical punishments or deprivations on them, even – in the most severe form – killing them. Such interventions are intended to stop social problems by means of controlling the people who are seen as problems (juvenile delinquents, drug takers, thieves, terrorists). Those who seek the suppression and control of social problems are usually, but not always, associated with the view that social problems are a challenge or threat to social order. The point about 'not always' is important, since sometimes these types of intervention are presented not in terms of protecting society or social order, but as being in 'the best interests' of the person being punished or 'treated': they need a 'bit of discipline', they respect 'toughness', and so on.

However, other interventions are intended to remedy or improve the circumstances or social conditions that cause problems – bringing about greater social justice, enhancing social welfare, or providing a degree of social protection. Thus, the development of welfare states in most advanced industrial societies during the twentieth century was associated with attempts to remedy social problems or to provide citizens with some collective protection from dangers to their economic and social well-being. In the process, a whole range of issues moved from being private troubles to becoming matters of public

concern and intervention. Between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, these societies redefined the distinction between private and public matters. Sending children to school became a matter of public compulsion rather than the private parental choice that it had been until the middle of the nineteenth century. Health became a focus of public finance, provision and intervention rather than being left to private arrangements. For most of the nineteenth century unemployment was seen as something that people chose (by refusing to take work), while for most of the twentieth century it has been seen as something against which collective action and defence by the state was necessary. Unemployment was not a social problem in the UK for most of the nineteenth century, although the unemployed themselves were certainly seen as a threat to social order (being beggars, thieves and a bad example to other workers).

In the process, citizens in advanced industrial societies came to associate social problems with social interventions – often involving action by the state – that were intended to reform or ameliorate the conditions that created problems. Social welfare, and the welfare state in particular, was intimately linked to social problems. The attempts to remedy social problems – combating illness, poverty or homelessness – drove the growth of the welfare state during the twentieth century. But the questions of whether these issues really are social problems and whether state welfare is the best remedy have reappeared towards the end of the twentieth century (see, for example, Hughes and Lewis, 1998). There are now echoes of the nineteenth-century arguments that many social problems are 'really' private troubles and not public issues, and therefore should not need social intervention by public agencies. The revival of such arguments is an important reminder that one central aspect of what is 'social' about social problems is the way in which these problems are socially perceived, defined and comprehended.

Different private troubles become defined as social problems in particular societies and in specific periods through a complex process of **social construction**. Social construction implies an active process of definition and redefinition in which some issues are widely understood to be social problems, while others are not. Just because unemployment was identified as a social problem – or public trouble – in the middle of the twentieth century, that does not mean that it will always be defined in this way. Even if unemployment remains defined as a social problem, it is not necessarily the case that the **nature** of the problem will always be understood in the same way. A move from the notion that unemployed people **have** problems to the idea that unemployed people **are** problems has major implications for the direction of public policy. If unemployment is understood as a problem created by a wider economic failure, then an appropriate policy response might be both to attempt to revitalise the economy in order to create jobs and to provide financial support in the meantime. If, however, unemployment is perceived to arise from either a failure of the unemployed to seek employment or the lack of necessary skills among unemployed people, then an appropriate policy response might be to discourage people from relying on state-provided income support (for example by reducing levels of benefit and introducing stricter rules on entitlement) and to encourage them to participate in relevant skills training. Since the mid-1980s in the UK there has been a marked shift in emphasis from the first to the second approach.

1.4 Summary

We have seen that social problems are 'social' in the sense that they capture public attention. They are more than private troubles, perhaps through reasons of scale but certainly because they are able to connect with other public issues, values and concerns –

for example, with contemporary concerns about social justice or social order. They are historically and culturally specific – that is, they belong to, or are visible in, particular societies at particular times. Finally, while they may be associated with changing social conditions (a rise or fall in the numbers of people in a particular condition such as poverty or homelessness), their status as social problems depends upon how they are **perceived**. If, for example, a condition such as homelessness is seen as a matter of individual choice or misfortune, it is unlikely to be viewed as a 'social' problem requiring public attention and action. A process of social construction determines both which issues are defined as social problems and the ways in which they are defined as such.

2 'What everybody knows'

2.1 Common sense and social problems

This concern with social construction may seem troubling or even a distraction from the real business of studying social problems. However, it is built on one of the starting points of the social scientific approach, namely that in order to study society we must distance ourselves from what we already know about it. We need to become 'strangers' in a world that is familiar. The defining characteristic of a 'stranger' is that she or he does not know those things which we take for granted. Strangers require the 'obvious' to be explained to them. In doing social science, then, there is a need to stand back from what we already know or believe and be distanced from, or sceptical about, those things which 'everybody knows'. Let us go back to the list of current social problems mentioned at the start of the course and look in more detail at the issue of poverty. What is it that 'everybody knows' about poverty in our society?

Activity 2

Make your own list of 'what everybody knows' about poverty and then compare it with our 'comment'.

Figure 2: Poverty in the UK today: a growing social problem, or no problem at all?

Our list of 'what everybody knows' is as follows:

- There is no real poverty in Britain today.
- There are more people living in poverty now than in the 1970s.
- Nobody needs to be poor.
- Some people would be poor no matter how much you helped them.

- Poor parents produce poor children.
- There are too many people in jobs with low wages.
- People wouldn't be poor if they knew how to manage better.
- Poverty acts as a spur to try hard.
- Government polices have made the rich richer and the poor poorer.
- People have become too dependent on state hand-outs.
- People are stuck in poverty traps.
- There will always be people who won't help themselves.

We have seen or heard all of these statements. Each of them has been announced with the certainty of truth. 'What everybody knows' turns out to be simultaneously over-simplified, complicated and contradictory. Each statement constructs the problem of poverty in a different way and implies different types of causes. One contribution that social scientists are expected to make is to say, 'well, that may be what you think, but the real facts are these …'. It is, however, not quite so easy. One reason for this is that defining poverty is itself a contested issue – should it mean an **absolute** lack of resources or should it be measured **relative** to the standards of the particular society? Even if agreement could be found on the definition, this still leaves open the issue of how to interpret or explain those 'facts'.

An alternative starting point is to examine how poverty is socially constructed as a problem – to scrutinise 'what everybody knows', alongside public, political and policy definitions of the problem and to disentangle the constructions that we find. This means that the practice of social science involves what we might call 'systematic scepticism' – distancing oneself from the 'common-sense' understandings.

Let us turn back to our list of statements about poverty and see if we can identify some of the key features of how poverty is socially constructed in the UK today. The first striking feature is that there are conflicting definitions about whether or not poverty is a current social problem. Those who view poverty as meaning an absolute lack of resources can see no problem: poverty simply does not exist in the UK (although it may do in other parts of the world). Such a view is contested by those who define poverty in relative terms and argue that poverty has, in fact, increased – for them it is a growing social problem. This suggests that 'poverty' is not simply a matter of academic definition but is at the centre of conflicting social understandings about whether people are 'really', 'truly' or 'genuinely' poor. If we believe they are not, there is no social problem which requires attention or any social response. This is the first, and simplest, split in common-sense (and political) debate about poverty: is it a social problem or not?

The second striking feature of these 'everybody knows' statements is that they evoke widely divergent views of poor people and the causes of poverty. This common sense about poverty is contradictory and contested. Some people look to the 'external' causes of poverty – the social, economic and political conditions that make some people poor. Others look to the 'internal' causes of poverty – the attitudes, behaviours or morals that lead some people to make themselves poor. What is noticeable is that even brief statements such as 'nobody needs to be poor' carry a set of unspoken assumptions about the nature of society and the nature of poverty. 'Nobody needs to be poor' tells us that:

- We live in a society of opportunities for everyone.
- There are no external conditions that force people to be poor.

- If people are poor, then this is something to do with the choices they make.
- Therefore poverty is the result of poor people making bad choices (in how they live, work, spend money, etc.).

A short, five-word statement contains a series of assumptions which add up to a theory of society (an 'opportunity' society), a theory of human behaviour (people make choices) and an explanation of poverty (some people make bad choices). It also implies how the rest of society should position itself in relation to poverty: it is not 'our' responsibility if 'they' make bad choices. Nor is there anything 'we' can do about it (except perhaps educate 'them' to make better choices). Each of the statements above could be assessed in this way, exploring the assumptions about society, behaviour and poverty that underpin them. The same approach could be applied to statements about other social problems.

Activity 3

If we were to consider discussions which focus on lone-parent families as a social problem, we would find ourselves confronted with comments like 'the rising numbers of single mothers indicate a moral crisis'. What assumptions do you think underlie this statement?

We would list the following assumptions, but you may have noted others:

- There is a group of people who are single mothers (rather than different types of single mothers, for example widowed, divorced, separated, never married).
- There used to be a moral order – a system of values, norms and ideas that prevented single motherhood.
- Something has changed to undermine that moral order (explanations of this may vary – we have become less religious; people are more concerned with individual freedom; there has been a rise in permissiveness; welfare systems have provided benefits to lone parents, making it easier to choose to be a lone parent).
- A crisis exists, and all crises need something to be done about them (in this case, some means of restoring traditional family values or morality).

One thing that a social science approach can do, by taking the perspective of the stranger, is to examine the content of common-sense statements about social problems and question the assumptions on which they are based. In the next section we will look further at the sorts of assumptions and explanations that are put to work in the different common-sense views of poverty. However, we want now to note a few other features of such views (we shall return to these later in this course).

The statements about poverty that we started with are not just random or throwaway thoughts that people express on the spur of the moment. They are social claims, each one implying that we all share the assumptions contained within the statements (even though the assumptions are profoundly different and even contradictory). 'Common sense', used as a term to describe such statements of 'what everybody knows', directs our attention as social scientists to the underlying theories, perspectives and assumptions that are mobilised through simple statements and claims. A society's stock of common sense can therefore be seen as a repository or storeroom of bits of knowledge on which people can draw in discussing society and its problems. One task for a social science approach is therefore to make an inventory of this repository – to catalogue the bits and pieces of

knowledge that people can and do draw on. If, for example, we were to go back to the issue of lone parents, we would need to take stock of the other possible elements of common sense that are available when lone parents are discussed. In addition to moral crisis, we might need to catalogue views about the irresponsibility of men, the changing pressures on family life, the causes of changes in divorce and marriage, and whether the same sorts of explanations apply to widowed, separated and never married women – as well as to lone fathers.

If we pursue this idea of common sense as a repository a little further, we can see another task for a social science analysis. The stock of this repository has been built up over time, having been deposited by previous generations and added to over time. It is not simply 'what we think today', but has a history. One thing we can do, then, is to look for the 'traces' of older ideas, to see how they are recirculated and kept alive across decades and even centuries. For example, ideas about the difference between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor are deposits from mid-nineteenth-century discussions (and policies) about the problem of poverty. They reflect anxieties of that time about how to deal with poor people, and how to ensure that social policies – the provision of benefits by the state or by charitable sources – did not go to the 'wrong sort of people'. Such ideas, together with their assumptions about society and human behaviour, were not just dumped in a dark corner of the storeroom and left to accumulate dust, never to be seen again. Rather, they are brought out again from time to time and threaded into new issues and debates, for example about whether we should have universal benefits or ones that are targeted at the 'most needy' or about how to distinguish between 'scroungers' and those 'genuinely' in need. Ideas about people getting their 'just deserts' and the moral worth of different people have been a recurrent feature of discussions about poverty in the UK.

Finally, it is important to note that this approach to common sense is not merely an academic exercise, in the sense of being of no practical use or interest. Taking an inventory of common sense and examining the continuing traces of past ideas and the ways in which they are revived and used are an integral part of the study of social problems and social policies. There are three aspects which make an understanding of common sense an essential feature of studying social problems:

1.   Each 'bit' of common sense involves a claim to be the truth: for example, statements about poverty are not just different, but are contested in conflicts where each position (and its assumptions and consequences) seeks to be 'what everybody knows'. Part of the approach to social science is not just to 'take an inventory' but to ask which strands are currently the dominant or most widely accepted ones, and how this pattern can be explained.

2.   Common-sense views are not just discussions or conversations that take place in idle moments. They are also connected to social and political action. Political parties address bits of common sense in their efforts to persuade people that they have the right answers and that their policies should be implemented. Indeed, one of the most potent claims made by political parties is that they are on the side of 'common sense' or that what they are proposing is merely 'what everybody knows'. If we have taken an inventory of common sense, we are in a position to ask: which part of common sense is being addressed here, and what has happened to the other parts?

3.   These connections – the dominance of some ideas over others, and the political articulation of some ideas – matter, because they lead to social action. The predominant definition of poverty, explanation of its causes, or view of who is 'deserving', has consequences, for these shape how the society and its political institutions respond to poverty.

2.2 Summary

Social scientists need to stand back, to view common sense or 'what everybody knows' from the perspective of a stranger. Common sense about social problems such as poverty involves a process of social construction, drawing on a repository or storeroom of underlying theories and assumptions. Common sense has been built up over time, carrying with it traces of earlier understandings which are also brought into discussions of new issues and debates. Common sense is itself divided, reflecting contested and conflicting claims about the nature of society and social problems. Although we have talked here of different 'bits' of common sense, some authors prefer to talk about a range of common **senses** (that is, in the plural). In discussions of social problems, each position seeks to be 'what everybody knows' – the dominant common sense. This has direct consequences for the development of social policy through political initiatives. The sceptical analysis of common sense is, therefore, of practical as well as academic importance.

3 Tracing the deposits

3.1 Competing explanations of social problems

If we can agree that poverty is a social problem, we are led to another question: what sort of social problem is it? For some, it is a social problem because people should not be poor: it involves social injustice. For others, poverty is a social problem because poor people behave badly (or bring up children poorly): it involves social disorder. We therefore have another parting of the ways, with some believing that social justice requires poor people to become less poor, and others believing that poor people need to be made better people. In part, this split between justice and order reflects different common-sense views of why poor people are poor. We would suggest that it is possible to see at least three different conceptions of the causes of poverty underlying the list of comments following Activity 2: poverty is natural/inevitable; poverty is the result of poor people; poverty is the result of economic and/or political causes.

3.2 Poverty as natural/inevitable

There is a construction of poverty that identifies it as a necessary feature of social life: some people will be better endowed, try harder or be more successful than others, and inequality will be an inevitable result (see, for example, Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, who argue that low levels of intelligence are the main determinants of poverty in the USA). Interfering with this natural order of things is dangerous, particularly because it prevents poverty acting as a spur to try harder. This is the basis of the American economist George Gilder's attack on 'welfare culture', his term for state programmes intended to diminish the impact of poverty:

> The most serious fraud is committed not by the members of the welfare culture but by the creators of it, who conceal from the poor, both adults and children, the most fundamental realities of their lives: that to live well and escape poverty they will have to keep their families together at all costs and will have to work harder than the classes above them. In order to succeed the poor need most of all the spur of their poverty.
>
> (Gilder, 1981, p. 118)

In this perspective, poverty is simultaneously natural and socially necessary. Inequalities are both the natural result of unequal performance in a competitive world and necessary to keep people trying to succeed. The response to the problem of poverty is to try to restore it to its 'natural' state, since programmes designed to ameliorate it prevent people trying to succeed. As a result, poor people become 'dependent' on welfare benefits and 'demoralised', losing the moral urge to fend for themselves and their families.

3.3 Poverty as the result of poor people

The second cluster of common-sense ideas about poverty centre around the theme that the character and behaviour of some types of people causes them to be poor. Such people are in some way 'flawed'. There may, of course, be different types of flaw, but poor people are distinguished from the rest of 'us' by some characteristic that makes 'them' poor. This might be their moral character (they are lazy, shiftless, workshy); it might be their abilities or capacities (they cannot budget properly); or it might be that they have not been properly socialised (they have not learnt the value of hard work, thrift, etc.).

Activity 4

What is the argument in the following quotation?

> Such problems – problems of morals, attitude, behaviour – are not susceptible to a quick fix by social policy … If incompetent shopping is the problem, larger hand-outs will not cure it. Higher subsidies will not reform bad budgeting. Whatever the behaviour cause, be it isolation, lack of parental example in domestic economy, illiteracy, poor motivation, depression, self-indulgent or incompetent expenditure by husband, those husbands selfishly not handing enough over to their wives, a failure to look beyond today, simply increasing social security expenditure will not solve it.
>
> (Anderson, 1991, p. 27)

Two things are being argued here. One is that there is a range of behaviours and attitudes that create poverty (from poor budgeting to selfish patterns of spending). The other is that these are counterposed to suggested solutions to poverty (increased social security expenditure), which, the author suggests, fail to address the causes that he has identified. Particular definitions of problems often proceed by this dual approach – establishing their own line of argument and rejecting others. They do so because 'what we know about poverty' is not a simple or self-evident set of truths all of which point in the same direction. Poverty – like other social problems – is caught up in multiple definitions and perspectives, each of which tries to claim for itself the status of truth.

To return to this particular perspective, it identifies the causes of poverty in the behaviour, attitudes and morals of the poor. They are separated from 'normal' people by these flaws or failings. To stop being poor, they need to become more like the rest of 'us'. This differentiation between the normal and others – sometimes described as **deviant** – is a recurrent feature of how social problems are talked about, both in 'everyday' language and in academic analyses. Both are concerned to find the factor or 'flaw' that distinguishes the **normal** from the **abnormal**. These issues are discussed further in the different contexts of disability, 'race' and sexuality.

3.4 Poverty as the effect of economic or political

causes

The third and final cluster of ideas about poverty are those which imply causes that lie in the external world of the economy and politics. For example, an increase in the number of people working in low-paid jobs produces lower incomes and more people living in relative poverty, or changes in government policy on welfare benefits might reduce incomes or trap people in poverty because they lose benefits when they earn income. These definitions locate poverty as an effect of causes beyond individuals or families – what we might call 'structural' or 'social' causes because they are located in social structures or arrangements that are outside the individual's control. Here is one such argument:

> The poverty of low wages and poor working conditions is often still a hidden factor in the poverty debate. Recent government policies have specifically weakened employment rights … Alongside the deregulation of employment law, new patterns of employment have changed the profile of the workforce. There has been a marked increase in self-employment and in part-time and low-paid work and a small increase in temporary work. Women are more likely to be in both part-time and temporary work. Many of these jobs are low paid with few employment and social security rights which not only creates poverty, but also stores it up for the future.
>
> (Oppenheim, 1993, p. 59)

Although this says things about the people living in poverty (for example, that women are likely to be affected by low-paid and poorly protected employment), it does not treat poverty as being the result of the intrinsic characteristics of such groups but rather as the consequence of economic and political arrangements.

Figure 3: Is poverty a necessary feature of society, the result of inadequate socialisation, or the consequence of economic or political arrangements?

3.5 Social science approaches

So far we have looked at three more developed discussions of some of the basic propositions about poverty that we considered in section 2. These three examples could be multiplied: there is a variety of explanations of poverty that we could have used. However, these three allow us to reflect a little on the relationship between social science discussions of social problems and common-sense understandings. It is worth starting with some of the differences.

- Even these brief extracts from books and articles indicate that social scientists take longer to say things than the rather pithy common-sense statements that we looked at earlier. Cynics might say that this is simply evidence of social scientists being long-winded, but we believe that there is something else involved here. In each case, what is being presented is an **argument**, rather than an **assertion**. Put simply, the authors are trying to set out a series of connections which explain why one thing is connected to or causes another. They make explicit what are implicit in the common-sense statements. In particular, they make explicit **causal claims** about why poverty occurs.

- On the other hand, these are still arguments. The difference between social science and common sense is not an absolute divide between 'opinion' and 'science', where science guarantees truth (and opinion is necessarily incorrect). We have here three

social scientists – and we could have had many more – with very different perspectives on the problem of poverty. While each of them would like to have their explanations seen as the truth, none of them can be certified as the truth merely by virtue of their being written by a social scientist. As with common sense, social science is characterised by **competing and contested perspectives**.

- Social science approaches also raise the question of **evidence**. Although the brief extracts that we have used above do not present statistical data or other sorts of information, they nevertheless raise the possibility in different ways. Gilder's argument that 'to escape poverty' the poor need to keep their families together could be tested against some sort of empirical evidence: for example, is there evidence that families with divorced or separated parents are unable to 'escape' poverty? We could probably all think of examples of such families. At the time of writing, parts of the British royal family are undergoing divorce and separation, and it seems unlikely that the children of these marriages will be thrust into poverty. However, one-off examples are not necessarily the same as statistical trends, where lone parenthood appears to be associated with family poverty. Such evidence might vindicate Gilder's argument, but it may also be explained by other perspectives.

In the rest of this course we want to distinguish between a social science **approach** and social science **perspectives**. There is a wide variety of different perspectives within the social sciences, providing different theories to explain social phenomena. Some of these emphasise individual characteristics or choices, some stress familial patterns, while others draw attention to structural or societal conditions and processes. These are the competing perspectives or theories. But there is also an issue about how to approach the study of social problems. Throughout this book the emphasis is on examining the diverse ways in which social problems are socially constructed – the ways in which they are defined, understood, made sense of within society. These social constructions may be in the form of common-sense knowledges, political ideologies, or social science perspectives, but they all contribute to the shaping of how social problems are constructed. A central issue for a social science approach, then, is the work of **deconstructing** them – making them strange rather than obvious, and examining their assumptions about society, people and problems.

3.6 Summary

Three explanations of poverty developed by social scientists have been considered. The first sees poverty as natural or inevitable, the second focuses on the behaviour of poor people, while the third analyses poverty as the result of economic or political processes. Considering these explanations makes it possible to draw some conclusions about the social science approach to social problems:

- It relies on arguments making causal claims, rather than assertion.
- Social science is characterised by competing and contested perspectives.
- Social scientists use evidence of various sorts to support and explore the arguments they develop; their conclusions can be judged against that evidence.

4 Mapping the field: competing constructions

4.1 Natural/social

In the previous section we looked at the issue of competing explanations of social problems. Here we want to take a rather different approach by starting from one of the major dividing lines between different types of explanation. These dividing lines are ones that recur in the definition, interpretation and explanation of a range of social issues: for example, patterns of inequality between men and women; crime and juvenile delinquency; the persistence of poverty, and so on. Despite the fact that we have referred to these topics as **social** issues or **social** problems, the most basic dividing line between different social constructions is the distinction between the natural and the social. This might seem slightly confusing, given our focus here on social issues, but ideas about the natural basis of social arrangements or social problems are widespread. There are many claims about social issues that begin with the formulation 'It's only natural that …'. For example, it's only natural that 'men go out to work', 'boys will be boys', 'people will not trust other races', and so on.

> **If we consider this approach as a 'social construction' – a way of perceiving or understanding the world – instead of exploring it in ways which seek to challenge or confirm the 'facts' on which it is based, what effect would that have?**

Ideas about the natural basis of society or of social problems within society refer us to a set of claims about the universal laws of biology or evolution that determine how we might behave. Such ideas often place an emphasis on competition, conflict and struggles for evolutionary success (the 'survival of the fittest'). They identify a range of attributes as the biological basis of human society and often insist that these are unchanging and unchangeable. In claims about the natural, biological attributes are often brought forward as explanations of social patterns. Thus, biological differences between men and women are drawn upon to explain differences in social behaviour or patterns of social inequality. Classically, women's biological capacity to bear children (whether they do so in practice or not) has been held to account for a range of social patterns. For example, for many years women's exclusion from education was justified on the grounds that they didn't need to know anything beyond being a wife and mother, because stimulation of the brain would drain energy that should be devoted to the tasks of reproduction. Equally, men's behaviour has been interpreted as the product of biological forces and drives. For instance, biologists have developed an approach known as 'parental investment theory' to explain why women are monogamous home-builders while men are philandering adulterers. According to this theory, the different 'investments' which eggs and sperm represent for the two sexes, produces a different orientation to the genetic challenge of reproduction. Women invest qualitatively (the best chance for a small number of eggs), while men invest quantitatively (scattering their seed). Such distinctions between men and women have been held to account for a variety of social differences – in attitudes,

behaviour, sexuality, patterns of employment, levels of income, involvement in politics, and so on (Barash, 1981; Wilson, 1981).

While there are many arguments about whether there is evidence to support this sort of explanation, our main concern with it here is as a distinctive type of social construction. It centres on the claim that our social world is formed and constrained by a variety of natural causes and conditions. The emphasis on the natural in this form of social construction provides a strong claim to authority and truth, by referring to a world of natural laws that are seen as universal and immutable. As a consequence, many of the social constructions that refer to natural conditions or causes tend to warn against attempts to change or tamper with these natural laws. Social 'interference' – for example, attempts to promote greater equality between men and women – is likely to have undesirable and 'unnatural' consequences.

Where social constructions that centre on 'nature' tend to be resistant to change, social constructions that centre on the 'social' conditions and causes of social issues tend to imply the possibility of change, reform or improvement. An emphasis on the social character of social arrangements suggests that such patterns might be re-arranged. Thus, if some forms of undesirable behaviour – such as delinquent behaviour by young men – are defined as resulting from following bad examples, this construction implies that the provision of better role models would lead to improved behaviour. By contrast, 'natural' constructions would draw attention to the biological or genetic basis of such behaviour – 'boys will be boys' – indicating little hope for intervention or change.

Despite the distinction between 'natural' and 'social' here, both types of approach to social issues are examples of **social** construction. Each provides a way into defining, interpreting and acting in the social world that we inhabit. Each also provides a framework within which events, actions and types of people become meaningful, and which allows us to position ourselves in relation to them. However, the distinction between natural and social orientations is a significant one because of their different explanations of social behaviour. Different policy conclusions will also be drawn.

Figure 4: 'Boys will be boys', but perhaps in need of better role models?

4.2 Levels of explanation

The distinction between the natural and the social is not the only significant one. Even the social orientation in constructions of social problems is complicated by different sorts of emphasis. The growth of social science since the late nineteenth century has ensured that a variety of competing theories, disciplines and perspectives are available to us in our attempt to make sense of social problems. Such theories have made their way into the realm of everyday or common-sense constructions – we all know bits of economic theory, bits of psychology and even bits of sociology. For the purposes of this course, the most useful way of distinguishing the differences in this approach involves considering different **levels of explanation**.

Constructions that stress the 'social' conditions and causes of social issues might begin with the level of the **individual**, looking at character, personality, aptitudes, etc. Others might focus on the **family** or **kin group** of the individual – how he or she is socialised, what behaviours, values, outlooks are learned or acquired in the family setting. The third level would then be the **locality** – patterns of social networks, peer groups and other local influences. Beyond this, one might look to constructions that deal with the **culture** of a particular society – its values, orientations and how these are communicated (the role of

the mass media, education system, and so on). Finally, some explanations look to **social structures** for the causes and conditions of problems – how the society is arranged, how the resources and power are distributed, and how inequality is organised. Different perspectives are likely to emphasise different levels of explanation.

Activity 5

Let us take another social issue, unemployment. Using the grid below, write against each level of explanation the factors you think would be important in constructing social explanations of unemployment.

Explanation	Factors
Individual:	
Familial:	
Locality:	
Cultural:	
Structural:	

Figure 5: How is unemployment socially constructed?

We would have completed the grid as follows, but you may have had different answers.

Explanation	Factors
Individual:	Explanations might address either the attitudes or capabilities of unemployed individuals. Are they actively looking for work, or are they work avoiders? Have they got the sorts of technical and social skills that employers are demanding?

Familial:	Has their upbringing or socialisation prepared them adequately for the world of work? Have they got the right outlook? Are there family networks that help or hinder them in obtaining work?
Locality:	Are there particular possibilities or problems in the local pattern of employment? Are people part of a local culture which makes them less employable or less interested in work? Some people talk about local 'cultures of poverty' which pass on attitudes that make people less likely to look for or get jobs.
Cultural:	Do values in the wider society stress the merits of being employed? Do they promote responsibility? Or do they encourage dependency and idleness?
Structural:	Whose interests are served by unemployment? Does unemployment make labour cheaper or more manageable for employers? Why does the level or scale of unemployment change in different periods?

We do not intend this to be an exhaustive survey of all the different types of social explanations of unemployment, but we hope it illustrates the range and the way in which different levels provide a focus for such social explanations. A similar exercise could be undertaken for 'natural' constructions of unemployment and its causes. Are some people 'naturally' lazy or resistant to work? Is 'human nature' itself pleasure-seeking and work-avoiding? Do some people fail to respond to the sticks and carrots needed to make people work?

4.3 Summary

In this section we have tried to sketch some of the main lines of division in social constructions of social issues. The distinction between the natural and the social in constructing the causes that underlie social issues is a profound and recurrent one. A 'social' orientation involves the construction of social causes and conditions as the explanations for social issues. However, it is also important to bear in mind that such an orientation will itself be complicated by differences of perspective, particularly about the level of society upon which the construction focuses.

5 Scepticism and social construction

5.1 Common sense revisited

It is worth taking a little time to reflect on what we have discovered so far. Starting from 'what everybody knows' about a social problem – or what are sometimes called the **common-sense understandings** – allows us to see a number of things if we apply the scepticism of being a stranger in our own society.

First, there is a question about whether particular issues are commonly understood to be social problems. As we have seen, there are views which say either that poverty does not exist in the UK today, or that, if it does, it is not a social problem but a natural consequence of having a competitive society.

Second, we can see that common-sense understandings are not cut from a single cloth. In the case of poverty, we have seen that there are different views of poverty and its causes which pull in different directions. We can see these both in the form of simple statements and in the more developed form of arguments about poverty. This suggests that there is no absolute or clear-cut distinction between everyday or common-sense talk about poverty and academic analyses and arguments – a point to which we will return later in this course.

Third, we have seen that these multiple perspectives are not only different but that they are **contested**. That is to say, they aim to establish themselves as the 'correct' explanation, superior to others. These different perspectives are engaged in conflict about how to define and explain poverty. We can therefore suggest that the social construction of social problems is a contested process.

Fourth, each of the brief quotations in section 3 announces its claim to be the correct or true understanding of poverty in different ways. Let us look back at how this was done. The quotation from George Gilder talks about how 'fundamental realities' are concealed from the poor. Anderson talks about how some suggested solutions (that is, those from other perspectives) do not address the causes that he has identified. Oppenheim talks about low-paid and poorly protected employment being a 'hidden factor' which is revealed by her arguments. Each of them tells us about why they are superior perspectives. We can therefore suggest that particular social constructions of social problems attempt to establish themselves as 'true'.

The practice of systematic scepticism is an essential feature of social science in that it refuses to accept any of these self-proclaimed 'truths'. Each of them becomes something to be studied as part of the process by which social problems are socially constructed. It is one of the most challenging aspects of studying social science, since it demands that we distance ourselves not just from 'what everybody knows' but also from what we ourselves 'know' about social issues. 'What we know' is also part of the 'stock of knowledge' in this society. It is disconcerting to take the position of being a stranger, but it is necessary if we are to understand how social problems are socially constructed.

5.2 From social construction to social

constructionism

The notion of social construction, we have argued, is fundamental to a social science approach to the analysis of social problems. However, some authors have developed the notion further into a more focused perspective, which may be called **social constructionism**. This perspective starts by emphasising one essential feature of human societies – the role of language. In human societies, action is preceded by understanding and intention. We intend our actions to have meaningful outcomes. Our actions convey messages to other members of society. Although, as we shall see, some aspects of the social constructionist perspective can be quite complicated, it starts from a relatively simple point of departure. We might call this the naming or **labelling** of things. How we name things affects how we behave towards them. The name, or label, carries with it expectations.

Let us consider the example of motherhood. The link between the biological facts of motherhood and its social expression are frequently taken for granted. The social constructionist approach has a rather different starting point. Thus we expect mothers (or, more accurately, 'people who carry the label mother') to love their children, be attentive to their well-being and to enable them to thrive. The label 'mother' carries a stock of social expectations, so that if a mother fails to behave in this fashion – if she abandons or abuses her children – we are likely to identify her as 'unnatural' and will anticipate finding something wrong with her that would explain her failure to live up to our expectations. What matters here, say social constructionists, is not the biology but social expectations. As with the label 'mother', many other names (the socially constructed identities or patterns of our society) are so well established, or 'taken for granted', that we view them as natural. From a social constructionist standpoint, the appearance of the word **natural** (or **unnatural**) is usually a warning that deeply embedded patterns of social expectations are at stake. The most deeply embedded aspects of our social arrangements have become so 'taken for granted' that we find it hard to think of them as social. Instead, we attribute them to causes or forces beyond society – to the realm of nature.

The point here is not to deny that there are important biological or natural differences between people, or even to deny the existence of certain shared biological drives – as 'everybody knows', for example, we all have to eat. Rather, it is positively to affirm the importance of the ways in which such differences are given meaning through processes of social construction. Thus, the person who gives birth to a child is called a mother (although, of course, it is also possible to become a mother through adoption). However, it is not clear that the same assumptions are made about the behaviour that follows from this biological relationship in all societies, at all times, or in all classes. In contrast to the model outlined above, for example, in some societies infanticide has been an acceptable form of birth control; in others child care has been shared through wide kinship networks; and in some social classes and at some times the passing on of babies to wet-nurses and then nannies, with little continuing maternal contact, has been viewed positively. Licensed forms of abandonment might also include the sending of children to boarding school at an early age. In all of these contexts it is the social expectations rather than the biological necessity that matters. In broader terms, what matters is the various ways in which a bundle of 'natural material called the body is given a social meaning'.
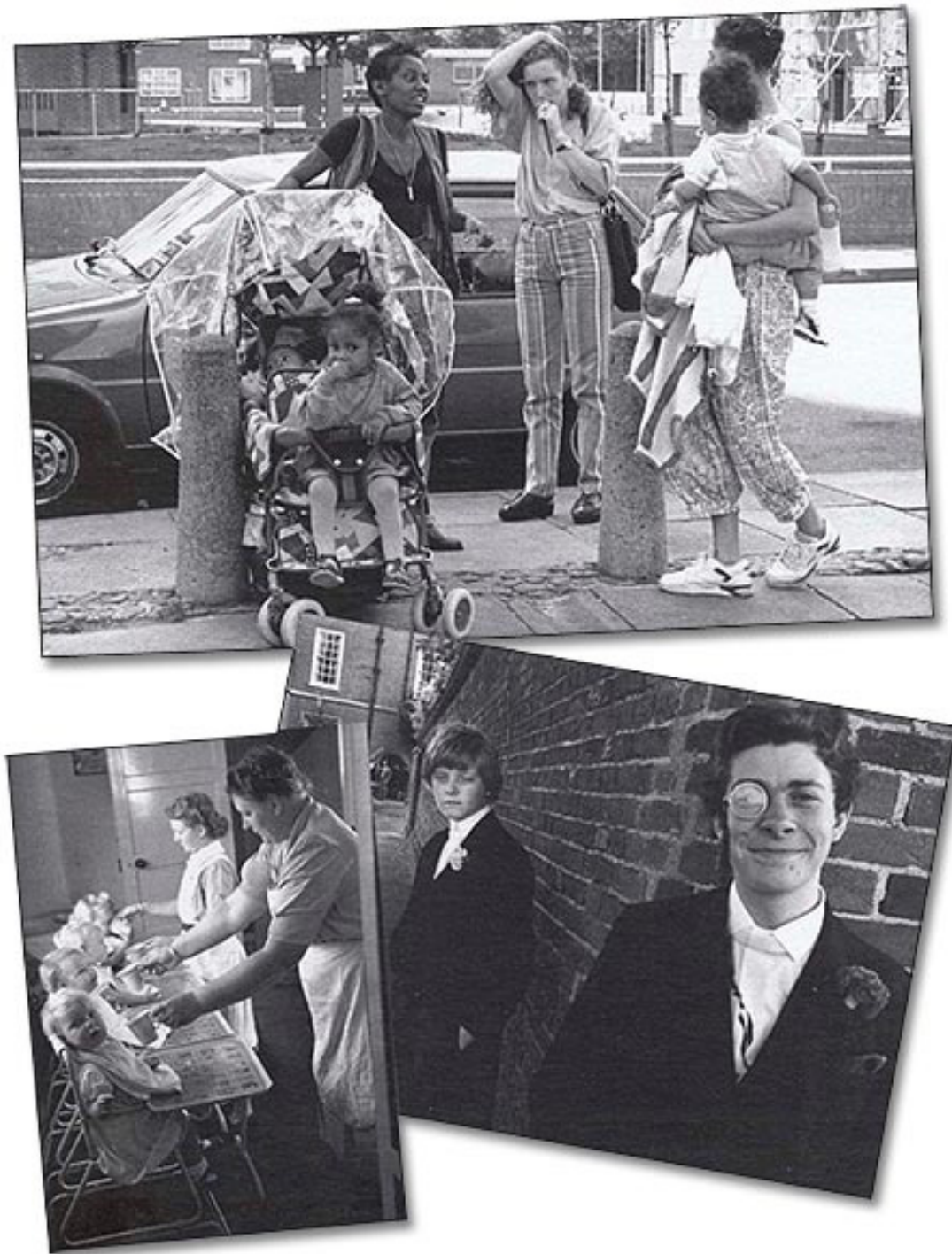
Figure 6: Which are the 'natural' forms of child care?

Those who take a social constructionist approach (for example Burr, 1995) frequently contrast their position with what they characterise as **essentialism**. Essentialism is the belief that social behaviour is determined by some underlying process or 'essence' which works itself out in social contexts. In this context it should not be confused with the more common everyday use of the word, in which 'essential' is defined as something one cannot do without. Most obviously, perhaps, essentialism finds a reflection in the notion that each of us has some basic personality which then determines the way in which we relate to others and fit into the wider social system. Similarly, the notion of some shared human nature can be seen as essentialist. Any argument which explains social or human behaviour largely in terms of biological functions or evolutionary pressures (for instance in

terms of 'the survival of the fittest') can be seen as essentialist. Critics of essentialism have not, however, restricted themselves to questioning biological determinism: they question any explanation which suggests that the best way of understanding social phenomena is to analyse them to find some underlying truth just waiting to be exposed. So, for example, classical Marxism has been criticised because it sees history as the working out of fundamental conflicts between classes which are rooted within a capitalist mode of production.

Activity 6

Can you think of any other features of contemporary social arrangements that are represented as 'natural' or non-social? Jot down any you can think of. List also any social arrangements in which people do not act in line with conventional expectations and which are identified as 'unnatural'.

We are not going to try to write out our own list here, but instead we are going to suggest that most of the things that we define as 'natural' are areas of life where particular sorts of physical or biological features of human life are visible. For example, our expectations about how people of different ages should behave are often seen as natural (particularly with regard to the young and old). As a consequence, we may think of older people who do not behave in a dignified and restrained manner (as befits their age) as behaving unnaturally. Similarly, issues about differences between men and women, or regarding sexuality, are usually assigned to the 'natural' realm. We could give further examples, but the main point here is the way in which ideas about the 'natural' order of things usually conceal issues relating to social arrangements and our conventional expectations about them.

Social constructionism – as a way of studying social arrangements – starts from the rather mundane point that the naming of things affects how we act, and develops into an approach which sees the whole edifice of society as socially constructed. One of the earliest attempts to develop this approach, by the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), treated it as the means by which humans could create order out of the potential chaos of life. For them, social constructions simplified the business of living by establishing patterns of mutual expectations: mothers are like this, fathers are like this, children are like that, and so on. Such simplifying constructions were a form of energy-saving device. Rather than having to negotiate every aspect of life in each and every social encounter, social constructions – these simplifying typifications of people and behaviours – enabled people to proceed 'as if' we could all take these assumptions for granted. In time, such assumptions became habitualised – habits of mind that required little thought or attention. People forgot that they were constructions and they became naturalised – simply features of how the world is. In the process, people reproduced these constructions (and the assumptions behind them) in their behaviour. The social order is produced and reproduced through the ways in which we enact these social constructions. As individuals we find ourselves operating within a limited range of choice of positions – sometimes called **subject positions** – within that social order. For example, a mother may find herself exploring the options of housewife, working mother or single mother, each of which is constructed as a set of expectations about how she will act.

Figure 7: Defying our expectations of how older people should behave?

Berger and Luckmann's view of social construction is only one strand in the development of this perspective (see Burr, 1995, for a fuller introduction to social constructionism). In the following sections we will be looking at the possible links between the social constructionist approach and concepts of 'ideology' and 'discourse'. However, what all of the different strands that have contributed to the perspective have in common is their stress on the way in which collective or shared understandings, interpretations or representations of the world shape our actions within it. Where they differ is in how they view these constructions. Some, particularly those associated with the concept of ideology, see constructions as a means through which social groups promote or legitimate their interests. Others, more closely associated with the idea of discourse, see social constructions as forming, rather than reflecting, social identities and interests.

5.3 Summary

Common sense is a complex and contested phenomenon. The practice of systematic scepticism is a key aspect of social science, particularly in the analysis of common sense and the consideration of the social construction of social problems. Social constructionism emphasises the importance of social expectations in the analysis of taken-for-granted and apparently natural social processes. It starts by exploring the assumptions associated with the naming or labelling of things. It is sceptical about any form of essentialism, which seeks to explain social phenomena in terms of natural or biological drives.

6 The question of ideology: social interests and social constructions

6.1 Legitimating the powerful

The labelling perspective associated with Berger and Luckmann focuses on the processes by which some behaviours and types of people become marked out for social disapproval – targeted by the wider society as different and requiring some form of social response. Its virtue is that it challenges conventional assumptions that social problems exist 'out there' as obvious and commonly understood facts. Berger and Luckmann's perspective stresses the importance of language in shaping how we define, understand and respond to social problems by drawing attention to the role of labelling. However, the perspective is less helpful in dealing with the question of why some conditions become identified as problems and why some sorts of social constructions are in widespread use. One of the ways in which the labelling perspective has been developed is through linking social construction to issues of social interests, power and ideologies.

In this view, societies are characterised by patterns of inequality between social groups, for instance between different classes, between men and women, or between different ethnic groups. Groups in dominant positions in society will try to use sets of ideas that legitimate existing arrangements – and their positions within them. For example, groups or classes who control a large share of a society's wealth are likely to spread ideas about the necessity or even desirability of these patterns of economic inequality. They may refer to the fact that wealth reflects social virtue ('breeding') or accomplishment (the reward for 'risk-taking'). They may argue that inequality is necessary to encourage everyone to strive to be successful. They may argue that wealth is a responsibility held in trust for future generations. Such sets of ideas that legitimate advantageous positions tend to be called **ideologies**. Similar ideologies have been used to justify the inequalities between men and women (men are stronger, better at thinking abstractly; women are better at caring or need to conserve their resources for the demands of childbirth, and so on). As both these examples suggest, one common feature of such ideologies is that they claim that existing social arrangements are legitimate because they are 'natural' (and therefore both desirable and unavoidable). Each **structural** pattern of inequality is likely to create interests (in preserving or changing the existing pattern) and these interests are likely to provide the foundation for ideologies which seek to legitimate or challenge these inequalities.

This is the most simple view of ideology: as a set of ideas which attempt to legitimate (or challenge) social position and inequality. Even in this most simple form, however, we can see ways in which it can link to and develop the labelling approach to social construction.

Activity 7

Let us return to the issue of poverty. How might poverty be defined in ways which would reinforce or challenge the position of the powerful?

We suggest that it might be in the interests of those with wealth to deny that poverty is a social problem (or even that it exists). If poverty can be explained as being the result of 'sad, bad or mad' people – those who are workshy, feckless or incompetent – then poverty is nothing to do with the social arrangements that make some people wealthy. Alternatively, poverty can be explained as a necessary, if unfortunate, by-product of a system that creates wealth. We might even go so far as to say that the idea of poverty is itself tolerable within such an ideology because it separates out the 'poor' as a social problem, rather than revealing the underlying structure of inequality. In distinguishing between the normal and the deviant, the wider inequalities and differences of social interest are concealed. On the other hand, if poverty were solely blamed either on the behaviour of the rich or on the operation of an unfair or unjust economic system, it might underpin a political ideology which aimed to challenge the powerful in society.

Ideologies are also likely to be involved in defining who and what are social problems. Most obviously, those who challenge existing social arrangements are likely to be defined as troublemakers, agitators or rabble-rousers who aim to cause unnecessary social disruption and disaffection. Alternatively, such challenges may be dismissed as Utopian, unworldly or even unnatural because they claim that other ways of arranging the social world are possible. Beyond this, however, there are ways in which specific social conditions or patterns of behaviour might be identified as social problems because they run counter to the interests of dominant groups. For example, some social scientists have suggested that the interests of a capitalist class mean that it needs a healthy and reliable workforce. In the period of industrialisation, therefore, indolence and insobriety came to be defined as social problems because they threatened to disrupt patterns of work and the norm of a sober and industrious worker (see, for example, Clarke and Critcher, 1985). Equally, it has been argued that the industrialists of Britain came to take a growing interest in the 'health of the nation' at the end of the nineteenth century, when they became concerned that ill-health and malnutrition made the British working class less fit and less competitive by comparison with other industrialising nations. Social problems here are the result of interests being threatened, and the definitions of those problems stem from the power of dominant groups to determine what counts as a problem.

In this view ideologies are **functional**. That is, they are geared to legitimating social positions. In principle, one can look behind ideologies to see what interests they protect and serve. They are also intended to **mystify** or **conceal** what society is really like by explaining away inequalities. So, for example, these legitimating ideologies may celebrate forms of equality (equality before the law, for instance) which distract attention from other areas of social life where inequality is rife. Anatole France referred ironically to 'the majestic equality of the French law, which forbids both rich and poor from sleeping under the bridges of the Seine' (quoted in CSE/NDC, 1977, pp. 24–5).

6.2 Contesting ideologies

Much social science analysis has been devoted to exploring the variants and consequences of this simple view of ideology, including capitalist ideology, which legitimates the interests of owners of capital against the working class; patriarchal ideology, which legitimates the interests of men against women; and racist ideology, which legitimates the interests of dominant ethnic groups against others – most evidently in the ideology of apartheid in South Africa. However, this simple and functionalist conception of

ideology has been developed in a number of ways. First, as we have already hinted, the stress on 'dominant' ideologies which legitimate social interests has been tempered by a recognition that there are other ideologies which challenge and contest dominant ones. For example, one might consider the conflicts between capitalist and socialist ideologies which sought to challenge or change the structural inequalities of capitalist societies; the conflicts between patriarchal and feminist ideologies over gender inequalities; or those between racist and anti-racist ideologies around inequalities of 'race' and ethnicity. Opening up ideologies in this way gives a more **dynamic** view of ideological conflict and struggles.

Oppositional ideologies are likely to try to define different sorts of social problems. Thus, socialist ideologies define inequality and its effects as social problems; feminist ideologies define gender differences in income, work and access to power (as well as issues of male violence within and outside home) as social problems; and anti-racist ideologies have attempted to construct inequalities (of income and rights) and other dimensions of racism (such as vulnerability to racially motivated attacks) as social problems. In this sense, one can treat the public agenda of social problems as one focus of ideological conflict in which competing ideologies struggle to establish their definitions of social problems, and what needs to be done about them.

Activity 8

Age is another issue around which there are contested understandings. Some would suggest that no one other than a mature adult is capable of taking full control of his or her own life. Consider, first, what might be the dominant ideologies behind this statement. Whose social interests do you think would be legitimated by it? Then try to identify alternative or counter-ideologies and the social interests which might underlie them. Finally, think about some of the contradictory common-sense views that surround the notion of growing old.

In generational terms the statement clearly supports the position of mature adults – that is, those who already tend to be in more powerful positions at home and at work. It might therefore also be seen as a statement which underpins structures of social order and minimises the risk of challenge from below – young people have to learn and accept discipline. It may also imply that those who have moved into old age need to accept secondary status. It is consistent with the view that those outside the workforce are a drain on the resources of those who are in productive employment.

Powerful counter-ideologies are also available, of course. From the young it might be argued that many people are already over the hill at 30, in some occupations at least. It might also be claimed that the young alone represent the hope of the future. Older people might emphasise the value of experience and wisdom, as well as stressing their entitlement to some support after a lifetime of supporting others. Each of these arguments would be appealing to different 'bits' of common sense.

One approach to the concept of ideology links it to the issue of common sense, which we discussed earlier. This approach derives from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971; see also Hall, Lumley and McLennan, 1978) and is concerned with the way in which conflicting ideologies contend over common-sense understandings. In this approach, ideologies struggle to establish their legitimacy and power by drawing connections with aspects of everyday or common-sense knowledge. In doing so, they try to organise and mobilise elements of common-sense knowledge as part of their world

view and in support of the social interests they represent. Thus, dominant social classes will refer to, and make connections with, aspects of common-sense knowledge that reflect and support existing patterns of inequality and which legitimate the economic or political power of these dominant groups. Counter-ideologies will want to build connections with those other elements of common-sense thought that object to or are sceptical about the existing social order.

In this perspective, common sense – understood as the contradictory and complex package of 'bits' discussed earlier – forms a field that is selectively addressed by contending ideologies. Different ideologies will address different 'bits' and try to organise them into a coherent story and a particular sort of perspective on the world. The aim is to ensure that there appears to be no alternative to the vision of society being presented that is capable of winning tacit or active support from people across a wide social spectrum. Gramsci used the term **hegemonic** to describe a political project that achieved these ends.

A particular example of this was provided in the 1980s by the ideology of the **New Right** associated with the Thatcher government in Britain and the Reagan presidency in the USA. This ideology was committed to social and economic programmes that would create an increased role for market forces and a more dynamic – if more unequal – capitalism, and was addressed to those aspects of common sense which saw competition, inequality and individualism as the dominant, and desirable, characteristics of social and economic life (Levitas, 1986; Hall, 1988). Thus New Right ideology addressed the 'natural' state of economic competition, identifying it as an essential feature of life for individuals, companies and even nations ('Great Britain plc') (these issues are discussed further in Hughes and Lewis, 1998). It stressed those parts of common sense that focused on individual freedoms (to earn and spend money) rather than collective provision (the 'nanny state' supported by 'excessive taxation'). Although this ideology often presented itself as common sense, it is important to recognise that it addressed common-sense thought *selectively*. It ignored or repressed those 'bits' of common sense that did not fit or could not be integrated into this ideological direction – in particular, those 'bits' that supported collective provision, mutual dependency, intergenerational solidarity, and so forth. Such 'bits' were usually demonised as 'socialism'.

This brief sketch, simplifying a complex process of ideological work, is intended to indicate that the relationship between ideologies and common sense may be a central issue in how social issues and social problems are constructed.

6.3 Summary

Taking the question of ideology seriously provides a way of developing beyond the limitations of the labelling perspective in studying the social construction of social problems in three main ways:

1.   Foregrounding ideology allows us to ask the questions: who says this is a social problem, and whose interests are being served by this definition? Looking at ideologies reminds us that the ways in which problems are identified and defined are neither obvious nor neutral but are **socially motivated**.

2.   The issue of ideology also directs attention to **what sorts of solutions** are being proposed or are implied in the way the problem is constructed. These too are socially motivated.

3.   The idea of **conflicting ideologies** provides a reminder that there is usually more than one definition of social problems in play – both in the definition of what conditions are social problems, and about how any particular problem should be defined and understood.

7 Norms, truth and power: discourses of social problems

7.1 Ideologies and discourses

Some social scientists, following the French writer Michel Foucault (1972, 1976, 1979), have argued that the view of ideology developed in Section 6 is too narrow because of the link that it creates between sets of ideas and the interests of specific social groups – for example, in identifying a capitalist ideology as if ideas go around with number plates on their back which allow us to see whose ideas they are. They suggest that we need a more complex view of how social knowledges are organised and distributed and of their consequences for social action. Foucault used the term **discourses** rather than ideologies. He studied how knowledges about a range of social issues emerged and shaped patterns of social action, including such focal points as madness, the prison system and sexuality. The idea of discourses is an important one for studying the social construction of social problems. It draws on the everyday meaning of the word discourse – to 'talk about' – to emphasise that knowledges are carried and reproduced through 'talk' and 'writing'. Societies 'discourse about' their social problems and social policies in a variety of ways – in political statements, television programmes, social science studies and 'everyday' conversations.

Foucault's view of discourses takes a step further, however. He suggests that each discourse is structured or organised around central themes and connections, and these define the terms in which statements can be made, investigations conducted, and conversations can take place. For example, in talking about 'poverty' we are already within a discourse that shapes what can be said. Let us look at some of these organising principles of the discourse on poverty and their consequences:

- To talk about poverty is to take a view of inequality as a difference between two positions. The population can be divided into the 'non-poor' and the 'poor'. There are other views of inequality (other discourses) that do not take this view, but which see it as a more complex structure, either with different layers or as a relational process.

- The distinction between the non-poor and the poor means that attention is concentrated on the poor: they are the deviations from the norm of being not-poor. This discourse therefore means that arguments will centre on how to define the poor, how many poor people there are, whether numbers have risen or fallen, and how to explain their condition. Although there may be different theories of poverty, they contend and offer their competing explanations within the discourse of poverty.

- The concentration on the poor in the discourse of poverty means that attention and explanations tend to centre on 'what makes them poor', and this usually means looking for what it is about them (their attitudes, character, behaviour) that makes them (rather than us) become or remain poor.

- As a result, the 'poor' become the subject of investigations, inquiries and studies designed to examine them and their 'forms of life' (Dean, 1991). The discourse of poverty means that we know far more about how the poor live than any other social group. We know about their housing, their spending patterns, their dietary habits, the

ways in which they raise children, how they spend their days, their health patterns and even how they die and are buried (the pauper's grave). The discourse of poverty organises social knowledge in particular ways: 'we' (the rest of society) look **at** poor people.

7.2 The institutionalisation of discourses

We can see discourses as ways of organising knowledge. They define what the problem is; they say what is worth knowing and what can be said. They produce the 'norms' against which deviation or abnormality is marked (the norm of 'not being poor', for example). But discourses are not just about words. Discourses shape and become institutionalised in social policies and the organisations through which they are carried out. This is not just a matter of the big policy ideas – the pressure to 'do something about poverty' – but also the minute arrangements by which 'something is done'. Let us give some more examples about poverty and how the discourse of poverty has been institutionalised.

- *Poor people have to prove that they are poor*. The systems of doing something about poverty – what in the nineteenth century used to be called providing 'poor relief – have always involved various sorts of tests that poor people have to pass to prove their need. For example, there have been availability for work tests, in which the poor must prove that they are ready to help themselves by taking work if it is available. There have been means tests, assessing household income to see that it falls below the agreed line at which benefits will be paid. There have also been morality tests – mainly directed at women – which examine whether they are cohabiting and thus potentially dependent on a man's income.

- *Poor people must present themselves as poor*. They are 'claimants' – an inferior and dependent social status, asking for something from society. Many social benefits go unclaimed, partly for reasons of access to information about them, but also partly because of the stigma (the social taint) of being a claimant. Once people place themselves within the discourse of poverty, their identity is defined in its terms. They are positioned as 'subjects' within it – that is, they are themselves subjects of the discourse and understand their own position through it.

- *Poor people have things* done to *them*. Being poor is to be placed in a position where other people have rights over you. Society's institutional arrangements have sometimes focused on **segregating** the poor – putting them in workhouses, for example – to keep them away from the rest of 'us'. Sometimes they have been concerned to **normalise the** poor – giving lessons in budgetary management, good housekeeping, or parenting – with the aim of making 'them' more like 'us'. At other times the emphasis has been on maintaining **surveillance** on the poor – monitoring their behaviour to make sure that they behave 'properly'. Although different policies on poverty aim to do different things, they are framed by the discourse of poverty in that they see poor people as the objects of policy – people to whom things are done (often 'in their own best interests').

Discourses in this sense are also about relations of **power**. They organise positions and places in a field of power. So, in relation to poverty, they empower (give power to) state agencies to monitor, assess or intervene in the lives of poor people. They empower some agencies (both state and voluntary agencies) to evaluate the 'worth' or 'desert' of poor

people before benefits or services are provided. Discourses may also – conditionally – empower or give power to poor people. Poor people may be 'enabled' to look for work, to take courses, to receive extra benefits, to keep their children, so long as they prove that they are the 'right sort' of poor people.

Figure 8: Cartoon – 'Clare in the Community'

Activity 9

Extract 1 is a document produced by the Charity Organisation Society, a nineteenth-century voluntary organisation which offered 'relief' to poor people who met its criteria. What view of poverty and poor people does it represent?

Extract 1 Charity Organisation Society: 'Notice to persons applying for assistance'

1. The Society desires to help those persons who are doing all they can to help themselves, and to whom temporary assistance is likely to prove a lasting benefit.

2. No assistance should be looked for without full information being given in order that the Committee may be able to judge:
   - Whether the applicant ought to be helped by charity.
   - What is the best way of helping them …

3. Persons wishing to be assisted by loans must find satisfactory security, such as that of respectable householders … Loans must be paid back by regular instalments.

4. Persons who have thrown themselves out of employment through their own fault ought not to count on being helped by charity.

5. Persons of drunken, immoral or idle habits can not expect to be assisted unless they can satisfy the Committee that they are really trying to reform.

6. The Society does not, unless under exceptional circumstances, give or obtain help for the payment of back rent or funeral expenses. But when help of this sort is asked for, there may be other and better ways of assisting.

7. Assistance will not, as a rule, be given in addition to a Parish allowance.

By Order, COS Committee

The emphasis of the COS regulations is relatively clear, making a fundamental distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Help will be given to those who 'are doing all they can to help themselves'. Those who have 'drunken, immoral or idle habits' will not receive assistance. In other words, the emphasis is overwhelmingly placed on the individual characteristics of poor people, and assistance is provided only to those who can be helped out of temporary difficulties, where 'temporary assistance is likely to prove a lasting benefit'. Within the discourse of the COS, it is not possible to view poverty as an endemic feature of society, a consequence of social and economic structures which foster inequality. Poor people become positioned as supplicants, whose own behaviour explains their poverty.

7.3 Summary

The idea of discourse alerts us to a number of issues about the social construction of social problems. It suggests that we need to look beyond competing theories or perspectives to look at how knowledge is organised around central themes that allow the different theories to compete. Discourses define what the problem is, and it is because theories share the definition of the problem that they can compete and argue. Perspectives that start somewhere else – or do not share the definition of the problem – have great difficulty in making themselves heard or understood. They do not fit the terms of reference of the discourse. Thus the discourse represented by the COS rules is not one that would allow for the discussion of poverty either as a consequence of the behaviour of the rich or as a consequence of structural social inequalities.

Second, discourses shape what sorts of knowledge are meaningful, worth having and 'truthful'. As we have seen, the discourse of poverty means that we look for, collect and use knowledge about 'poor people'. To suggest that this category of people does not exist, or that we should not try to know more about them sounds **meaningless**. Of course, 'everybody knows' that there are poor people. They can be identified, measured and investigated (and we can only do something about the problem of poverty if we know more about it). But the **category** of 'poor people' only exists because of the discourse of poverty, and we should not assume that 'they' are 'different' because of that. Placing 'them' in a separate category can be seen as a means of marginalising or excluding 'them' from normal life.

Third, the idea of discourse points us to the importance of looking at the ways in which the poor are institutionalised in social arrangements and relations of power. The workhouse, charity organisations, benefits offices, means tests, cohabitation rules and so on are ways in which the discourse of poverty has been institutionalised (and they also reflect different sorts of theories, policies and perspectives within the discourse). They involve relations of power between groups of social actors – claimants, assessors, case workers, fraud investigators, and so on.

8 Conclusion: the view from social constructionism

This course has concentrated on the question of how social issues are socially constructed. It has done so not because this is the only form of analysis in the social sciences. There are many different approaches, theories and perspectives that bear upon social problems, patterns of social differentiation and the organisation of social welfare. Nevertheless, all of them have to operate in a social world where **the meaning of things** shapes how we act. It is this that makes processes of social construction such a central focus for the study of social issues. As we have seen, there are different ways of engaging with studying social constructions – we can treat them as labels, forms of knowledge, ideologies or discourses – but it is difficult to proceed without studying them. However, it is important to end this course with two cautionary points. The first concerns the fragility of social constructions. The second concerns the relationship between social construction-ism and politics.

The focus on social construction often sounds rather ethereal, dealing with fragile tissues of what things mean and how they are interpreted or defined. This all sounds rather intangible alongside what is often referred to as the 'real world' – hard facts, solid structures and grim realities. Indeed, part of the attraction of social constructionism as a perspective is that it suggests the social world might be slightly less solid and permanent than such emphasis on the 'hard facts of life' might imply. Social constructionism does, after all, indicate that the social world is constructed – meanings are made, definitions produced and interpretations propounded. In this way, social constructionism highlights the **provisional** character of social life: in other words, what was constructed this way could have been constructed differently. It implies a degree of fragility or impermanence in social arrangements. Social constructionism, as a way of looking at the world, implies the possibility of other constructions.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to confuse social constructionism as a perspective – the way of looking – with the lives of particular social constructions. The perspective may imply impermanence or fragility: the idea that the social world is fluid or changeable. But this is not the same as saying that all social constructions are fluid, changeable or intangible. Nor does it mean that they do not have real consequences for people as they live their lives. Many social constructions are deeply embedded or solidified as ways of thinking and acting that change hardly at all. Despite the impact of competing constructions like feminism, many of our social constructions about men and women have resisted change. They remain deeply rooted in 'natural' orientations about what men and women are 'really' like. As a consequence, we encounter the sorts of contradictory common sense that we saw earlier in relation to poverty. As regards gender, though, 'what everybody knows' might include the knowledge that: there is a 'glass ceiling' that stops women being promoted; men are better managers; equal opportunities have gone too far; men can't get a fair deal; women who want careers are unnatural; and men should have the same rights as women to look after children. Confusing and contradictory this array may be, but it is the product of overlaid forms of competing constructions – some long-standing and deeply sedimented in our society but intersecting with others which challenge and attempt to change the ways we think and act.

In this respect, social constructions should not be seen as fragile, insubstantial or impermanent. Berger and Luckmann (1967, pp. 65–89) discuss three interlinked

processes through which social constructions become solidified: **habitualisation**, **institutionalisation** and **sedimentation**. Each of these processes relates to the way human societies build patterns of predictability and stability that are reproduced over time. The reproduction of social arrangements requires predictability – the development of habits of thought and action that impose a social order. Berger and Luckmann argue that:

> All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort… Habitualization further implies that the action in question may be performed again and again in the same manner and with the same economic effort.

> (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 71)

The fact that this order is socially constructed does not make it any less real.

Berger and Luckmann deal with the way in which social constructions become institutionalised as the 'taken for granted' facts of everyday life. Although these 'habits' may be socially constructed, each individual encounters them as social facts – they are solidified and intransigent. We face these as institutions to which **we** have to adjust. What the perspective of social construction allows us to see is the way in which a social order – its habits, institutions, characteristic ways of thinking and acting – is both socially produced and appears as the natural and proper way of behaving. Over time, patterns of human behaviour are laid down, or sedimented, and each new development has to relate to the sediments of the past. The social constructionist perspective enables us to understand both stability (the reproduction of this social order) and change, as competing constructions attempt to break old habits and create new ones. The perspective of social constructionism allows us to see these social arrangements as both fragile and solid, permanent and changeable. So, when we explore the social construction of social problems, we can see how particular ways of thinking and acting become 'habits', institutionalised and 'sedimented' as the normal way of life.

To many people, it has appeared that social constructionism is equivalent to a radical political stance. To point out the constructed nature of social arrangements does raise challenging issues. Indeed, some social and political movements have used the perspective of social constructionism to argue for the need to change existing or dominant constructions. For example, some versions of feminism developed challenges to dominant images, expectations and constructions of femininity as oppressive, exploitative and legitimating forms of inequality. However, social constructionism as a perspective is not equivalent to any particular form of politics. As a perspective, it is politically agnostic – it makes no direct political claims of its own – except about claims that the social order is natural, eternal, immutable or otherwise fixed. Social constructionism presents an inherent challenge to such claims because of the insistence on social orders being socially constructed. But beyond that, social constructionism has no intrinsic politics. It leaves open the question of what sort of social constructions would be most desirable. These are the focus of political choice, conflict and argument.

Such matters cannot be resolved by or within a social constructionist perspective. It may be that, like most social science, social constructionism is 'inherently disturbing or critical, because to look for explanations of what is normally taken for granted as natural … runs counter to the norms of everyday behaviour' (Platt, 1991, p. 345). In that sense, the practice of scepticism, the taking up of the role of a 'stranger' in one's own society, and the insistence that social orders are socially constructed, is disconcerting. It involves a perspective which refuses to 'take for granted'. But it is a perspective, not a politics. Social

constructionism is, above all, a method of analysing social arrangements. What to do about them is a question that follows from the analysis: the method does not presuppose any particular conclusion.

At the centre of this course is an attempt to explore the ways in which social differences are constructed. The issues explored are sensitive and challenging. They may sometimes raise points that make you uneasy or challenge deeply held convictions about the way the world works and your position in it. We believe, however, that it is only by approaching issues systematically with the help of a social constructionist perspective that the emergence of social problems and the development of social policy can be explored effectively.

Further reading

Berger and Luckmann (1967) is a classic text in the development of the social constructionist perspective within the sociological tradition. Burr (1995) offers a very thorough review of the social constructionist perspective, clearly outlining the methods of discourse analysis. Although the book draws significantly on debates within social psychology, it is of wide relevance to the social sciences more generally.

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