6 Critical Social Constructionist Research

What kind of knowledge does discourse analytical research produce? What is the status of its results, and what can they be used for? These questions, conventionally posed in all academic work, form part of a wider discussion about the nature of social scientific knowledge. In this chapter we will present aspects of this discussion in the form it has taken within social constructionism. In Chapter 1 on pages 21–3 we briefly outlined the issue of the status of research knowledge, introducing the anti-foundationalist premise adhered to in social constructionism that all knowledge is discursively produced and therefore contingent, and that there is no possibility of achieving absolute or universal knowledge since there is no context-free, neutral base for truth-claims. If all knowledge is historically and socially embedded, and if truth is a discursive effect rather than a transparent account of reality, how, we asked, do we treat our own knowledge? In Chapter 4, under the heading of reflexivity, we discussed how researchers try to acknowledge their own role in the research process and evaluate the results in relation to their consequences. These concerns represent attempts to take into account that the researcher can never just be 'a fly on the wall' who sees things as they really are, and that the researcher's knowledge production, as in the case of all other discourse, is productive – it creates reality at the same time as representing it.

But even if we were to follow such reflexive procedures conscientiously, we would never be able to produce fully 'transparent' knowledge, whereby our results would accurately depict reality one-to-one, and whereby we could somehow achieve full control over the effects of these results (cf. Rose 1997). It is precisely the possibility of absolute knowledge that is rejected in the social constructionist premises.

Some critics of social constructionism argue, therefore, that social constructionism is unusable, both scientifically and politically. It is scientifically unusable because it cannot determine what is true: every result is just

one among many other possible stories about reality. And it is politically unusable because it cannot determine what is good and bad. When a social constructionist identifies social conditions that should be changed, this is just an expression of her own contingent view, critics argue (for example, Soper 1990).

Our position is that this reading of social constructionism is too pessimistic, and in this final part of the book, we will argue that discourse analysis is indeed well suited to critical social research. We will do this by presenting and discussing a range of different social constructionist positions in the debate and by locating the three discourse analytical approaches we have covered in the book within the wider social constructionist field. The focus will be on ways in which social constructionist researchers can tackle their own knowledge production. What status do the results have? How can research further social change? How can taken-for-granted, naturalised aspects of our world be revealed? How can researchers take their own role in knowledge production into account when conducting their research?

The overall aim of the chapter is to contribute to the overarching discussion of social research as critique. We will argue that social constructionist research, including discourse analysis, inevitably is, and *should* be, a critical enterprise. After an initial discussion about *what* discourse analysis claims to produce knowledge about, we will go on to present a classic understanding of critique: research as a critique of ideology. The conceptualisation of research as a critique of ideology has been strongly criticised within social constructionism, and the first point to address is whether critique should actually be the aim of research at all. Since our answer here is yes, we then go on to explore a minimal definition of critique as the unmasking of dominant, taken-for-granted understandings of reality. Our aim here is to theorise a position for the researcher from which he or she can discover what is otherwise taken for granted. We present three different strategies for the production of knowledge about the taken-for-granted, and we discuss the status of such knowledge. The discussion of relativism is inherent in the social constructionist premises, and we explore different positions in the negotiation of relativism at different phases of the research project. Here, an important point is that the question of critique and the status of scientific knowledge is not just about the declaration of epistemological principles in the introduction of research reports. Rather, it is necessary to think through the consequences of the epistemological principles for every stage of the research process, including the choice of theory and method and the presentation of the results in research reports; and conversely, it is important to consider how the choices one makes contribute to positioning the researcher

in relation to epistemology. Finally, we gather the different threads of the argument in a presentation of our own position, arguing that following scientific criteria enables the researcher to produce a particular and valuable form of knowledge, and that the degree of authority ascribed to scientific knowledge in public debates should be the subject of ongoing negotiation.

'But What About Reality?'

When discourse analysts present their results, they are sometimes met with the question, 'Yes, but is it just a discourse, or…?' The question implies a distinction between discourses and something else which is not viewed as discursive, and, by the word 'but', it is also implied that this other entity is more fundamental than discourses. Let us deal with this question in two steps. First, what is outside discourses? And secondly, is the relationship between the two spheres hierarchical? There are a range of different dimensions which are supposedly not covered by discourse analysis. These dimensions include experiences, feelings and the body, the material world and people's actions. The three approaches, as we have discussed earlier, have different understandings of the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive. Discursive psychology, for example, has made a point of treating as discursively constituted, psychological categories that traditionally have been viewed as non-discursive – such as attitudes, emotions and memory. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory generalises this position, seeing all reality as discursively constituted and, thus, making legitimate the use, in principle, of discourse analytical tools to analyse all aspects of the world including the body and the material world. But although categories such as the body can, in principle, be taken into account in a discourse theoretical analysis, this does not mean that discourse theory provides a satisfactory theorisation of the body. None of our approaches do that. So, if the focus of interest is the body, it is a good idea to read more sophisticated theory on the body and attempt to translate it into the discourse analytical perspective chosen.

   Critical discourse analysis distinguishes more sharply between the discursive and the non-discursive. In relation to this approach, it therefore makes more sense to ask if something is 'just discourse' or if the relevant non-discursive practices have also been studied. But it does not make sense in any of the approaches to ask if something is 'just discourse' if one is implying that discourses are surface phenomena and that the core of the social has to be analysed at a more fundamental level. That is, if

what one is really asking is 'Is it just a discourse, or is it also reality?' All the approaches view discourse as (at least partly) constitutive of the social, but that the social is constituted does not mean that it is not real. The constituted social world provides conditions of possibility for action and produces effects in just as firm a way as the physical world.

According to a caricature of social constructionism, reality is what we say it is. If we say it is different, then it is different. If I say in the morning, that I am a man, then that is what I am; if I then say in the afternoon that I am a woman, then I am. This caricature is both right and wrong. At the level of principle it is right; it is through ascribing meanings to ourselves and the surrounding world that we can understand and act in the world, and in that sense both ourselves and our world *are* the meanings we ascribe to them. Meanings are contingent and therefore changeable and, if they change, the subject and the surrounding world also change, making available other possibilities for thinking and acting. But, in a given situation, most meanings are relatively stable and individual subjects have only limited possibilities for manipulating them. Changes in meaning ascriptions are collective social processes. If a single individual declares that, during the afternoon, she has undergone a sex change, it is not likely that this identity change will be accepted by those around her or that our understanding of gender will suddenly change. The existing fixities of meaning are too stable for that.

Most discourse analysts (and probably most researchers in general) would like to contribute, through their research, to changing the world for the better. For discourse analysts, this ambition is often pursued through demonstration of the negative consequences of particular fixations of meaning designed to open up for other ways of understanding the world. They attempt, then, to destabilise prevailing systems of meaning. But an important reason why meaning systems are so stable is that many of our understandings of the world are naturalised; that is, we view them not as *understandings of* the world but *as* the world. Therefore, an important discourse analytical aim is to unmask and delineate taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings, transforming them into potential objects for discussion and criticism and, thus, open to change.

This application of discourse analytical knowledge suffers from an epistemological difficulty. How can researchers reveal common-sense understandings in their own society, if they, being part of society themselves, share many of those understandings? The question of the possibilities for identifying society's naturalised understandings is a central theme in the following, within the context of the overarching discussion about what critical research is and can be.

IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

All the approaches to discourse analysis presented in this book understand themselves to be critical in some way or another. On the basis of research, they aim to criticise unjust social conditions and contribute to improvement of those conditions. Critical research has a long history in both the social sciences and the humanities, but the understanding of what critique is, and, in particular, what its foundations are, varies across the different traditions.

Ideology critique – widespread in the 1970s and with historical roots in Marx and the Frankfurt School – represents one important type of critique. In this view, power relations in society are accompanied by a hegemonic language that systematically masks reality. The aim of critique is to undermine power by revealing the reality behind ideology. For example, people may suggest that, in our society, there is sexual equality. At the same time, social research may reveal that men earn more than women and that women systematically spend more time on household tasks than men. There is, then, an inconsistency between how things really are and people's understanding of how things are, and this inconsistency provides the grounds for critique. People do not see reality properly because ideologies distort their world-view. For example, there may be an ideology that holds that the sexes, after many years of struggle, are now equal, and this ideology may reinforce a male-dominated hierarchy in the job market and, perhaps, a female-dominated home. Ideology, then, furthers unequal relations of power but people cannot see it because they suffer from false consciousness: what they see is ideology rather than reality. In the critique of the dominant ideology, the researcher's role is to reveal ideology as distortion, so that people gain the possibility of seeing behind ideology and changing reality.

Put briefly, the critique of the dominant ideology aims to unmask power with truth. This understanding of critique has been subjected to heavy criticism by social constructionist researchers. First of all, it has been criticised for its adherence to a classical Marxist conception of society, whereby the base determines the superstructure, or, in our terms, discourses are constituted by non-discursive conditions, primarily the economy. Second, it presumes that there is a truth about social conditions behind the discourses and that the researcher has privileged access to that truth. Thirdly, it assumes that this truth is free of power (cf. Foucault 1980: 118; see also Barrett 1991; Billig and Simons 1994).

These premises conflict with social constructionism, where truth is seen as intertwined with power and the truths which are produced (including those of the researcher) are seen as historically and socially

contingent. But does this mean that critical social constructionist research is impossible? Does it mean that all truths are equally good (or equally bad)? According to Michael Billig and Herbert Simons' (1994) diagnosis, a great deal of critical research is being produced, but critique has gone overboard – anything and everything is criticised and every truth is subjected to criticism and deconstruction. Critique has become 'promiscuous', as they put it, as it is no longer connected to a political project, since we no longer have a firm belief in true, political principles as did critical ideology theorists (1994: 6).

This discussion of the relationship between science and politics, and hence of the possibilities for critical research, has been long and intense within social constructionism. And it seems as if the field of discussion suffers from a paradox, whereby research is seen *both* as more *and* as less political than before. On the one hand, it is implicit in the social constructionist perspective that research is always political. Research can never free itself from values as it is always situated in a specific cultural and historical context. And the research which is produced about the world is political by virtue of its performative character: that is, it acts on the world by constituting it in certain ways rather than others. For example, traditional anthropology with its division of the world into 'us' and 'them' has contributed to the legitimation of the dominance of the West through colonialism and neo-colonialism (Fabian 1983). From a social constructionist point of view, research cannot avoid being political.

On the other hand, the concern is voiced by theorists such as Billig and Simons that social constructionist premises render research less political. The argument is that if social constructionism no longer can deliver absolute truths or normative ideals, then research ends up in a relativism where people either criticise anything at all without having any political strategy, or accept everything without taking a political stand because they do not want to accord themselves a false authority by criticising the lives and opinions of others.

In the rest of the chapter, we discuss, on the basis of the question of critique, a range of different suggestions as to what social constructionist research can be used for. We cannot hope to exhaust the discussion and we do not try to give detailed accounts of the work of the authors we take up. Rather, we use the different authors to demarcate a range of key positions in the debate – and a range of possible answers to the question of critical research.

All the contributions to the discussion share a common concern with what research can and should be used for. They all agree that science cannot ascribe to its own knowledge the status of 'truth' in opposition

to the 'false consciousness' of others. But the answers to what critique is and to how to view the relations between critique, science and society, are different. They have very different consequences, not just for what we do with the results when research is completed, but also for how we go about the research process itself – in particular, how we build an analytical framework, how we produce and analyse empirical material and how we write up and present our research. Thus, although there are no easy answers to the question of what status scientifically-produced knowledge has and how it can be applied in a responsible way, it is important to take a stand and tailor the research accordingly.

A Modified Ideology Critique

One response to the question of whether it is possible to do critical research can be labelled a 'modified ideology critique'. This approach retains the basic principles of ideology critique that people's worldviews are not always in line with reality, and that research should make better world-views available. At the same time, it modifies ideology critique by softening the hierarchy between the researcher's knowledge and other people's knowledge; access to truth is no longer viewed as a scientific privilege.

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is an example of this modified version of ideology critique. According to critical discourse analysis, dis-courses can be more or less ideological. The more ideological discourses are those that give a distorted representation of reality (misrepresenta-tion) and thus contribute to the maintenance of relations of domination in society (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 32f.). In this, we hear the echo of ideology critique: discourse analysis should reveal ideologi-cal representations and attempt to replace them with more adequate representations of reality.

However, critical discourse analysis modifies traditional ideology critique in some respects, particularly in Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999). The authors still maintain that certain representations are more true than others; however, they argue that what is true should not be determined by a scientific elite but by a public, democratic debate in which different representations are compared with one another in relation to both their content and their social consequences. It is the task of science to con-tribute to public debate kinds of knowledge which people normally do not produce or have at their disposal in everyday practices (1999: 33). Thus scientific knowledge here is treated as a contribution to the public debate rather than the final arbiter of truth.

But even with these modifications, critical discourse analysis articulates the question of critique in a way from which many other social constructionists distance themselves. For example, as we have already discussed in earlier chapters and will see on p. 186, there is disagreement as to the question of whether or not it is possible to distinguish between more or less ideological discourses. Before discussing further the modified critique of ideology formulated by critical discourse analysis, we map out a range of other positions in the debate. We begin by taking a step backwards. Until now we have presented the discussion as a question of *how* to produce critical knowledge. This question contains two presuppositions – that research can produce knowledge and that it should be critical. But not all social constructionists accept these two assumptions.

THE CRITIQUE OF CRITIQUE

Ideology critique used research to produce knowledge about the world that was in opposition to, and better than, people's understandings. Social constructionism distanced itself from this on the basis of the premise that knowledge is never a direct reflection of the world, a premise which applies to scientific knowledge just as much as to other forms of knowledge. There are two ways of taking the consequences of this premise. For most social constructionists, the purpose of research is still to know something about the world and to produce as good representations of the world as possible, and the premise that knowledge is historically and culturally specific can be tackled through various forms of reflexivity. But for a minority of social constructionists, knowledge, in the sense of representation, is impossible, and therefore it is not the task of research to produce knowledge in that sense. We will begin by discussing this latter position.

The anthropologist, Steven Tyler (1986) criticises the paradigm of representation followed by modern science – that is, the belief that reality can be reflected in scientific texts. By promising absolute truth, science has exerted power over ordinary people's lives and discounted their everyday knowledge. Representation or *mimesis* is impossible, according to Tyler, and therefore sciences such as anthropology should rid themselves of their scientific ideals and stop trying to tell us what the world is. Instead, they should more mystically and poetically 'evoke' what cannot be said, in order to make us think about who we are and what we ought to do.[1]

In this type of theory, the question of critique does not arise at all, since the purpose of science is not to produce a description of the world but to produce effects in the world. While also aiming to change the world, critique implies that one representation of the world is replaced by another, better representation – and it is this idea that Tyler considers naïve and even destructive.

Tyler's argument hinges on the possibility of writing non-representational texts. His own text is not written in a traditional, scientific form, rather it mixes arguments with more poetic narrative passages, and in thus it evokes its message rather than stating it explicitly. But even with this experimental form of presentation, we do not think that the text avoids representing the world. In the following passage, it is quite clear that a particular representation of the world is used as an argument for how to write ethnographies about it:

> A post-modern ethnography is fragmentary because it cannot be otherwise. Life in the field is itself fragmentary, not at all organized around familiar ethnological categories such as kinship, economy, and religion […] (Tyler 1986: 131)

Here, Tyler describes what life is like in the field – that is, fragmented – and how ethnography therefore should be – correspondingly fragmented. Thus, Tyler bases his argument on a description of reality, a representation. And in this particular passage, he even argues that ethnography should reflect the world (by being fragmented), in opposition to his claim that representation is impossible.

Our point is that even if it is impossible, according to social constructionist premises, to distinguish categorically between representation and reality, and even if representation is never a direct reflection of reality, in our texts we cannot avoid representing and thus giving some sort of picture of reality. Another problem in Tyler's theory is that he advocates the withdrawal of anthropology from science and instead its embrace of a kind of poetry or therapy. Although modern science might have followed naïve ideals and had negative consequences, we do not see any reason to reject all scientific rules and criteria. On the contrary, as we will argue, the humanities and social sciences must be maintained as a space for the production, discussion and evaluation of different representations of the world on the basis of a set of shared criteria.

If scientific texts, as we have argued, inevitably represent the world, this opens up the possibility of replacing one representation of the world with another through critique. But not everyone agrees with this ideal. The problem is that critique, in the main, involves an asymmetrical relationship between those who criticise and those who are criticised, as in

3035-06.qxd 9/6/02 6:03 PM Page 184

ideology critique whereby the researcher is in possession of the truth while all others have false consciousness. If we are to research according to social constructionist premises, we cannot privilege scientific knowledge in this way. This raises the question of what scientific knowledge is and whether it can be said to be in any way better than other forms of knowledge, a question to which we will return later. Some researchers think that the asymmetrical relationship between researcher and researched that critique tends to entail is so problematic that we should be wary of making critique the goal we set for research.

Among those who problematise critique in this way is the anthropologist of science, Bruno Latour (1999), who argues that critique is not necessary as people already know what they should know; people do not need researchers running around revealing their illusions. The social psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, argues along similar lines. Although not dismissing the concept of critique altogether, he warns of the negative consequences of research as critique (Gergen 1994b, 1998). Gergen argues that critique implies what he calls a 'binary ontology' (1994b: 60). According to Gergen, critique is always dependent on that which it criticises. In criticising something, one reinforces it at the same time. The debate becomes polarised between 'for' and 'against' so that arguments which do not fit in one or other camp are excluded, and other debates are also kept off the agenda. Moreover, Gergen argues, discussion is often treated as a kind of war and critique as an attack on our inner essence. Therefore, critique does not lead to dialogue but to alienation. In another metaphor, when one criticises another person's opinions, one establishes a position as a wise parent who corrects a child, states Gergen (1994b: 63). In so doing, critique silences the opposing party, blocking democratic debate. This is particularly paradoxical in the case of critique by social constructionists since social constructionism strives to avoid all tendencies to totalisation (1994b: 67f.). The conclusion is, then, that critique freezes debate, restricting and polarising the voices which can participate in it.

Gergen's ideal is a debate consisting of different competing contributions. His starting point is that knowledge production is a social process in which decisions are taken collectively. This collectivity entails that, in discussing a specific topic, every single individual has knowledge of many different arguments. Gergen proposes, for example, that we do not polarise the debate about a specific topic in terms of 'for' and 'against' a single aspect of the topic but instead follow up the different arguments as a network of threads which gradually form a complex picture (1994b: 71ff.).

We fully agree with the social constructionist view put forward by Gergen that knowledge production should be understood as a collective process (cf. Calhoun 1995: Chapter 6), and his proposal that we take account of this in specific debates can be a good way of maintaining the complexity of the debated topic. However, while experiments of the kind Gergen suggests can be a fine supplement to critique as a scientific practice, we do not think that they are an adequate substitute for critique. Gergen's suggestions can contribute to viewing the topic under debate from many perspectives and to a better understanding of the arguments of the others. But, in our view, his suggestion also implies that all arguments are equally good and that, through understanding, we can resolve conflicts of meaning.

Gergen's scepticism about the concept of critique is based on the hierarchy it constructs between the researcher and the surrounding world. He formulates the relationship as one of patronising parent versus child and tries to replace it with more symmetrical relations. The implication of the parent/child metaphor is that the one party in the conversation is totally denied legitimacy. We agree that the concept of critique implies an asymmetry but we do not think that this necessarily entails the denial of legitimacy to the opposing party. Moreover, our view is that Gergen's equation of critique with binary ontology unfairly narrows down the concept of critique. In another metaphor, critique as scientific practice often involves 'unmasking' naturalised, taken-for-granted knowledge which may be shared by competing contributions to a given debate. To a large extent, we subscribe to this metaphor, and maintain critique as the aim of social research. But have these formulations brought us back to ideology critique's search for the truth behind all illusions? Not necessarily, and we will, in the following pages, explore some alternative possibilities.

CRITIQUE OF THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED

The unmasking of taken-for-granted, naturalised knowledge is often an explicitly formulated aim of social constructionist research (see, for example, Marcus and Fischer 1986: Chapter 6; cf. Brown 1994: 24). Here the critical project is a matter of denaturalisation of the taken-for-granted understandings of reality. The starting point is that our representations of the world are always contingent – they could have been different – and, in taking something for granted, we forget that it could

have been different. As the taken-for-granted delimits the field of possibilities for thinking and acting, its unmasking can open up a political field to other possibilities and, therefore, can represent a critical research aim in its own right.

This is, for example, the case for Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory.[2] In their theory of the hegemonic practices of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe conceptualise how reality comes to appear to be natural and non-contingent. They propose that discourses, by way of hegemonic closures, fix meanings in particular ways and, thus, exclude all other meaning potentials, and that, through myths about society and identity, the discursive constructions appear as natural and delimited aspects of reality. Laclau and Mouffe's aim is to challenge hegemonic closures by going in the opposite direction: through deconstruction, they strive to show that the entities which we see as objective and natural are, in reality, contingent combinations of elements which could always have been articulated differently.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Laclau equates ideology and objectivity and, in some sense, the project of discourse theory is thereby a project of ideology critique, although very different from traditional ideology critique. While Laclau adheres to ideology critique's definition of ideology as a distortion of reality, he views this distortion as an unavoidable part of every representation of the world. In order to be able to engage in meaningful talk, we always have to reduce the meaning potentials of the words we use, and we must assume that there are objects such as society and subjects about which we can say something meaningful. And here lies the ideological distortion as these operations imply objectification that negates the contingency inherent in all ascription of meaning (Laclau 1990: Chapter 2; 1996a).

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is therefore ideology critique in the sense that it aims to expose contingency and deconstruct objectivity but, in contrast to traditional ideology critique, it cannot offer any ideology-free truth – the researcher is also condemned to distort reality through the identification of objects and meaningful talk about them.

Discourse theory's formulation of the critical project provokes a number of questions. Craig Calhoun, for example, criticises the type of theory that sees power as all-pervasive and all utterances as ideological. By viewing all constructions as equally ideological, this type of theory, Calhoun contends, rules out the possibility of distinguishing between those contributions which improve the world and those which do not and, as a result, critique becomes unconstructively directed towards anything at all (Calhoun 1995: 64). From Calhoun's perspective, one can ask how discourse theory determines what to criticise, and what the researcher

has to offer instead. Does Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory deal only in 'negative criticism' (Brown 1994: 23f.), whereby existing conditions are criticised without the suggestion of a better alternative? Discourse theory does, in fact, present a positive utopia which research can help to realise – namely, the utopia of a 'radical democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Chapter 4; Mouffe 1992). A democracy providing full freedom and equality for everyone is impossible and political communities can never include everyone as they always build on an opposition between 'us' and 'them'. But it *is* possible to have full freedom and equality as a horizon to strive towards and an attempt can be made to include more and more areas in the political debate about equality (Mouffe 1992: 378f.). Democracy provides us with a framework by which we can compare ourselves with one another and, in this way, identify injustices. If men have the vote, for example, why can women not have it also, feminists asked in the early 20th century. And the way towards a radical democracy lies in making it possible to ask more and more of that kind of question. If others have the freedom to be heterosexual, why can we not have the freedom to be homosexual? If others are accepted as white, why can we not be accepted as black? All these questions have been posed by new social movements and have contributed to opening up the domain for questions which can be discussed politically in terms of freedom and equality.

In a radical democracy, it is important that the political field never stiffens into firmly demarcated groups and standard positions on the political agenda. Every political question divides people into particular groups and gives them particular identities; it fixes the myth of society in particular ways. And since one way never exhausts all parts of our fragmented and overdetermined identities, and never realises all possible group formations, it is important that existing groups can be deconstructed all the time and new groups can be formed – and fresh questions can be placed on the agenda. Groups that engage in political activity over a particular question must therefore be understood not as groups of identical people who share the same essence but as temporary alliances in which particular aspects of the members' identity are constituted and activated in relation to the question at hand. Only if one keeps open the issues of which conflicts should be on the political agenda and which groups are in conflict, is it possible continuously to introduce new discussion topics in relation to equality and freedom. Laclau and Mouffe's critical project of unmasking the taken-for-granted can, then, be said to be a political project in which the deconstruction of objectivity keeps us aware of the ideological, contingent nature of the objectivity we ascribe to the world and, more specifically, exposes new areas for political discussion.

However, in response to Calhoun's question as to how one determines what should be criticised, discourse theory's vision of radical democracy provides only a modest answer. Discourse theory's critical project consists of the deconstruction of the taken-for-granted but the theory does not give any guidelines as to *which* taken-for-granted understandings are most in need of deconstruction and in terms of which political criterion. In our view, not setting *a priori* normative standards does not necessarily constitute an obstacle for critical research. However, if we operate along the lines of the social constructionist premise on which discourse theory itself is based, namely, that research does not just produce a representation of the world but also produces effects in the world, it is important to make the research aims clear to oneself and others.

This political dimension can be added to a discourse theoretical project by combining it with other approaches to research that enable the researcher to identify the aims and the political direction of the specific research project. *Action research*, currently gaining in popularity, is one such approach (see, for example Reason and Bradbury 2001; Tracy 1995; Willig 1999a). Action research relates much more intimately to the field of study than traditional scientific approaches, as it is argued that research should be carried out *with* people, rather than *about* them. This means that the aims of the research should be formulated in a specific context of social practice, together with the people in this context, whereby informants and researcher cooperate in identifying specific problems in the field that the research should help to solve. In many forms of contemporary action research, people in the field are seen as *participants* in the research process, contributing their knowledge of the field to a common development of new knowledge together with the researcher (for a related approach, see our discussion of dialogical research on p. 198–200).

Another, more traditional, way to integrate a specific political dimension into the research project is to incorporate a theoretical perspective that invests the concept of critique with a clearer political direction. In the following sections, we will present some feminist perspectives according to which the research, from begining to end, follows a political trajectory.

IDENTIFYING THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED

Let us first return to the question of the taken-for-granted and how it can be identified. The taken-for-granted, as noted earlier, is, per definition, that

which is not problematised – that which one does not even think *can* be problematised. In order to identify the taken-for-granted, naturalised ascriptions of meaning, researchers need to distance themselves from them in some way or another. In this section we will present three different responses to the epistemological question of how to theorise a subject position for the researcher that enables her to identify the taken-for-granted.

The first response we call *analytical redescription*. Basil Bernstein suggests that we think of theories as 'languages of description' and the application of the theory as a translation of the empirical material into its language (Bernstein 1996: Chapter 6). Through this process of translation, some of the taken-for-granted aspects of the material are denaturalised (cf. Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). All the discourse analytical approaches presented in this book provide the possibility of redescribing the empirical material. Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse and articulation and its concepts of floating signifiers, myths and so on can, for instance, be seen as a form of language which can describe the empirical material in a different way from the way in which it describes itself. Likewise, the linguistic tools of critical discourse analysis and the rhetorical tools of discursive psychology can be seen as distinct languages which can create a distance between the researcher and the material.

As is the case with all translations, such a translation is neither neutral nor innocent, involving a kind of violence on the empirical material (Silverstone 1999: 14). And that is also the intention; the aim of discourse analysis is to extract other meanings from the material than those which are at the foreground. But the conceptualisation of discourse analysis as a form of translation also carries with it some limitations as to how, and how much, we can twist our material, since we have to confine ourselves to those interpretations which fit the discourse analytical language we have chosen as our analytical framework. Conceptualising the different approaches to discourse analysis (along with any other scientific theory) as languages of description, then, on the one hand, enables the researcher to establish a distance to the empirical material, transforming it through redescription, and on the other, guarantee a certain loyalty to the original empirical texts by limiting the interpretations that can be made of them.

Critique from the Periphery

In order to move on to discuss other means of identifying the taken-for-granted, we need to highlight an assumption common to most social

constructionist research: the assumption that the taken-for-granted is organised around a centre of power. It can be more or less explicit or theorised. Laclau and Mouffe, for example, both discuss it explicitly and theorise it solidly, so let us use discourse theory as our illustration. According to discourse theory, discourses fix meaning by excluding all other meaning potentials. Two discourses can collide in an antagonistic relationship to one another when they try to define the same terrain in conflicting ways. Antagonisms are dissolved through hegemony, whereby the one discourse conquers the terrain and appears as the objective reality; the objective being that which has become taken-for-granted, that which we forget is contingent. The taken-for-granted emerges, then, when alternatives are pushed out of our vision.

The taken-for-granted is not, of course, omnipresent – it is a key point of social constructionism that there is nothing natural or given about the taken-for-granted world. But the point at which a particular taken-for-granted understanding begins and ends can be understood in two ways. Either the taken-for-granted can be understood as emanating from a centre and spanning a certain radius out to the periphery on which it is not quite so taken for granted. Or one can understand the taken-for-granted as an all-imposing structure containing gaps that provide potential footholds for dissension. These two metaphors do not exclude one another and we think, for example, that discourse theory can be understood in both ways. Nevertheless, we separate them in order to be able to distinguish between two different kinds of response to the question of how to disclose the taken-for-granted. Both metaphors *localise* the taken-for-granted. Thus they also localise points from which to identify otherwise oblique, taken-for-granted understandings. We now turn to feminist theory in order to illustrate some ways to establish such points.

The social constructionist premise of the cultural and historical specificity of knowledge entails that people who are positioned differently in time and space also view the world differently and have varying taken-for-granted understandings. It is this premise which feminists, among others, have used to theorise the knowledge they themselves produce. Feminist thinkers have been at the forefront in the development of theories about situated knowledge; the adoption of a specific site for knowledge production, among other possible ones, is the starting point for most feminist research.

The basic premise underpinning feminist research is that women represent a special group – a group that has been overlooked and oppressed both in society and in science. And, from the perspective of our analysis of critique, this premise has two major consequences. First, feminist research is normative, the aim being to make women and their lives and

experiences visible and to fight against the oppressive structures. In relation
to the question of what should be criticised, feminism provides an exam-
ple of research with a much clearer political direction than, for instance,
Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory: that which should be criticised is
that which oppresses women. Second, the feminist starting point has led
to fruitful discussions about how one can make visible and criticise
dominant, naturalised understandings by locating oneself in a particular
position, and how the anchoring of the knowledge produced by the
researcher can be theorised. One influential position in this discussion is
feminist standpoint theory, as formulated by the sociologist Dorothy
Smith.

Dorothy Smith (1987) contends that the ideals of modern Western
science relating to objectivity and abstraction both reflect and reinforce
the marginalisation of women in a patriarchal and capitalist society.
Therefore, she suggests a sociology which is based on the standpoint of
women. The argument is not that women can see reality differently
because they are biologically different from men, but that women as a
social group have separate experiences from men as a result of the gen-
dered distribution of labour. It is often women, Smith argues, that do all
the housework, make the food and look after the children (1987: 83).
And this work is often invisible. Whereas women are continuously con-
fronted with the immediate local world and the concrete experiences of
bodies and basic needs, it is much easier for men to transcend their local
surroundings and assume a distance from the immediate reality, just as
scientists distance themselves from their object of study. Thus, although
science presents itself as if it were gender-neutral, in reality it is based on,
and furthers, the worldviews and interests of men.

Smith uses women's experiences to construct a platform from which she
is able to observe the dominant, taken-for-granted understandings and criti-
cise them. She does not think that women's experiences *necessarily* lead to
a feminist and critical perspective on the dominant relations of power since
both sexes have to understand themselves and the world around them
through the dominant discourse. A feminist understanding of the world has
to be actively constructed (1987: 107), but the conditions of possibility for
a feminist understanding lie in the marginalisation of women's lives and
work. Women's experiences fall outside patriarchal frameworks of under-
standing, and this 'outside' (62ff., 78ff.) provides the resource for the
feminist critique of the dominant, unquestioned understandings.

Smith recounts how she herself as an academic and single mother
experienced the splitting of her own consciousness into two: a scientific,
abstract consciousness as an academic and an experiential, locally-oriented
consciousness as a mother. Women are 'strangers' in the academic world,

and here the possibility for a critical perspective emerges. Starting out from experience, women can potentially see *both* the dominant structure *and* what falls outside it, and by virtue of their bifurcated consciousness they can, then, criticise the ruling power apparatus.

Let us now return to the two metaphors for conceptualising the boundaries of the taken-for-granted: we argued that the taken-for-granted can either be understood as a structure spreading from a centre and identifiable at its periphery, or as a structure with gaps that can expose and problematise the taken-for-granted. Smith's theory is more in line with the first metaphor: women's experiences represent a site outside the dominant discourse which can be used as a starting point for the problematisation of naturalised understandings as oppressive to women.

A parallel theorisation can be used to denaturalise understandings with respect to other oppressed groups. The working class, ethnic minorities and homosexuals, for example, can also, on the basis of their experiences, deliver standpoints from which the dominant understandings can be identified and criticised (Smith 1987).

In sum, Smith provides a particular theorisation of the conditions of possibility for critique. However, there are some problems with her perspective. Although she points out that women are different from one another and have different experiences, she tends to present women as a homogeneous group, positioned in the same way vis-à-vis the ruling power-apparatus. Consequently, her standpoint theory risks making invisible the differences among women. For example, in a society in which ethnicity is a key category, there may be big differences among women of different ethnic groups in relation to their experiences and their positioning in society. Patricia Hill Collins' work is relevant in relation to this (for example, 1986). Collins formulates a version of feminist standpoint theory which adresses the issue of homogeneity. She introduces the concept of the *outsider within* in order to link gender and race. She suggests that black women historically can be seen as outsiders within societies such as the US, where they come into whites' homes as maids, for example, but are never accepted as equals. This shared experience of always being both outside and inside can form a basis, according to Collins, for black, feminist thinking, in which both a theory and a political strategy can be developed, directed to furthering equality betwen gender, classes and ethnic groups. Collins (1998) stresses that women are different and that black women do not represent a homogeneous group either. Nevertheless she insists that certain groups under certain circumstances can share so many of the same life conditions that these common conditions can form the basis for a specific view of the world, a specific standpoint.

However, a problem associated with both versions of standpoint theory is that they involve a privileging of the category of experience. Calhoun warns against tying the critical perspective too tightly to specific experiences, since, if experience fully determines what people can see, then we lose the possibility of discussion with people who have different experiences (Calhoun 1995: 180f.). The danger is that we implant a form of essentialism where, for instance, men are totally excluded from feminist thinking on the grounds that they would never be able to see the world from the standpoint of women. Calhoun may have a point here, although we believe that Smith is less categorical on this point: men *tend towards* more abstract and less context-specific experiences rather than being excluded from concrete, context-specific experiences altogether (cf. Smith 1987: 82).

Rather, the biggest problem we see with standpoint theory is that it risks the reproduction of what it criticises. In terms of our metaphor for the boundaries of the taken-for-granted, if one uses the dominant discourse's distinction between 'them' and 'us', centre and periphery, to reveal the naturalised knowledge of the centre (by positioning oneself on the side of 'them' – on the periphery), one quickly comes to reproduce the naturalised distinction between 'them' and 'us' as a taken-for-granted understanding which one shares with the centre. On the one hand, Smith's goal is to problematise and criticise the oppression of women in society but, on the other hand, she takes as her starting-point the lives and experiences of 'women'. In this way, and in spite of her assurances that neither men nor women represent homogeneous groups, she reproduces the very same patriarchal division of the world into 'men' and 'women' that she aims to criticise (cf. Prins 1997: 76).[3]

Standpoint theory provides a strategy for distancing oneself from the centre, in order to look at the centre from the periphery. Another strategy to establish such a distance is to 'move away' from the centre in time or space. Sexuality in a Western society can, for instance, be problematised through reading anthropological studies of sexuality in other societies where completely different views about sexuality, love, body and gender, may be found. Similarly, one can adopt an historical approach such as Foucault often did. By exploring the understandings of sexuality prevalent in the past and, through the distancing process inherent in this, Foucault was able to present contemporary understandings of sexuality as exotic constructions which could have been different (Foucault 1979, 1987, 1988). The historical perspective provides us with material that helps to cast light on how categories such as sexuality have taken a specific form.

By drawing upon historical and anthropological material 'foreign' to oneself and one's own empirical material, one can try to establish a site outside one's culture from which one can identify what is taken for granted within it. The 'outsideness' of this site must not, however, be taken to be absolute as one cannot completely escape one's own understandings. But while access to 'foreign' material is always mediated by one's existing understandings, our view is that consideration of completely different worldviews can, at least, make it possible to ask new questions of our own understandings and the understandings identified in the empirical material.

Critique from Gaps in the Structure

Still exploring the question of how to uncover the dominant naturalised understandings of reality, we will now present a final theorisation which attempts to establish an alternative understanding of the world, seeing the world through gaps in the structure rather than from its periphery. Such an attempt is made, for example, by the feminist theorist, Donna Haraway.[4] Haraway does not base her research on the perspective of 'women' or the 'working class' or 'black people', as these categories are already part of the structure she wants to criticise; instead she tries to position herself between the existing categories and view the world from there. Her universe is, therefore, populated by beings such as cyborgs, monsters and gene-manipulated mice, which do not fit into the usual divisions between human, animal, machine and so on. By taking the perspective of, and identifying herself with, such 'inappropriate/d others', as she states using Trinh Minh-Has' concept (Haraway 1992: 299), she is able to explore how the categories we normally employ are contingent articulations of elements strictly divided into, for example, 'nature' and 'culture'. And this disruption to the construction of categories makes it possible to imagine other (and better) worlds in which the elements are articulated differently (1992: 313f.).

In the classic essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991), Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to explore, among other things, our ideas about identity. The cyborg is a mix of organism and machine, nature and culture, and it therefore collapses the categories we normally keep separated. The Western tradition operates with a long list of such dichotomies (self/other, man/woman, civilised/primitive and so on) that contributes to the maintenance of a system of domination in which men dominate women, the 'civilised' dominate the 'primitive' and so on (1991: 177). Haraway employs the metaphor of cyborg to identify and

criticise the dichotomies. Her point is that we are all cyborgs – a hybrid of human and machine (1991: 150). Without all our technical aids, we would not be what we are and could not do what we can. And more generally, the idea is that our identities are always 'polluted' – they never quite fit the categories we construct.

Haraway criticises the structure from its gaps – a viewpoint based on that which falls between our categories. But this does not mean that she has found a place from which she can see reality as it 'really' is, completely free of all structure. That would, in her view, be impossible. By employing the cyborg, which also has a prehistory in the military industry, she tries to appropriate a figure which is already circulating in our material and linguistic practices in order to re-code it. She appropriates the cyborg, using it to tell a different story, a story that creates a 'political myth' (1991: 157) in order to give an account of how we create ourselves and the world by combining heterogeneous elements. By criticising Western dichotomies, she opens up the possibility that elements can be combined in new and hopefully better ways in the future. In her account, research, like our identities, can never be completely 'pure'; it is destined to navigate in a world that is already structured in many different ways. But what it potentially *can* do is disrupt our understandings and reassemble them in new ways.

THE STATUS OF KNOWLEDGE

We have now presented three different theoretical understandings of how researchers can identify the taken-for-granted, naturalised constructs they seek to uncover. First, we suggested that theories are languages of redescription entailing the translation of the empirical material, second, we discussed standpoints on the periphery from which to gain an outside perspective on the centre, and third, we pointed to gaps in the dominant structure from where naturalised categories can be problematised. The question of naturalised constructs and the possibility of unmasking them was relevant because critique in social constructionism is often – at least as a minimum – formulated as the denaturalisation of the taken-for-granted. And all of these strategies aim to theorise a distance between researcher and the taken-for-granted, wherein the taken-for-granted becomes visible as an object of study. In other words, these alternatives, used individually or in combination, provide an epistemological basis from which knowledge can be produced. But implicit in the social constructionist premises lies the question of which status to ascribe this new

knowledge. Most social constructionist researchers would agree that research itself establishes new forms of taken-for-granted understandings, and that scientific knowledge is a contingent construction of reality, just as other representations are. How then can we guarantee that the understanding of reality we present is better than the one we criticise? How can we evaluate scientific knowledge? In sum, (how) can we invest our claims with academic authority and political force without reference to a fixed foundation for knowledge?

Relativism and Reflexivity

Does the relativism inherent in the social constructionist premises make it impossible to distinguish good descriptions of reality from the not so good, and progressive political principles from reactionary ones? And, if this is the case, is it something we should worry about? We will now present a number of positions in the debate, starting in discursive psychology. Here opinion is divided (cf. Chapter 4): one grouping views relativism as a political obstacle whereas another grouping does not. Members of the second grouping, Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore and Jonathan Potter (1995) argue that relativism is unavoidable but nothing to worry about. Relativism, according to them, is not a scientific programme, but a fundamental scepticism vis-à-vis any claim to knowledge about reality, a scepticism which makes it possible to question everything. But this does not mean that we cannot make claims and judgements about this reality – indeed, we cannot avoid doing so. What it does mean is that all claims are open to discussion, and herein lies the possibility for ongoing democratic debate. In contrast, realistic arguments, trying as they do to pin down what the world really is, freeze the discussion.

Edwards et al.'s strategy is to *embrace relativism*, accepting it unconditionally as a condition for all knowledge production. Other discursive psychologists such as Parker (1992) and Willig (1999b) warn against this wholesale acceptance of relativism. They argue that critical research becomes impossible if all statements about the world in principle are equally good and, to avoid this danger, they choose a combination of social constructionism and the ontology of critical realism in order to take account of what they consider to be the non-discursive aspects of the world. Critical discourse analysis has also, to some extent, chosen this route. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) distinguish between different forms of relativism, accepting a modest form of relativism endorsed by critical realism, and rejecting what they see as more radical forms. Drawing on the concepts of the critical realist, Roy Bhaskar, they accept

epistemic relativism, according to which all discourses stem from a particular position in social life, and dismiss *judgemental relativism*, which holds that all discourses are equally good representations of reality. They dismiss judgemental relativism with the argument that the strengths and weaknesses of discourses are continuously being judged in every-day practices when, for instance, people test how good a discourse is to think with or to use as a framework for collective action (cf. Brown 1994: 27ff.).

It is a matter of interpretation whether Chouliaraki and Fairclough's position is actually different from the one espoused by Edwards, Ashmore and Potter. One interpretation is that Chouliaraki and Fairclough's rejection of judgemental relativism rests on the argument that, in every discursive situation, certain standards are implied as to what is right and wrong, useful or not. All discourses can never be equally good as one always argues within a discursive space in which there is already a set of criteria for what is accepted as a true statement. In this interpretation, the measurement criteria for which representations are the best are contingent; embedded in specific discursive spaces – a position close to Edwards et al.'s embrace of relativism. But if this were the case, why make the distinction between epistemic and judgemental relativism in the first place? In an alternative interpretation of Chouliaraki and Fairclough's position, this distinction makes more sense. According to this interpretation, Chouliaraki and Fairclough argue that some representations reflect reality more loyally than others according to some external measure. Such an interpretation is out of line with their definition of truth as a product of a democratic discussion but fits well with their distinction between more or less ideological dis-courses.[5] According to this interpretation, Chouliaraki and Fairclough *circumscribe relativism*, viewing all representations as socially con-structed (a relativist position), but seeing some as more loyal to reality than others (a non-relativist position). From a social constructionist perspective, the question arises here as to *who* should pass judgement as to which representations are better than others. If the choice of one representation over others is not the product of struggle in a discursive field, there must be someone – such as the researcher – who decides by virtue of their privileged insight.[6]

We have now discussed the difference between an embrace and a cir-cumscription of relativism at a metatheoretical, epistemological level and here, as we have seen, the difference is not always clear. But the discus-sion can also be conducted in relation to other stages of the research process and here the difference between Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and Edwards et al.'s approach to discursive psychology is more

obvious. The discussion about relativism is not just about epistemological principles but also about how – and the extent to which – the researchers take account of the principles in constructing their research designs. Although Chouliaraki and Fairclough briefly mention the necessity of reflexive consideration of the role of the researcher in knowledge production (1999: 9, 29; cf. Chouliaraki 1995), the general tendency in critical discourse analysis is to apply conventional scientific methods in the production of empirical material and present research results in traditional academic texts without reflexive questioning of these practices. In contrast, the field of discursive psychology as a whole offers an extensive discussion of the possibilities for reflexive research.[7] As outlined in Chapter 4, reflexivity is an attempt to take into account the researcher's own role in knowledge production in the light of the relativist premise, inherent in social constructionism, that one's own knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. The aim is to redefine the classical relations of authority between the researcher and the people under study, and to avoid positioning oneself as a sovereign authority with privileged access to truth.

One strategy is to enlist the informants as co-researchers, and many discursive psychologists advocate *dialogical research* based on more dialogical methods for the production and analysis of empirical material (e.g. Condor 1997; Sampson 1991). Instead of viewing empirical material as something which exists 'out there' for a neutral researcher to observe and collect, this approach stresses that empirical material is a social construction, resulting from the interaction between researcher and researched. In other words, researchers create their objects of analysis and empirical material through ongoing dialogue with the field. Dialogical research is viewed as a more democratic alternative to traditional forms of research since more space is given to the informants' voices in the production of the material and in the writing-up of the results: for example, by presenting their empirical material as a product of a dialogue between researcher and researched, by reproducing longer interview extracts, by carrying out the analysis in cooperation with the informants, or by involving them as co-authors of the text. Although many discursive psychologists and other critical social psychologists play an active role in reflexivity debates and support the idea of dialogical research (see, for example, Ibáñez and Íñiguez 1997), their application of the principles in specific research projects tends to be limited, often restricted to a recognition that their empirical material is the product of a dialogue between the researcher and the researched. For example, they mostly discuss the material exclusively in relation to the informants, ignoring their own role as researchers in the construction of the material.

In particular, they often analyse interview responses without analysing the questions, thus overlooking the dialogical context to which the responses belong (Condor 1997).[8]

With respect to dialogical research's aim to challenge the authority of the researcher, the question is whether this is possible and desirable. Equality between researchers, informants and their respective forms of knowledge should supposedly make research more democratic. But, in our view, this equality can never be total: it is the researcher who decides that a project should be carried out and defines what it should be about and who should be involved as informants. And it is the researcher who coordinates the whole process and who gains any academic prestige which the project brings. As Susan Condor points out, there is a danger that dialogical researchers merely mask the asymmetrical relationship between researcher and informants, presenting themselves as neutral spokespeople for the informants (Condor 1997: 133; cf. Chouliaraki 1995).

Even if one could make the relationship between researcher and researched fully symmetrical, the question remains as to whether or not this is a good idea. We see a fruitful potential in the development of dialogical research practices both in relation to the research design – whereby researchers try, to a greater extent, to take into account their own active role in knowledge production – and in relation to the construction of the researcher's role whereby researchers cast off part of their authority in order to take more account of the voices and interests of the informants. The discussion within dialogical research of what (and whose) knowledge is accepted as legitimate provides a central contribution to democratic debate, promoting awareness of who has the monopoly over knowledge of what, who is silenced and what knowledge is not recognised *as* knowledge. Furthermore, dialogical research may help to create common platforms on which to exchange knowledge between different discourses, such as scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge. But we find in dialogical research a tendency towards the total rejection of one's authority as researcher and the equation of scientific and other forms of knowledge. In contrast, we would emphasise the point that even if all knowledge can, in principle, be equated on the grounds that all knowledge is contingent, there are at a given point in a given society, different types of knowledge, constructed according to different logics and directed at different applications. We do not believe that these different forms of knowledge can or should be reduced to one another or, more specifically, that scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge can be measured according to the same standards or have the same authority in all cases. Despite its contingency, we believe that the legitimacy of

science depends precisely on its being viewed as a distinctive form of knowledge with its own criteria for knowledge production and resulting authority.

Dialogical research is a reflexive answer to social constructionist relativism in the research phases of gathering, analysing and presenting empirical material, attempting to dismantle the hierarchical relation between researcher and informant. *Experimental writing*, to which we now turn, focuses on the presentation of research, thus problematising another hierarchical relationship, that between writer and reader. The traditional scientific research presentation is criticised for presenting scientific knowledge as neutral and objective and, therefore, for ascribing it undeserved authority. On the basis of this critique, some researchers strive to show the construction of the text *in* the text, so that the reader is constantly reminded that what she reads is not the truth, but a contingent representation of reality. For example, Edwards and Potter (1992) have interrupted the conventional flow of the text in their book on discursive psychology with 'reflexive' boxes in which they discuss the status of their knowledge and how they have arrived at it. One of the boxes, for instance, takes the form of a dialogue between the two authors in which they discuss what label they should give to the model they have developed (1992: 155). In this way, they show that knowledge does not just exist but rather is produced by choices made by specific people in specific situations.[9]

Even though the aim of such presentations is to challenge the hierarchical relations of authority between author and reader, the texts may have the paradoxical effect of appearing patronising, as they imply that if the reader is not alerted, she would believe anything she reads. If this is the effect, then the goal of a more equal relationship between author and reader has obviously not been achieved.

In more extreme experiments, it almost appears as if the aim of the text is to say as little as possible – or at least to undermine whatever one has said so that the reader is not enticed to believe in it (e.g. Woolgar and Ashmore 1988). Experimental texts of this type can consequently be difficult to discuss because it remains unclear what message the authors are willing to commit themselves to. Not taking a stand, then, in our view leads to a problem, because the texts thereby close themselves off to discussion and critique. Our ideal is that scientific texts function as a contribution to an ongoing discussion and that the author, therefore, should make clear what it is she wants to say and what criteria she accepts as the basis for critique and discussion.[10] This problem notwithstanding, experimental writing can be an effective and constructive reflexive strategy to redefine the relationship between knowledge production, author

and reader and to express this textually. In the next section, we will briefly return to this question.

The aim of our discussion of dialogical research and experimental writing has been to illustrate how the question of relativism is not just about stating the epistemological position followed (an embrace or circumscription of relativism). At all stages of the research process, the issue of relativism is negotiated, and choices are made which have consequences for the degree of relativist positioning of the research. If one chooses traditional methods for the production and analysis of material whereby it is always the researcher who has the last word, and if one writes up the results in a traditional scientific text where the researcher - subject and the conditions for knowledge production are excluded, then the knowledge produced is presented as 'a view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). If, in contrast, one makes use of one or more reflexive strategies, the research results are positioned instead as one form of knowledge among other possible forms. In the first case, the disadvantage is that one quickly appears as a truth-sayer who has privileged access to reality. In the second case, the risk is that the reflexive strategies mask an authority which the researcher is ascribed and ascribes to herself without acknowledgement.

Relativism and Objectivity

As we have seen, adherence to the premises of social constructionism involves a negotiation of relativism, both in the claims of principle made in research and in the way the different phases of the research process are conducted in practice. We will now return to the discussion of relativism at the level of principle, exploring the status of knowledge produced in relativist research. Often relativism is treated as the opposite of objectivity. Knowledge which is tied to a particular perspective – a view from somewhere – cannot be objective, and if all knowledge is historically and culturally sedimented, then objectivity is impossible. This opposition underpins the ways of tackling relativism which we presented in the previous section. When Edwards et al. embrace relativism, they imply the impossibility of objectivity. And when Chouliaraki and Fairclough attempt to circumscribe relativism, it is because they think that some descriptions of the world are better and, at least, less misrepresentational than others, and that a total relativism excludes the discussion of more or less ideological knowledge.

Within feminist research the very opposition between relativism and objectivity is problematised. Sandra Harding (1991, 1996), for example,

argues that knowledge becomes more objective through being produced within a particular historical and cultural context. Or to be more precise: all knowledge is historically and culturally constituted but modern science presents itself *as if* its knowledge has no context; it has naturalised itself as a pure reflection of the world. Harding introduces the concepts of 'strong' and 'weak' objectivity (1991: Chapter 6; 1996). Modern science represents 'weak objectivity' because it does not take into account its own cultural and historical conditions of possibility. Strong objectivity is achieved through *strong reflexivity* which involves an exploration of our own cultural and social locations as researchers (Harding 1991: 161ff.). By accounting in this way for where our own knowledge 'comes from', we can produce more objective and less distorted representations of the world (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996).

Donna Haraway (1996) introduces the related concept of *situated knowledge* as her answer to the question of how we, on the one hand, accept that all knowledge is historically contingent, but, on the other hand, want to produce convincing descriptions of the world (1996: 252). Knowledge, according to Haraway, is always partial and it is always produced by following a particular view of the world. And this view is always made possible by 'visualising technologies' to see with – whether these are spectacles, microscopes or theoretical constructions. By examining how one's view is situated and by describing the 'technology' which has made the view possible, one can show that one's own representation of the world comes from a particular location and that it itself is also a construction.

Harding and Haraway both propose, then, that giving an account of how and where one's own representation of the world comes into being makes the knowledge better. But they understand the concept of 'better' in slightly different ways. Harding is very optimistic with respect to the possibilities for a reflexive strategy whereby researchers explore all their assumptions critically and systematically (Harding 1991: 307). This understanding of reflexivity implies that it is possible for the researcher's role and his or her cultural and historical location to become transparent to the researcher, and this is, we think, too much to hope for, as it returns us to a researcher position from which one can produce a transparent, neutral description of reality (cf. Rose 1997).

Haraway is also sceptical on this point (Haraway 1997: 16, 37f.). Although she argues that researchers should make the best attempt they can to describe the conditions of possibility for their view of the world, she stresses at the same time that research is always performative in that it constitutes the world in particular ways and therefore privileges certain possible worlds over others (1997: 37). She tries to demonstrate

this by using an experimental mode of presentation in which she switches between narrative accounts, detailed analyses and reflexive comments. As noted earlier, she defines her cyborg-construction as a 'political myth' and stresses that she does not just represent the world but articulates elements in particular ways (Haraway 1992: 313ff.). Thus, she maintains a basic relativism without circumscribing it, as she tries to make visible the status of her own knowledge as a contingent construction. But, in her case, the embrace of relativism does not result in the undermining of her own possibility to say something or in her rejection of all criteria for evaluation of her knowledge-claims. In our reading, she accepts both political and scientific criteria for knowledge production: certain representations of the world are better than others, and they can be evaluated in terms of the political aims that the researcher sets for her research and in terms of scientific criteria such as coherent argumentation and transparency in the presentation of the process of knowledge production.

CRITIQUE AS A POSITIONED OPENING FOR DISCUSSION

We will now try to collect all the threads we have followed through our discussion of the possibilities for critical research and weave some of them together to form a proposal for how social constructionist researchers can understand and tackle their own knowledge production. Our position is that research ought to contain a critical perspective. Also, in a very broad sense of the word, 'critique', we believe that it is impossible to avoid being critical. As we have argued earlier, in producing texts, we cannot avoid saying something about the world, representing the world in meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory claims, texts always contain assumptions about how the world is, and thus the production of objectivity (in discourse theoretical terms) is unavoidable. Therefore, we agree with both Steven Tyler and Donna Haraway when they emphasise the performativity of scientific texts; texts inevitably *do* something to the world, rather than just describing it. But, in opposition to Tyler, we do not agree that, in writing academic texts, one can, or should, try to avoid describing or representing the world. Representing the world, in one way or another, is unavoidable in any production of meaning. And such a representation of the world is always put forward at the expense of other representations that could have been made, and in competition with other representations that have already been made.

Thus, if critique is understood in a broad sense as the proposal of one understanding of the world at the expense of other possible understandings, we do not think that one can avoid being critical at all.

But we will also propose a narrower understanding of critique. In what sense can some views of reality be understood as better than others? Some of the contributions which we have presented have objected to the construction of asymmetry in scientific practice, whereby science traditionally has privileged its own knowledge over all other forms of knowledge. Tyler, for example, argues for a complete withdrawal from science and its truth-claims. Kenneth Gergen and Bruno Latour argue that critique always positions the researcher as in possession of superior knowledge. And some discursive psychologists and feminist theorists advocate the use of reflexive strategies which promote a higher degree of equality between researcher, researched, and reader. In all of these cases, the tendency is towards the undermining of scientific authority in favour of a more equal relationship between different kinds of knowledge and the knowledge of different kinds of people (cf. Jørgensen in press).

Our view is that such a levelling-out process both tends to mask authority relations, which are unavoidable in scientific practice, and overlooks the unique qualities and value of scientific knowledge. If it is a general condition for knowledge production that certain representations of the world are promoted at the expense of others, then we would rather that researchers acknowledge that they *are* saying something about something and take responsibility for these claims, instead of pretending that they are not putting forward any message of their own about the world (as is the tendency in the case of Tyler, Latour and some versions of reflexive research). Not to take responsibility in this way is to deny themselves an authority they already have ascribed themselves as producers of texts. Also, we distance ourselves from the related attempt to equate scientific knowledge with all other forms of knowledge (which is the tendency in the case of Gergen and parts of dialogical research); our position is that scientific knowledge represents, rightly, a specific form of knowledge that, by virtue of its 'scientificity', has qualities which distinguishes it from other forms of knowledge.

At the same time, we agree that science should not position itself as the truth in opposition to the 'false consciousness' of everybody else. We propose the division of the discussion into two levels. *At the level of principle*, it has to be accepted that the knowledge produced by ourselves as researchers is no better than all other forms of knowledge in the sense that the knowledge produced by science is subject to the same conditions as all other knowledge – that is, it is historically and culturally specific and therefore contingent (it could always be different). This implies that

researchers should be open to listening to other people's representations
of the world and to discussing with them; other representations cannot
be rejected on the grounds that researchers have privileged access to
truth. This symmetry at the level of principle is important to maintain as
it becomes difficult to have a democratic political discussion if an *a priori*
distinction is made between those people who have legitimate knowledge
and those who do not. Contingency at the level of principle, then, pro-
vides an opening for continued discussion (cf. Butler 1992) and, at the
same time, it is social constructionism's central motor: it is on the basis
of the premise that all knowledge is historically and culturally contingent
that social constructionist researchers attempt to distance themselves
from the taken-for-granted and make it the object of critique and dis-
cussion. And the consequence at the level of principle is that researchers'
own taken-for-granted understandings can also become subject to
unmasking and scrutiny.

But neither life nor research takes place on this level of principle in
which everything is contingent (cf. Hall 1993). Utterances are always
articulated in specific contexts that set narrow boundaries for what is
understood as meaningful and as meaningless, true and false. And at this
grounded, concrete level, we have no choice but to put forward certain
representations of reality at the expense of others. As Haraway claims,
people always talk within an already regulated space, so that all talk –
including that of the researcher – is subject to the prevailing discursive
logics. The utterances one makes are always situated or positioned.
Although it is the goal of social constructionism to identify these spaces
and destabilise their regulative logics, social constructionist research is,
like all other discourse, subject to these logics, for good or for bad.

Our proposal is to use the concept of critique to combine these two
levels – the level of principle and the concrete, grounded level – and see
critique as *a positioned opening for discussion* (Jørgensen 2001). In our
view, critical research should take responsibility for providing a parti-
cular scientific description of reality on the basis of a particular epistemic
interest; that is, critical research should explicitly position itself and dis-
tance itself from alternative representations of reality on the grounds that
it strives to do something specific for specific reasons. At the same time,
critical research should make clear that the particular representation of
reality it provides is just one among other possible representations, thus
inviting further discussion.

In relation to the discussion about relativism, our position means
that we align ourselves closely to Haraway when she talks about her
research as a 'political myth'. We do not try to circumscribe relativism,
and we do not see how it can be circumscribed within the terms of the

social constructionist premises. But neither do we want to embrace it to the extent of undermining all knowledge projects with an eternal 'it could all have been different'. That knowledge is political means that one can neither present the absolute truth nor completely avoid saying something. What one says through one's research can make a difference to the world, and one should take responsibility for this. And this can be done by considering the goals and possible consequences of one's research in a wider social context (for example, a form of 'explanatory critique', see Chapter 3).

We distinguish ourselves from Haraway, perhaps, by placing more weight on the value of *scientificity*. Just because knowledge production is political, does not mean that it cannot have scientific value. Haraway would probably agree on this point, but in defining her project as a 'political myth' she emphasises the contingency; the fact that the representation could have been different. This is also our emphasis on the level of principle, but the understanding of scientific knowledge we are advocating aims to keep the level of principle and the level of the concrete in perspective simultaneously, and thus a more adequate description of the status of scientific knowledge would be a *truth that can be discussed*. Here 'truth' refers to the concrete, grounded level according to which some stories are advocated as better than others, and 'discuss' refers to the level of principle according to which one should always be open to alternative truth-claims.

What, then, constitutes the value of scientific knowledge and how can we practise research as a truth that can be discussed? Science can be seen as one discourse among many others; a discourse which is characterised by the production of knowledge in particular ways on the basis of particular rules. The rules include the general principles that research steps should be made as transparent as possible, that the argumentation should be consistent, that the theory should form a coherent system, and that empirical support should be given for the interpretations presented. From a social constructionist perspective, these rules are viewed as contingent, entailing that they can be criticised and changed over time. Many of the theorists presented here, for instance, represent critiques of traditional scientific practice and its rules and procedures, and they also contribute to the discursive struggle over which rules to adhere to in social constructionist research. Scientific knowledge is, like all other knowledge, a contingent construction submitted to discursive regulation. What differentiates scientific knowledge from most other forms of knowledge is the attempt to adhere to one or another set of *explicit* rules. And within a given set of rules – that is, at the concrete, grounded level – all scientific descriptions of reality are *not* equally good. Specific research

results can, and should, be evaluated as better or poorer scientific representations of reality by evaluating whether the procedure and the result live up to the rules it claims to follow (cf. Phillips 2001).

In specific research projects, then, we think that it is crucial to make explicit the foundations for the knowledge produced. Positioning oneself and one's research involves giving an account of what it is one aims to say something about, and what rules one is following in the research process. This applies both to the more general rules about transparency and coherence and the more specific rules set by individual theories. We suggested earlier in the chapter that the different discourse analytical approaches can be understood as different 'languages of redescription' into which one translates the empirical material. And it is important that one makes clear which analytic language one is applying and, thereby, which rules one is following in the process of 'translation'. Theoretical and methodological consistency is, in this way, a research constraint: the researcher understands the world in a particular way rather than in other possible ways. But this is a necessary constraint that is also productive. The use of a specific theory in the production and analysis of material enables researchers to distance themselves from their everyday understanding of the material, a process which is crucial to social constructionist research.

Scientificity – understood as research that gives reasons for, and follows, a set of explicit rules – is precisely what distinguishes scientific knowledge from other forms of knowledge. This does not mean that the production of other forms of knowledge is not governed by rules – it is, in fact, such rules and regularities that discourse analysis aims to identify. And neither does it mean that other forms of knowledge do not, from time to time, draw on and apply scientific procedures. For example, in everyday conversation, people can dismiss others' descriptions of reality on the grounds that they lack consistency: 'that's not in line with what you said before'. But the difference is that the researcher has an obligation, as a member of a scientific community, to follow a certain set of rules as systematically as possible, and this opens up the possibility of producing knowledge which is not normally produced within other forms of discursive practice. And this is what, in our opinion, gives scientific research legitimacy as a contribution to wider democratic discussions about what society is and what it should be.

In the wider democratic discussions, different forms of knowledge come together and here, again, the principle of contingency as a condition for all knowledge production becomes important. Different forms of knowledge operate according to different discursive logics and, when they come together in a wider democratic debate, it is not necessarily the

scientific set of rules or discursive logic which functions – or ought to function – as the common platform for discussion. Such a privileging of science would authorise the scientific experts as the only group allowed to make knowledge-claims. To decide the rules for the common discussion is a crucial part of the struggle taking place in relation to public debate. What are considered to be 'scientific questions' in public debate must be seen as the product of an ongoing struggle between different forms of knowledge rather than something to be decided once and for all, and the research produced is itself part of this struggle.

We have presented our proposal for critical research as a balancing act between the level of principle and the concrete, grounded level; a balancing act between, on the one hand, treating all knowledge, one's own included, as contingent and open to discussion and, on the other hand, treating it as a contribution in specific contexts in which some accounts of reality are better than others. The balance between the two cannot be ultimately determined by these general considerations; rather, it must be determined in relation to the specific research project in question, in which one must decide how to position oneself as researcher and consider the consequences of the position taken for the research design and the presentation of the research. Thus how to present oneself and one's own knowledge in a specific situation is a specific and strategic choice. One has to consider where to position oneself on a scale, ranging from the position of researcher as equal participant in the debate, offering a contribution on a par with all other forms of knowledge, to the position of researcher as scientific expert, invested with the authority to provide a better representation of reality on the grounds that this representation is the product of scientific research on the topic under debate.

If one chooses to stress the contingency of research, different reflexive strategies can be used, as in dialogical research, to build bridges between different forms of knowledge. Such strategies can be very valuable from the perspective of particular epistemic interests, provided one does not imply that it is possible to neutralise one's own authority completely. In this book, we have chosen a more traditional, academic mode of presentation. We have wanted to produce and convey knowledge about discourse analysis and we have laid claims to a certain authority in this, signalling 'this is something we know something about'. We have, for instance, often positioned ourselves as knowledgeable about the field and the reader as less knowledgeable. In other places, we have tried to formulate ourselves so as to open up for important discussions and to keep them open. For example, in this conclusion to the discussion about critical research, we have applied a number of subjective modalities ('we believe', 'in our view' and so on) in order to indicate that here we recognise

that there are other positions with good arguments. In line with our view of research as a truth that can be discussed, we have, in formulating the text, switched between a 'truth-position', some places plainly stating 'how things are', and a 'discussion position', indicating contingency, in places where we identify a need for further debate.[11] Whether or not we have placed the boundary between truth and discussion in the right place, is up to the reader to decide. The conception of critique as a positioned opening for discussion always contains an invitation to the reader to enter the discussion herself and carry it further.

In the above presentation of our position, we have written a lot about what we think the researcher should 'take into account' and 'take responsibility for' – as if researchers were faced with clear choices and were in possession of an overview of the conditions of production and the consequences of their research projects. We state, for example, that researchers should position themselves explicitly, making clear the nature of the research project's epistemic interest and theoretical and methodological framework. However, as we have also argued, it is important to acknowledge that these reflexive practices are subject to constraints set by the conditions of knowledge production. Researchers are always part of a wider social context and thus cannot just position themselves and their knowledge freely. As we have just noted, it is the reader who, in some sense, has the last word in relation to the text – without the readers and their varied use of texts, texts could just as well remain unwritten. The individual researcher, then, cannot claim sovereign control over her knowledge. And, as we have stressed throughout this chapter, the same applies at the other end of knowledge production: the researcher's knowledge is itself a product of social and cultural conditions of which she is not in control and cannot fully understand. Reflexive strategies can be used, as suggested by Sandra Harding, for example, to cast light on the social and historical circumstances under which one's knowledge has been produced, but they will not provide complete transparency. It is impossible to make all taken-for-granted understandings explicit, and one cannot avoid introducing new taken-for-granted understandings.

Being positioned, then, is something which the researcher, to a certain extent, just *is*, and the lack of transparency this entails has to be accepted. But positioning is also something that the researcher *does*. Standpoint theory understands knowledge as something that can be achieved by virtue of a particular position provided by particular experiences. We agree with this to a certain extent, but we believe that it is also important to treat positioning as an *active* effort in which the researcher strategically positions herself in a particular location in order

to see the world from the perspective of particular aims and a particular theoretical framework (cf. Haraway). And we believe that it is important to give an account of the position in which one is standing and the technologies with which one is seeing the world, even if it is impossible to transcend the contingent conditions of production and give a complete account.

We will conclude by returning to the critique of ideology – the approach to critique which has become so criticised within social constructionism because it assumes that the researcher can reveal people's ideologies with the help of truth. In fact, in important respects, our proposal for a theoretical understanding of critical research follows in the footsteps of the critique of ideology. We do not distinguish, as does critique of ideology, between more or less ideological representations of reality as we do not consider some accounts of reality to be more objective accounts of the world than others. But we do retain the asymmetry which is integral to the critique of ideology. Although, in principle, there are always many other possibilities of representing the world, the writing of specific texts always implies a claim that reality is representable and that the representation offered in the text is better than other possible interpretations.

Social constructionist research is, as we have seen, often concerned with the unmasking of the taken-for-granted and, as such, it has the ambition of 'getting behind' people's everyday understandings. In this respect, too, it resembles the critique of ideology. The epistemological difference is that we do not see the goal as that of reaching the reality behind the masks; any unmasking contains itself a new 'masking' – a new contingent construction of reality. If scientific truth, as in the critique of ideology, is conceptualised as oppositional to the false consciousness of everyday life, a hierarchy is established that delegitimises other forms of knowledge in public debate. At the same time, the strength of science is to have the time and the theory to distance itself from some of our shared, taken-for-granted understandings; thus science at its best contributes to democratic debate by making visible areas which have hitherto been outside discussion because the state of things has been considered to be natural. The version of reality which one puts forward in research is not better than any other at the level of principle, and it can always be cast aside through discursive struggles both within the scientific field and in the public sphere as a whole. But by representing a qualified (that is, scientific) and *different* account of reality from those which are otherwise available, research knowledge can hopefully contribute to the addition of new perspectives to public debate.

What right do we have to contribute with such new and critical perspectives, one may ask. As social constructionists, we do not have the right endowed by possession of a final truth. But we do have the right that all people, in principle, have to intervene in democratic debate with a truth that can be discussed, in order to further our visions for a better society.

NOTES

1 See Deleuze and Guattari (1987: Chapter 1) for a conception of representation which is similar in many ways.

2 See also Butler (1993: Chapters 7 and 8) for a very similar understanding of common-sense, critique and radical democracy.

3 See Harding (1991) for a standpoint theory which tries to take account of these points of criticism.

4 See Butler (1993: Chapter 8) for a queer-perspective which is based on 'queer' as a category which falls between the dominant categories, and see Bhabha (1994: Introduction) for an attempt to think from the gaps in dominant understandings of culture.

5 See Potter (1996b: 224ff.) for a critical reading of critical discourse analysis along these lines.

6 But see Chouliaraki (2002) for a reformulation of the relation between discourse analysis and critical realism, which also affects the question of relativism.

7 Reflexivity is also, in slightly different versions, a topic of discussion within other disciplines, such as anthropology, feminism and science studies. We briefly present one feminist understanding of reflexivity in the next section, but in the present section we mainly focus on critical social psychology including discursive psychology.

8 More radical attempts to engage in dialogical research have been carried out in related fields of research, see, for example, poststructuralist feminist social scientists such as Lather and Smithies (1997).

9 See Ashmore (1989), Lather and Smithies (1997) and Woolgar (1989) for similar experiments with presentation forms. Lather and Smithies (1997), for example, is a poststructuralist text written by feminist theorists on several levels that privileges the knowledge of the informants over that of the researchers and which constantly tries to make clear to the reader that there
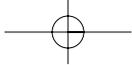
is never only one story and no story is fixed. Lather (2001) contains additional reflections based on the writing of Lather and Smithies (1997). See also Denzin (1997) for a discussion of different forms of experimental writing.

10 This criticism can also be directed at Steven Tyler's ideas that the texts should evoke rather than represent, as we already have mentioned.

11 See Harré and van Langenhove (1999) for a discussion of academic writing from the perspective of the theory of positioning.