

## 5 DISSECTING FACTUAL TEXTS

In the last few years a number of literary critics and social scientists have suggested that many of the supposedly obvious differences between various kinds of texts might be rather less interesting than their similarities. Indeed, they have argued that the development of our understanding of the way texts make sense may be strongly hindered if we unthinkingly adopt everyday classifications such as 'literary', 'scientific', 'journalistic' and so on, and thereby take on the baggage of assumptions which go with these categories. Culler, for example, has suggested that any special distinctiveness awarded to literary texts cannot be taken for granted but must be left to emerge through analysis. If this is done 'literary works will appear not as monuments of a specialised high culture but as powerful, elegant, self-conscious, or perhaps self-indulgent manifestations of common patterns of sense making'. (1) The literary theorists Terry Eagleton and Roger Fowler have adopted similar positions. For them the traditional and largely unquestioned assumptions about the unique and humanistic nature of literature should be purged from analysis. (2)

At the end of Chapter 4 we referred to the major goal of this book, which is to contrast some of the different ways of making sense of social life adopted in literature and social psychology and to reveal some of the regularities underlying both approaches. The literary theorists mentioned above argue for a general analysis of texts which is not constrained by the traditional guidelines imposed by the category 'literature'. However, it may not seem obvious why an analysis which included non-literary discourse would be interesting; particularly an analysis which examines scientific and other factual texts as we do. Yet, just as a serious analysis of literary texts is undermined by the expressive realist myth which sees literature as a residue of universal human truths, so the study of factual texts has been constrained. In this case, however, the problem has been social psychologists' overriding concern with what texts are about, or represent, at the expense of any serious study of how they are constructed and how they function. Discursive material of various kinds has almost inevitably been used by social psychology for the documentation of actions, be-

liefs or other aspects of social reality. The central analytic concern has thus been with the reliability or validity of the text in its task of representation. (3)

Traditionally, then, the paramount analytic question for social psychologists has concerned the relation between texts and what they depict. Moreover, when this relation has been properly elucidated the text itself has generally ceased to be of interest. It is largely for this reason that so little attention has been paid to literature by social psychologists. For they have seen the relation between literary texts and what they depict as highly problematic and lacking acceptable means of validation. Furthermore, as we have commented, the attention that has been paid comes mostly from humanistically orientated thinkers who are prepared to adopt expressive realist assumptions to warrant the unique acuity of literary texts. In either case texts are seen as important because of what they depict; not, as we argue, because of how they give the appearance of depicting the social world or because of their relationships with one another.

In this chapter we wish to extend this argument and look more closely at the ways in which versions of social life are actively constructed in different kinds of discourse. At the same time we will examine some of the ways in which traditional approaches to texts, which attempt to recover the actions, attitudes, etc. which they depict, can become parasitic upon the specific interpretative practices which are involved in the construction of texts. For people are inevitably and continually utilising lay social psychological notions when constructing accounts of their social world. Thus it is only through fully explicating the relationship between analysts' and participants' discourse that analytic findings can be successfully distinguished from the systematic systems of accounting which are apparent in discourse of all kinds.

We will illustrate these points by discussing some studies using conversational and discourse analysis which show that participants' versions of their own and others' actions and beliefs are regularly constructed in ways which parallel a number of basic theoretical issues in social psychology. Indeed, they suggest that certain of the basic analytic categories that social psychologists use to explain social behaviour are also deployed in participants' discourse for a variety of highly situation-specific purposes. Without a full understanding of these processes which occur at the level of discourse about social life, there is a constant danger of the analyst simply adopting participants' implicit social psychologies as apparently general theoretical characterisations of their actions. It is the explication of this issue which is the main reason why our present enterprise is of more importance to social psychology than merely providing a new subject-area for the discipline. Its full implications will become clearer as we discuss specific studies of the construction and organisation of discourse.

## RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

Social psychologists, and indeed psychologists in general, have spent a good part of their time in both professional and academic contexts classifying people as prejudiced, intelligent, neurotic, extrovert and so on. One common classification which has important repercussions is 'mental illness'. The officially ratified use of this categorisation can have far-reaching and sometimes destructive consequences for a person's prospects and life style. Of course, an enormous amount of research has been carried out on this issue of diagnosis and psychiatric classification and some emotive debates have ensued. Yet very little attention has been paid to people's everyday notions of mental illness. How do lay persons come to identify people as mentally ill and warrant these identifications?

This was the question which Dorothy Smith took as her initial perspective on an account of a particular girl, K's, mental illness.

(4) This account was obtained by one of Smith's students for a class project. It is a reconstruction, from memory, of an interview in which a girl called Angela describes the onset of K's illness. In a sense, then, it is a joint product of Angela and the interviewer; although much of it appears to consist of remembered direct quotations from Angela's original oral description. These features, which from a methodological point of view are serious flaws, do not diminish the interest of Smith's analysis. For such features are a chronic aspect of everyday accounting, and as Smith does not use the interview to provide an objective picture of social reality they should not be seen as imperfections.

On a first hearing of the account, when it was read out in class, Smith took it as a literal, unproblematic rendering of the onset of K's illness. However, on closer inspection of the written text, Smith became less sure of its acuity. An alternative and radically different version of K's difficulties soon, in fact, became apparent. Smith's analysis seeks to show how the original, 'authorised' version made sense, but how it may also be dismantled to present a new and contrasting version in which K's mental illness no longer seems obvious and unproblematic.

It is worth describing the account in some detail. It starts by describing the admiration that Angela felt for K, whom she met at university. 'Here was a girl, a year older, of such a good family, a good student, so nice, so friendly, so very athletic, who was willing to befriend her. K suggested outings, and they went skiing, swimming, playing tennis together.' (5) However, Angela noted that 'nearly every morning' on the way to university K would cry about 'little things'. She also started to have problems with her courses. At this time Angela gradually came to recognise that there was something wrong. She tells that her admiration turned slowly to bafflement.

K is so intense about everything at times, she tries too hard. Her sense of proportion is out of kilter [...] When you meet her,

you are struck, by a sweet girlish appearance. She will sit quietly in company, smiling sweetly at all times, and seems disarmingly appealing. But when there were young men in the company she would find it harder than ever to carry on a conversation, and would excuse herself and leave very soon [...] It was obvious that she was terrified of anyone getting too near to her, especially men. And yet she used to pretend to us (and obviously to herself too) that she had this and that guy really keen on her. (6)

At a later date Angela and another girl asked K to share an apartment with them, partly because Angela 'felt responsible' for K. However, before moving in K stayed with Angela's family for a few days. Angela recounts the difficulties which arose: for instance, K ate her mother's breakfast on one occasion, and on another was embarrassed when the family openly displayed emotion. Once together in the apartment, the girls 'had to face the fact that K was definitely queer'. Problems arose over washing, cooking, budgeting and other domestic activities. Finally things came to a head over dinner at a friend's flat.

Conversation was lively, but she did not take part. A boy was discussed, but K had not met him. However she suddenly cut in: Yes, isn't he nice. Everything was quiet for a moment, but I carried on talking sort of covering up for her. A few minutes later she cut in again, with: Oh yes, and the little black sheep and the lambs.... This was really completely out of touch. (7)

At this point the girls started to take action; they contacted a friend of the family for advice, who admitted that the social circle of parents and relations 'had silently acknowledged' that K was not well for some time. It was arranged that K should see a psychiatrist.

In many respects this is an unremarkable story, apparently documenting the tragedy of one girl's progressive mental disorder. However, by examining in detail the various mechanisms for sense making utilised in the account, Smith is able to throw its straightforward factual basis into doubt. The first of these mechanisms draws on the general interpretative frame in which the account is placed. In various different ways it is indicated to the reader that the correct approach is to read the account as a factual record of K's mental illness. The fact of K's illness, stated at the outset, is available for use by the reader as a resource for interpreting the information which is subsequently presented. Furthermore, the account is privileged in the sense that the key participant, K, is absent from the scene of accounting and is thus unable to present her version of events (although the very fact of her mental illness, once established, suggests that K's version would anyway be suspect).

A second and related process that Smith analyses is the construction of the account's 'objectivity'. The account treats the fact

of mental illness as something existing prior to its being 'admitted' by the various characters referred to. They are depicted as having no part in its construction. Furthermore, each of the characters - Angela, Angela's mother, etc. - is treated as positively disposed towards K: they either liked or admired her. Thus their gradual 'realisation' of her illness can be seen as reluctant; it is not something they wish, as they might if they disliked her. The reader cannot easily 'explain away' their views as being a product of their specific interests; for her illness is displayed as contradicting these interests. Moreover the account treats each individual 'acknowledgment' of her condition as quite separate and based on some form of direct observational evidence; her illness' factual status is therefore depicted as having been independently verified. Yet, when closely examined, various aspects of the account cast serious doubt on this independence. The account is thus organised in a manner which prejudges its conclusion, or as Smith puts it:

If the collection is viewed as a problem, then we have been told what the solution is. The problem presented by the account is not to find an answer to the question 'what is wrong with K?', but to find that this collection of items is a proper puzzle to the solution 'becoming mentally ill'. (8)

A third mechanism which displays K as mentally ill is apparent in the detailed descriptions of K's behaviour. These are, it seems, provided to give the reader a chance to judge K's mental state independently of the various claims made about it. As such they reinforce the general appearance of objectivity. Yet it is in these descriptions that Smith is able to reveal much of the 'work' of the account taking place. Smith identifies a device for characterising action which she calls a 'contrast structure', which is used repeatedly throughout the account.

Contrast structures are two-part sequences of discourse in which the first part provides a context for making sense of the second. For instance:

- (i) When asked casually to help in a friend's garden,
- (ii) she went at it for hours, never stopping, barely looking up. (9)

In this structure, K's behaviour, depicted in part (ii), is made to seem anomalous or bizarre by the implicit instruction or rule suggested in part (i). (10) Thus the 'casual' request for help results in inappropriately 'singleminded' labours by K in the garden. Of course, in another context, where the reader has not been led to read the account as a document of mentally ill behaviour, this might merely appear as an example of excessive zeal. Yet in this context the deviation from the normal, required behaviour represents an anomaly. It cannot be fitted into the framework of everyday normative behaviour or common deviations from that behaviour.

Some contrast structures have a more complex structure:

- (i) We would go to the beach or pool on a hot day and
  - (ii) I would sort of dip in and just lie in the sun,
  - (iii) while K insisted that she had to swim 30 lengths.
- (11)

In this case parts (i) and (iii) of the structure are on their own insufficient to display K's behaviour as anomalous. What is bizarre about swimming, especially on a hot day when interested in athletics? However, part (ii) suggests the behaviour which is appropriate or normal when visiting the beach. This associates the hot day with lazing around and relaxing - not swimming 30 lengths. The sense of bizarreness is further heightened by noting that K 'insisted' on swimming this much, which implies that she is acting in an obsessional manner, rather in the way that she 'barely looks up' while gardening.

Other contrast structures are very simple:

- (i) She would wash dishes
- (ii) but leave them dirty too. (12)

This appears to be an achievement that exceeds normal incompetence. As Smith notes, dishes can be washed badly so as to leave bits of food on them; but to leave them 'dirty' after washing them is 'almost Dada and an achievement in itself'. (13) Again the sense of anomalousness is created by presenting a norm and showing how K's activity bore no sensible relation to it.

Smith claims to have identified at least 11 contrast structures in the account, out of 23 discrete items of behavioural description. The account as a whole achieves its effect through multiplying these structures over a wide variety of different situations. Any weaknesses in particular structures are obscured by the overall effect, which prevents the reader from formulating any kind of rational story which can make sense of K's behaviour other than that she is becoming mentally ill.

We can see, therefore, that Smith has modified her initial question, which asked how lay people come to identify mental illness, and replaced it with a different sort of question: how is an account organised to display the fact of mental illness and to undermine alternative classifications? The site of interest is no longer people's actions, and how they come to understand that someone is abnormal, but the organisation of the text itself. Smith's analysis undermines the impression that accounts can be a neutral rendering of actions and instead displays a complex, layered discursive structure which is responsible for the apparently unproblematic classification. Smith herself goes on to argue that an alternative explanation of K's problem is available in the text if it is analysed closely, an explanation which suggests that K is being 'frozen out' of a particular social circle. She reassesses the idea that Angela is K's friend, and suggests instead that Angela and her flatmate are trying to exclude and victimise K. Smith is thereby able to reread K's comment about the black sheep

and the lambs (line 123) as a rational description of this process of exclusion, and not 'out of touch' at all. However, we do not need to follow Smith down this avenue where she begins to speculate back beyond the text to the real nature of the actions it depicts. (14) For our purposes what is interesting is the illustration of the contingency of this seemingly straightforward account, and the demonstration that key social psychological issues are being largely pre-packaged.

If analysts are to use such accounts as this as the basis for research they must be aware that they are produced in the light of participants' implicit and situation-specific social psychological understanding. What Angela's account embodies is not simply a description of the onset of illness, but a set of inferences and conclusions organised in such a manner that K's mental illness appears obvious and inevitable. It seems, then, that if social psychologists are to produce fruitful analyses with data of this kind, which do not simply reproduce participants' own folk psychologies, we must treat accounts with great care and attempt to lay bare the techniques by which they legitimate or undermine particular versions of the social world.

#### ATTRIBUTING CAUSES

Dorothy Smith's procedure when presented with the account of K's illness was to expose an alternative version of K's problem which was available in the text but initially much less apparent. The descriptive contingency of the text was thus revealed by showing that it could not be taken as a coherent, unitary account of action but should be seen as a more fragmentary, heterogeneous account which, although 'authorising' one version by the use of a number of textual devices is, nevertheless, open to alternative readings. In other cases the contingency of accounts of action can be demonstrated by comparing versions of events presented in different texts. This is what Tony Trew has done in an analysis of two contrasting newspaper accounts of the violence at the Notting Hill Carnival of 1977. (15)

Trew has examined in detail 'on-the-spot' reports and editorials concerning disturbances at the annual carnival in the Sun and the Morning Star. These are, of course, strongly contrasting newspapers: the Sun has one of the largest circulations in the UK while the Morning Star has the smallest; the Morning Star is the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, while the Sun is not formally at least tied to a political party in this way. These differences are not, however, presupposed in the analysis, which centres on the descriptive and evaluative language the papers draw upon. In particular Trew examines the way the news reports of the events at the Carnival are shaped to mesh with the evaluation of those events in the paper's editorials.

Two brief extracts from the reports will serve to give a flavour of their contents. They are broadly similar, for the most part men-

tioning the same events. However, as Trew's analysis makes apparent, there are some important differences.

Sun 30 August 1977

INTO BATTLE! Riot shields out as the police storm Carnival mob  
Two hundred police carrying riot shields and truncheons last night charged a rioting mob of black youths at London's Notting Hill Carnival [...]

An eye-witness said 'At one point the police were pinned down. The mob stoned them and they used their riot shields to protect themselves' [...]

The violence started early in the afternoon when small groups of youths used the gaiety of the Carnival for an orgy of crime.

Morning Star 30 August 1977

FIGHTING MARS END OF CARNIVAL AFTER DAY OF PEACE

Police observers hovering in a helicopter above the huge crowds at London's Notting Hill Carnival yesterday estimated between 200,000 and 250,000 people were taking part [...]

The two sides sparred amid a hail of missiles, and from there on the police adopted streetfighting tactics [...]

When they broke into one shop from where missiles had been coming, those inside were knocked about by truncheons. (16)

Trew's style of analysis is rather different to Smith's. He uses fine grain linguistic categories taken from the socio-linguistically orientated work of Halliday to examine the complex ways in which participants and processes are depicted in the two texts. (17) To properly understand Trew's study it is important to have some understanding of the way these categories operate. They have to be treated very carefully. Things which are depicted as having agency at certain places in the text may not seem much like agents in ordinary life. For instance, it is a regular feature of both texts that they treat items like 'truncheons' and 'missiles' as if they were active agents rather than passive objects, and they are thus categorised as 'participants'. Conversely, many nouns are depicted in these texts as processes with duration, end points and so on. For instance 'riot' is used both to depict a thing and a process.

When this classification scheme is used the texts can be broken down into two sorts of clauses. 'Transactives' represent processes which include one active participant and one passive, who is merely involved or acted upon. An example of such a clause is 'A gang of youths attacked a group of press photographers.' In contrast, 'non-transactives' represent processes in which there is just one participant involved and no causal process taking place. An example of this sort is 'a man of 21 was in a critical condition with a stab wound'. When these two stages of classification are carried out the analyst is able to highlight the distribution of agency and interaction within these accounts. This form of analysis thus makes explicit who is initiating action and who is being acted upon.



Using this technique dramatic differences are revealed between the two accounts. The Sun article includes many more transactive clauses than the Morning Star article, indicating that it depicts more agents and more causal interaction. Furthermore, much of this contrast is concentrated in the category of 'young people / thugs'. The Sun depicts processes as occurring between groups of participants and as being most predominantly initiated by 'gangs of youths'. On the other hand, the Morning Star report takes the processes themselves as focal, rather than the initiating participants. Only the police are depicted as initiating action to any degree.

A second important difference occurs in the description of the Sun's most active participants. The Morning Star article describes these as 'groups of youngsters'. The Sun, however, uses 'youths', 'black youths', 'gangs of youths', 'thugs', and 'a mob of black youths'; thus contrasting 'gangs' and 'mobs' with the Morning Star's 'groups', and 'youths' and 'thugs' with the Morning Star's 'youngsters'. Similar sorts of contrasts occur in the terminology used to define the processes in which the 'gangs'/'groups' were involved: for instance 'riot' in the Sun for the Morning Star's 'trouble'. Yet in the descriptions of other groups and other processes the papers share almost identical terminology. Exactly why these very specific differences in the reports should occur can be seen when Trew examines the editorials associated with each report.

In each paper's editorial the events at the Carnival are explained and placed in the context of broader social groups and processes. Suggestions for appropriate action are made in the light of these explanations. Furthermore, the form of these explanations arises naturally out of the descriptive terminology of each newspaper. Thus, in the Sun, the violent events are depicted as the actions of 'thugs' and 'hooligans', and these terms provide their own explanation. It is in the nature of 'yobs' and 'thugs' to be violent and produce disruption; nothing further need be said to make sense of their actions. (18) However, in the Morning Star, the violent actions are presented as more enigmatic because they are either carried out by 'young people' who are not identified as special in any way, or they are seen as disembodied processes such as 'hooliganism' or 'thuggery'. Such things need explaining, and the Morning Star indicates a number of possible causes, such as deprivation and the inadequate financing for the Carnival. Trew summarises this relationship between the description and explanation of events as follows:

From these different forms of classification and their implicit explanations, flow, with all logic, different remedies; 'punish them' says the Sun editorial - 'improve the conditions', says the Star editorial. 'These people are our enemies,' says one, 'it's the yobs against the rest of us.' 'These young people are our young people', says the other, 'we must remove the causes of their anger.' (19)

It is clear, therefore, that these two newspaper reports cannot be

considered to be literal depictions of events. The apparently straightforward descriptive terminology of each article can be seen to be part of a more comprehensive system of discourse which provides also for explanation and evaluation. Each newspaper draws upon a different system for explicating action. By closely comparing the accounts in the different papers certain orderly features of their specific versions of actions and events may be made explicit. The Sun emphasises 'internal' or dispositional factors, while the Morning Star emphasises 'external' or situational factors. It is through fine grain analyses such as this that we can put some flesh onto our intuition that certain newspapers take a different ideological 'slant' on events and we can start to reveal the detailed processes through which these political versions are constructed.

It is interesting to view the social psychological research concerning lay people's attributions of causation for behaviour in the light of Trew's analysis. This research ought to be of great relevance here because it is specifically concerned with the way people draw upon implicit social psychological notions when explaining their own and others' behaviour. Each of the newspaper accounts can be seen to embody an implicit social psychological analysis of the behaviour of certain participants at the Carnival. However, research on attributions has traditionally treated explanatory categories such as dispositions and environmental influences (or internal versus external causes) as part of the organisation of people's perceptual schemes or as a feature of their information processing. (20) That is, this research has adopted the individualistic, asocial approach typical of much American and British social psychology. (21) Yet it is clear from Trew's analysis that we can only make sense of the use of dispositional and environmental influences when we understand the social context of the different accounts and, ultimately, the different ideologies which they imply. (22) Far from being essential categories of information processing and perception the newspaper accounts are organised, as was the account of K's illness, to inexorably lead to one particular explanation. The innocent appearance of straightforward explanation arising from literal description must therefore be seen as an 'achievement' of each account.

#### MAKING RULES AND ACCOUNTING FOR CONSENSUS

So far we have looked at the way certain social psychological notions are used in two very different sorts of discourse. A 'theoretical' issue for the social psychologist - is this person mentally ill? were this group of people caused to act in this way? - becomes a 'practical' issue for the participants. Just as psychologists draw on technical notions of mental illness and social influence in the construction of their theoretical versions of events, so people themselves draw upon similar notions when producing versions of their own and others' actions which are appropriate for particular occasions. Psychologists who ignore these overlapping aims do so at their peril. Texts and talk, such as are discussed

above, do not merely describe various features of actions and understandings which make up people's social worlds but they are an active part of the construction of those worlds. Only through properly understanding the practical functions and organisation of participants' discourse can it be ensured that it is not merely reified as social psychological theory.

One form of discourse which is often considered to be a paradigm example of precision and literal description is scientific discourse. Yet even here a number of recent analyses have shown that neither scientific talk nor writing can be considered as straightforwardly literal. (23) Here too, issues of theoretical interest to the social psychologist present themselves as practical problems to the participants being studied. The way these participants depict these issues in their discourse is similarly closely bound up with the pragmatic constraints inherent in specific social situations. We will discuss two examples to illustrate this relation between the form of the scientific discourse and its function.

As we noted in Chapter 4, the notion of a rule and the idea of rule following have become important in more recent, qualitatively based approaches to social psychology. However, there has been considerable debate over the exact status of rules: how they function and how they may be used to explain behaviour. Harré has tended to see rules as templates for guiding activity. (24) In this view, a given rule allows the participant to produce the correct actions in any appropriate circumstances. In contrast to this idea of rules as guiding frames for action is a second, rather different view which claims a much looser connection between rules and activity, and implies that rules are inevitably open to various different interpretations when applied to complex real situations. Indeed, from this perspective rules may be treated as devices used for making sense, justifying or condemning behaviour as much as for guiding it. They are seen as members' ways of creating the 'appearance' of order by 'accounting' for behaviour, rather than creating 'actual' order by 'guiding' behaviour. (25)

This debate may seem far removed from the everyday realities of scientific life. Yet there are situations where this sort of distinction can become a crucial practical issue. Such a case occurs where scientists use criteria to explain the selection and rejection of theories. A number of philosophers and historians of science have suggested that broad criteria such as accuracy, consistency and testability play an essential role in the choice between competing theories. (26) And indeed such criteria are regularly drawn upon in scientists' discourse about their theory choices. However, there are important and systematic differences in the way they are characterised.

A detailed study has been carried out of the way in which the criterion of testability is used in the transcript of a psychology conference. (27) This demonstrates that in both general accounts of theory choice in psychology and in accounts of the role of this criterion in the selection of particular theories, different versions

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of its importance are produced. There are two primary versions, both of which are formulated by a number of different psychologists. The first depicts testability as a determinate criterion of selection which states that no theory which is untestable should be selected. Accordingly any scientist who supports an untestable theory is misguided or even unscientific. The second version depicts testability as rather unimportant for theory selection. This may be because the real reasons for a scientist's theory choice are seen to lie in diffuse social processes; or it may be because the relationship between theories and data are thought to be too vague to enable a definitive decision about whether a theory is testable or not.

Where scientists give accounts of the role of testability in both the selection of their own theory and the selection of competitors' theories an interesting asymmetry becomes apparent. When characterising the choice of their own theories they tend to use a notion of testability much like the first view mentioned above. Testability is represented as an effective constraint on choice which is not significantly influenced by social processes. It is outside the speaker's sphere of social control and it seems purely to select those theories which may be related to bodies of data in a clearcut fashion. On the other hand, when accounting for the selection of competitors' theories, testability is described as ineffective in constraining scientific activity. For it is open to different interpretations which may be strategically made by scientists to give a spurious aura of legitimation to their theories. Thus accounts given by competing scientists who characterised their own theory as selected because of its testability are taken to be rhetorical rather than literal.

We can now see how these different accounts are related to the theoretical dispute about the nature of rules. If criteria for theory choice are treated as a type of rule for choosing correct or appropriate theories, it is clear that psychologists draw on different versions of this rule in different contexts. When talking of selecting their own theories they describe the rule as a template for guiding action. When talking of competitors' choices the rule is characterised more flexibly as a rhetorical presentation which is dependent on other scientists' interpretations. This asymmetric account can be viewed as an essentially practical resource for the scientists concerned. They draw flexibly on the criterion of testability to do two very different things: firstly to display their opponents' views as problematic, i.e. not directly and necessarily constrained by criteria but influenced by a number of social factors; secondly to characterise their own decisions as being forced by the impersonal, determinate operation of criteria. Thus, by way of these accounting techniques, they legitimate their own position and undermine alternative, competing positions. We cannot, therefore, use accounts of this sort to decide which view of the function of rules is the correct one because the scientists, in different contexts, draw upon each of them. Moreover, while parts of the discourse appear compatible with a theory which treats rules as determinate templates other parts treat them as essentially flexible and indeterminate.

As a last example, let us look briefly at the use of notions of consensus in scientific discourse. A large amount of research, both in social psychology and other social sciences, is underpinned in one way or another by the idea of consensus. Yet the central role this notion plays in making sense of research findings is rarely acknowledged. For example, in the studies we examined in Chapter 5, Willis and Marsh produce a number of categorisations of participants which are treated as stable, unproblematic features of their social worlds, and taken to indicate their possession of agreed sets of rules or consensual beliefs about school or football culture. However, Willis and Marsh devote very little space to a discussion of the exact sense in which these groups 'share' rules or beliefs. This is despite the fact that in each case their final explanation is dependent on the broadly consensual nature of these phenomena.

A study of scientists' use of notions of consensus by Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkey illustrates some of the serious problems which can arise when using this apparently straightforward notion. (28) These authors looked at a group of biochemists' responses to a description of increasing theoretical consensus in their field. This description was contained in an honorary lecture given by Spencer, an eminent member of the field, which was subsequently published. (29) The description was accompanied by a graph purporting to illustrate the increasing acceptance of the speaker's theory by relevant experts in the field.

A number of biochemists responded that the graph represented an accurate, veridical description of the increasing consensus in the field. However, other scientists responded very differently. They raised various problems with the veracity of the graph. For instance, some suggested that Spencer had wrongly identified the membership of the field; leaving out certain important figures and mistakenly including others. Further scientists suggested that beliefs had been wrongly attributed, in fact that certain participants characterised as believing in the theory did not do so. Thus, for these scientists, consensus was a point of contention. Although some accepted Spencer's diagram, others suggested that it was flawed.

Without going any further into the details of this study, it is clear that claims of consensus such as that made by Spencer, whilst being a ubiquitous feature of science and other areas of social life, cannot be taken as a stable basis for social psychological analysis. To do so would be to implicitly take sides with certain participants' versions of their social situation at the expense of others'. All of these scientists cannot be right about the state of consensus, because their accounts contradict one another. Despite this, accounts of consensus are regularly used by the scientists in the construction of accounts of broader aspects of their field. Thus Spencer's graph can be seen as a way of showing that some members of the field are acting in a dogmatic, closed-minded fashion and that his theory is increasingly being seen as correct by those scientists with open minds. While those who gave accounts

which questioned Spencer's consensus claims often did so in the context of arguments in support of competing theories. In this way the overall weight of support for Spencer's theory could be shown to be less than claimed by Spencer.

It seems, then, that as with accounts of the criteria used for theory choice, we can make more sense of these accounts by treating them as fashioned for particular interactional purposes than by treating them as veridical descriptions of consensus. Of course, the fact that claims to consensus are controversial and orientated towards practical ends is not at all a surprising one. Yet it has immensely important implications for social psychology in cases where representations of consensual social groupings - be it of biochemists, the middle class or football hooligans - are constructed using participants' discourse. For it is only too easy for the analyst to produce research which incorporates and sustains certain participants' sectional interests as an unnoticed baggage brought in with their versions of collective belief.

#### PARTICIPANTS' AND ANALYSTS' DISCOURSE

Each of these analyses of spoken and written discourse is to some extent preliminary. On the whole, they and others like them have only been conducted in the last few years; although linguists' and conversational analysts' interest in this topic goes back rather further. (30) There is as yet no unitary method or fully agreed set of presuppositions. Some studies, such as Smith's, try to explicate the organisation of discourse within single texts, and thus try to reveal how they accomplish the impression of 'mere description'. Others, such as Trew's, attempt to show the inconsistency of different accounts of the same phenomena, and how variations in the accounts are related to the social context in which they are produced and, ultimately, to their different functions. In each case, then, we can start to see 'factual' accounts as contingent social products organised to achieve certain practical goals.

Despite this diversity and the provisional nature of these studies, they raise questions that are of central methodological and theoretical importance to social psychology. They illustrate, for instance, how basic social psychological notions such as 'identity', 'motivation', 'rules' and 'consensus' are very much the currency of participants' discourse (although they will not necessarily be formalised in this particular way). Moreover they demonstrate that ordinary discourse is recurrently organised in such a fashion that explanatory and evaluative categories appear as descriptions which merely document the genuine, observable features of social life. The danger, as we have stressed, is that what are really participants' explanations, participants' lay social psychologies, will become implicitly incorporated into the analysts' explanations. This can easily happen when members' discourse is treated as a straightforward document of social actions as it is regularly constructed to appear. (31)

This sort of methodological confusion between the interpretations of the analyst and the people being studied is evident in the work of Harré and Willis discussed in Chapter 4. For instance, as we have noted, a central feature of Willis's research is a comparison between the behaviour of two groups of school pupils. These groups are chosen by Willis to represent pupils who conform to the school culture and those who oppose it. Throughout his text Willis adopts, however, the descriptive terminology used by just one of his groups. He used 'the lads' label for themselves and also their label for the conforming group, 'the ear'oles'. Yet it is clear that the ear'oles would not use this label to describe themselves. For it carries with it a negative evaluative baggage which becomes increasingly apparent as Willis outlines the detailed differences between the two groups.

For the most part the ear'oles are described from the perspective of the lads, who continually contrast their own daring, sexual prowess and social maturity with that of the ear'oles, whom they see as lacking these things. The ear'oles' perspective on themselves hardly enters into Willis's text. Indeed, the occasional quote from a member of this group is used only to reinforce the lads' account by seemingly illustrating an unquestioning acceptance of the school's version of reality. Thus, although the lads are viewed as rounded characters, riven through with contradictions and able to take an ironic stance on their activities and surroundings, the ear'oles come over as ciphers who are fully institutionalised into the school culture. It seems that Willis has adopted, at least in part, the dominant system of interpretation used by the lads, and this inevitably penetrates and sustains his analytic conclusions. Although his study is intended to undermine those explanations which treat participants as passive victims of social and institutional processes, Willis ends up explaining the behaviour of the ear'oles in exactly this way.

We do not wish to suggest, returning briefly to the theme of Chapter 4, that analyses of formal texts and discourse like those discussed in the majority of this chapter should entirely replace studies of people's different ways of reading. These analyses are meant to reveal the strategies by which certain texts 'manage' reality and thereby construct the social world in ways appropriate to each occasion of use. The question of how they are read (or heard) is a quite separate one. It is not, however, a logically prior question. Studies of reading cannot underpin particular textual analyses because 'readings' are subject to the very same social contingencies as texts and must therefore be approached in the same way. A rigorous analysis will eventually need to examine both those sections of discourse which are conventionally designated as readings, and start to tease out the complex interrelations between them.

Throughout this chapter, then, we have been concerned to illustrate the complex organisation and function of certain 'factual' texts and some of the ways in which they can embody participants' lay social psychological understanding. Moreover we have emphasised

**the** danger of analysts reifying this understanding and incorporating it into their research findings. In the next chapter we will look closely at one particular attempt by a social psychologist to use certain 'factual' texts as a data base for developing social psychological theory. This example will illustrate in greater detail the way that analytic conclusions are dependent on certain systematic, but unacknowledged, techniques for dealing with discourse as a record of events.