In this chapter, I want to point to the gradual unfolding in the history of psychology of certain ways of thinking which have, relatively recently, led to the emergence of specifically qualitative approaches to psychological matters. For, behind the use of qualitative methods, lies a set of distinct conceptions of the nature of human psychology, and I will outline here some of the sources of these conceptions.

There are several different approaches to qualitative psychology, as the chapters in this book testify, but it is probably true to say that behind each approach is a concern with people’s grasp of their world.

I use that ungainly term grasp of their world to avoid terminology which would be unacceptable to one or other of the traditions within qualitative psychology. There are important differences in opinion about how the subject matter of qualitative research should be conceptualized. First, the ‘qualities’ sought in elucidating a person’s grasp of their world may be seen as a system of objective variables. For some, qualitative research seems to aim at discovering the variables entailed in some human situation and does not dissent from the orthodox view of the person as being part of a natural system of causes and effects (in the positivist manner). Such an approach is not the focus of this book. Second, the person’s grasp of their world may be conceptualized as as a set of quasi-linguistic propositions (which may or may not be seen as open to personal choice) by which the person construes or constructs their world. Such qualitative psychologists often turn their attention to the range of social interpretations of events available to a person, arguing that these interpretations are what gives form and content to the individual’s grasp of their world (gender, for instance, being ready-packaged for us in particular ways). These authors are likely to shy away from the use of terms like ‘experience’, feeling that it points too much to the individual; what should be studied, instead, is
the social nature of the constructions of the world that guide thought and action. Third, qualitative psychologists may envisage the person’s grasp of their world in terms of ‘perceptions’ or meanings (whether socially shared or idiosyncratic). This is a major aspect of the phenomenological viewpoint, in which qualitative researchers often speak of the personal ‘lifeworld’, and try to describe an individual’s experience within this particular meaningful realm.

The Birth of Psychology and the Question of ‘Experience’

Within contemporary psychology those who wish to investigate the person’s grasp of their world in detail will tend to turn to qualitative methods. A concentration on human experience as the central topic of psychology or a focus on construction or interpretation seems to lead, for us, almost inevitably to qualitative research. Yet the history of psychology does not show a necessary link between the study of experience and qualitative methodology. It is sometimes forgotten that, when experimental psychology was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was defined as the science of experience, and – maybe surprisingly – the methodology replicated as far as was possible that of the physical sciences. The philosophers and physiologists who began to establish psychology as a discipline had seen the immensely impressive strides in understanding the nature of the external world made by the physical sciences. Psychology would complement this by developing a scientific understanding of the inner world of experience, and this inner realm would be approached experimentally and quantitatively. The major interest of those early experimentalists, in fact, was in discovering what precisely the relationship was between the outer world and the inner world.

Gustav Fechner (1801–1887), for example, aimed to discover the laws relating the physical nature of an external physical stimulus to the internal experience of the sensation it produced. Fechner’s *Elemente der Psychophysik* (1860/1966) could indeed be said to be the founding publication of experimental psychology. In it, Fechner reported his findings regarding such matters as the relationship between stimulus and sensation. For instance, a measured change in the intensity of light would be compared with the extent to which the person’s experience of brightness altered. So variations in objective physical energy could be graphed against variations in the subjective sensation of brightness. The brightness of light is, in a certain sense, an experience.

The limitations of Fechner’s psychophysics, from the point of view of contemporary qualitative psychology, are rather obvious. What was the meaning of ‘experience’ in experimental work such as Fechner’s? It was simply the individual report of some aspect of a sensation. But we might well object that the experience of variations in brightness was within a very specific, controlled context, with a particular social meaning (the research participants lived in a
culture and historical epoch in which it made sense to play the role of ‘research subject’ and to turn attention exclusively to the specified aspect of the sensation). We might wonder about the vocabulary available to the participants for reporting visual sensation. We might inquire about the relations of power between experimenter and subject. We might speculate about the perceived passage of time during these possibly tedious sessions. But these wider aspects of the experience in the round were of no interest to Fechner.

Right at the start, there was scientific controversy surrounding Fechner’s book. Some of it was aimed at the details of the methodology. But William James was one of the distinguished psychologists who regarded the whole enterprise of ‘psychophysics’ as completely without value.

The human capacity to report verbally on sensations of the elementary kind investigated by Fechner (‘Which light is brighter?’ ‘The one on the left.’) could, it seems, appear unproblematic given the restricted focus of interest of the experimental investigation. When later investigators developed psychological studies which had more complex aims, the difficulties of the approach adopted by Fechner became increasingly insistent. A more elaborate attempt at the analysis of experience is found in Wundt’s *Physiologische Psychologie* (1874/1904), in which various novel methods were used, but notably Wundt focused on laboratory investigation using trained and systematic self-observation. While systematic in the extreme and subject to careful experimental control, the method nevertheless depended on the research participants’ verbal report of their (a question-begging term) introspections. The accounts of the structure of experience varied between laboratories as Wundt’s approach began to be adopted by other workers in the new science.

It was not only because of the unreliability of the experimental self-observation method when applied to the description of the make-up of consciousness that Wundt’s work on the structure of immediate experience was challenged. In particular, Franz Brentano (1838–1917) developed a quite different approach to immediate experience. He viewed conscious experience as a process; experiencing was an act, so that different kinds of experience are to be distinguished by the particular way in which we gain consciousness of the object of experience. In particular, the ‘kind’ of conscious act involved in relating ourselves to something so as to form a judgement about it, is different from the conscious act by which we achieve a perception of something. So judgement and perception and other modes of conscious experience involve different orientations to the object.

The key feature of conscious activity, for Brentano (and this was taken up by Husserl and the phenomenologists), was its intentionality, a technical term pointing to the intrinsic ‘relatedness’ of consciousness to the object of its attention. The fact that consciousness uniquely has this attribute of intentionality was definitive, i.e. all consciousness is consciousness of something. And psychology, for Brentano, had the task of delineating the various ways in which consciousness could relate to its objects.
Brentano's act psychology did not gain a significant hearing outside Germany, though it had an impact on Gestalt theory. The psychology of Wundt, with its technique of self-observation and focus on mental content, gave way to functionalism and especially its behaviourist form in the Anglo-American world. But in the meantime the impressive psychological descriptions by William James (1842–1910) deserve attention.

### Early Critique: William James and the ‘Stream of Consciousness’

In volume I of James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), we have a basic psychology of experience, primarily focusing on the stream of thought but also elaborating on two meanings of 'self'. James does not give us new research evidence, but we do have quite systematic views on psychological matters that have in some ways been more influential than the work of James's experimentalist contemporaries.

The thing which distinguished James's description of experience from that of Wundt was that James rejected atomism in favour of the attempt to describe key features of the whole field of awareness taken in its entirety. James described consciousness as an ongoing process, having its own themes within which the current foci of attention get their meaning. So the content of consciousness is, at a particular moment, a phase of a personal 'stream'. The significance of a particular object of consciousness is due not just to its reference to the external thing but also to its relationship to the ongoing themes of my awareness – its personal relevance to me, the experiencer.

James builds up a general case for the importance of what he calls the ‘fringe’ of the focal object of which we are conscious. An object of awareness gains its meaning in large measure from the 'halo of relations' with which it is connected – its 'psychic overtone'. Husserl later also pointed to a similar idea: the 'horizon' of a phenomenon. That is, an object of awareness is affected intrinsically by the whole web of its meaningful connections within the world of experience. Choice is also a feature of consciousness for William James. Of the available objects of attention, one becomes focal at a particular time, and others are reduced to the periphery of attention. Here we have something akin to the Gestalt psychologists' distinction between the figure and ground of awareness.

James's approach to consciousness is continued in the following chapter of the *Principles*, which is devoted to the self. James regards this as a very difficult topic, but he discusses in detail the distinction between the self as an object of thought (the self-concept, let us say), and the self as that who is aware of that self-concept. So the self is a 'duplex' (as James puts it) – involving both (a) the self which we can conceptualize, the self as known, the me, and (b) the self as that which 'has' that knowledge, the I. The *me*, in particular, is shown to have a complex structure. So James begins to develop a phenomenology of the self, which was elaborated on by such later authors as G.H. Mead and Gordon Allport.
The basic description of awareness and self was a valuable advance. James, much later, continued the descriptive tendency of his work in a way which also employed a form of qualitative research. This was in the groundbreaking *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In this book James draws on a wide range of texts and personal accounts, which are interpreted as subjective perceptions. Thus he sets aside the question of whether a person’s account of experience of God relates to any external reality and describes it in the terms employed by the person themselves.

James made a considerable contribution to the kind of thinking that lies behind qualitative psychology by his descriptions of the field of thought and his analysis of the notion of the self.

### The Rejection of Experience in Behaviourism and Cognitivism

In the next generation of American theorists, we find the criticisms which James made of the kind of experimental self-observation undertaken by Wundt and his school, ripening into an alternative school of psychology, *behaviourism*. J.B. Watson (1878–1958) published a statement of position in the paper ‘Psychology as a behaviorist views it’ (Watson, 1913), in which he demanded a replacement of the self-observation method by the study of behaviour. It was asserted that mental processes could not be the object of scientific study because they were not open to observation. Partly this was an impatient reaction to the irresolvably contradictory findings of earlier psychologists. ‘Objectivity’ was the catchword, and this meant focusing on events which both (a) could be reported reliably and were not susceptible to idiosyncrasy, and (b) were open to observation by someone other than the person undergoing the experience.

Watson recognized that this meant that psychology would no longer be the science of consciousness (which, as we have seen, had been its definitive area of investigation), but he seems merely to have regarded this as a consequence of the requirement that psychology adopt a ‘scientific’ methodology. The apparent problem was neither that consciousness had previously been ill-formulated, nor that consciousness could be dismissed as unreal. Consciousness was simply not amenable to objective analysis. In the United States, especially, behaviourism was the dominant form of academic psychology for 40 or 50 years.

This historical shift was unfortunate, for it took out of play several lines of investigation which, when elaborated, are conducive to the development of qualitative psychology. When the psychologist concentrates on objective stimuli and measurable responses, attention is directed away from the following:

- **The ‘first-person’ perspective.** Propositions about psychological events can be stated only in the third person – from the viewpoint of the observer rather than the actor themselves.
- **The perceptual approach.** Behaviourism could not consider the perceptions of the research participant. Likewise other modes of intentionality of consciousness – thinking,
judging, paying or switching attention, etc. – could not be properly differentiated and researched because behaviourism could not permit itself to consider the relationship between consciousness and its objects of awareness.

- Idiography. Behaviourist research, though allowing for ‘individual differences’ due to variations in individuals’ histories of reinforcement, could not regard the study of people in their uniqueness as a justifiable scientific enterprise. Objectivity would be threatened.

- Meaning. Meaning was sacrificed by behaviourism. In the search for the objective and observable causes of behaviour, the meaning that a situation has for the person disappeared as a topic of research. Similarly, people’s own accounts of their experience were regarded as verbal behaviour – that is, responses which needed to be explained in terms of their causes – rather than understandable and meaningful in their own terms.

- Social relatedness. Other people are an important source of stimuli, and my responses to them are likely to have significant repercussions, but people were not seen as different in kind from the physical objects which constitute a person’s environment. Behaviourists were not able to recognize the social nature of the human being. In particular, they were not able to recognize fully the social construction of human reality.

In effect, the catalogue of things which behaviourism neglected provides a valuable list of items which are, in varying degree, central to the qualitative sensibility in psychology.

However, within behaviourism, developments in a cognitive direction were made from time to time, in an attempt to re-establish psychology as, in some sense, a science of mental life. Perhaps Plans and the Structure of Behavior by Miller, Gallanter and Pribram (1960) is the most obvious of these attempts, in that the authors termed themselves ‘cognitive behaviourists’. In time, a self-confident and autonomous cognitive psychology developed, importantly in Neisser’s ground-breaking Cognitive Psychology (1967), effectively replacing behaviourism as the dominant tendency in experimental psychology.

Cognitive psychology can be seen as a critique of the denial of inner processes, in that it allows studies of perception, memory, thinking, and so on. The work of Miller et al. and Neisser challenged behaviourism in its American heartland. In Britain, never so much in thrall to this theory, respected cognitive work had been going on – witness Bartlett (1932), Broadbent (1958) and Welford (1968). But, as I have shown in detail (Ashworth, 2000), cognitive psychology in general retains a quasi-behaviourist, methodological commitment to external, measurable and observable variables. In essence, the novelty of cognitive psychology lay in developing models of inner processes on the basis of what was externally observable. Viewing ‘mental activity’ as a process of information flow, cognitive psychologists began to test models of the operation of the mental mechanism (attention, perception, thought, memory, etc.)

The methodological approach of cognitive psychology is worth pondering, because it is often thought that this approach made an advance on the sterile objectivism of the behaviourists and allowed research to turn again to the scientific study of the whole breadth of the person’s grasp of their world. But if we look again at the list of matters which behaviourism refused to give place to in its research, we can see that cognitive psychology tackles only some of
these directly. Additionally, both behaviourism and cognitivism share an underlying positivism (see Box 2.1).

Behaviourism’s place in history lies in its paradigm-shattering critique of self-observation in psychology. Other lines of critique failed to capture the field at that time, but we now turn to one alternative approach which did not reject experience but instead sought a more subtle approach to it. This viewpoint was one which immediately called for a qualitative psychology.

**Box 2.1 Positivism**

The methodological viewpoint generally taken for granted within the natural sciences, and dominant also in the social sciences, is positivist. The central idea is that only events which can be observed, or that only propositions which are (at least in principle) testable, have a claim to truth (unless, like logic, they are true by definition).

Among its characteristics – as seen in psychology – are the following:

- There is a single, unitary real world, within which the events of interest to psychology take place. This is realism.
- The individual is part of this real world, and so such processes as memory, emotion and thought are events in the real world with definite enduring characteristics.
- The purpose of science is to set up experimental situations in which the characteristics of these psychological processes can reveal themselves, and this will allow the processes to be modelled.
- The world can be described in terms of measurable variables which can interact with each other in determinate ways.
- The models (mathematically formulated if possible) will show how variables interrelate, especially how they relate to each other in a cause-and-effect fashion.
- The purpose of research is to test hypotheses regarding relationships between variables, and to reach, by closer and closer approximation, theories which can begin to be regarded as having the status of scientific laws. (This sense of an ongoing development gives positivism its characteristic historical optimism, and specifically the sense that each study, based on what is known and available in the established literature, is potentially a contribution to the ‘total knowledge’ of the future.)

In rejecting positivism in this sense, qualitative psychologists put on one side concern with the idea of an unequivocal real world, in favour of attending to the accounts that people formulate of their reality.

**Phenomenology and Existentialism**

The founder of phenomenology as a philosophical movement, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), had a fundamental aim which it is necessary to have
clearly in mind in assessing his work and its relevance to psychology. Although he was critical of both the experimental psychology of Wundt, and the subsequent behaviourist alternative, his purpose was not primarily to reform psychology. Rather, he wanted to provide a firm foundation for all the disciplines – sciences, arts and humanities – by establishing the meaning of their most basic concepts. For he believed not only psychology, but all the scholarly disciplines lacked a method which would establish the nature of their fundamental concepts. What typically happened, according to Husserl, was that common-sense terms were pressed into use as if they were technical terms, or other rough-and-ready ways of developing concepts were employed. So, if asked what perception is, psychologists would have no precise account of the notion, but would have to answer in a way which arbitrarily built on unanalysed common-sense.

Husserl, then, proposed the method of phenomenology, which would enable basic concepts to be framed in a rigorous way that would give a firm basis to each science.

To take psychology specifically, Husserl (1925/1977, 1931/1960) regarded the discipline as flawed in its conceptual schemes by the tendency of psychologists to turn away from concrete experience and to develop prematurely abstract and unexamined concepts. Because the concepts were not grounded in experience, they were seriously lacking in clarity and appropriateness to the subject matter they were intended to reflect. What was the solution, then? In the Husserlian slogan, it was a return to the things themselves, as experienced.

The core philosophical basis of Husserl’s programme was a rejection of the presupposition that there is something behind or underlying or more fundamental than experience, which should be immediately sought. No, Husserl maintained, what appears is the starting point; we should begin our investigation with what is experienced. In fact, phenomenology starts with the methodological move of suspending, or ‘bracketing’, the question of a reality separate from experience. Possibly later it will become necessary for the sciences to develop hypotheses about the underlying factors that account for what is experienced (the physical sciences have had to do this). But phenomenology is to be concerned with the primary reality, the thing itself as it appears; that is, the ‘phenomenon’.

Though this gives a flavour of the work of phenomenological clarification of psychological concepts, it will be clear that a very arduous process is involved. Something akin to James’s account of the web of meanings surrounding an experience must be described. The technical description of this process of attending to experience (Ashworth, 1996) goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Giorgi and Giorgi provide a careful account in Chapter 3.

It is important to note that, though phenomenology was initially concerned with the clarification of the basic concepts of each discipline, it is not surprising – given the way in which Husserl insisted on the importance of experience for this purpose – that the enterprise soon discovered special implications for the practice of psychological research. Husserl established that human experience in general is not a matter of lawful response to the
‘variables’ that are assumed to be in operation. Rather, experience is of a system of interrelated meanings – a Gestalt – that is bound up in a totality termed the ‘lifeworld’ (Husserl, 1936/1970). In other words, the human realm essentially entails embodied, conscious relatedness to a personal world of experience. The natural scientific approach is inappropriate. Human meanings are the key to the study of lived experience, not causal variables. In a nutshell, phenomenology insists that the daffodils are indeed different for a wandering poet than they are for a hard-pressed horticulturalist.

For phenomenology, then, the individual is a conscious agent, whose experience must be studied from the ‘first-person’ perspective. Experience is of a meaningful lifeworld.

Subsequently, ‘existential phenomenologists’, such as the early Heidegger (1927/1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1958; see Ashworth, 2000), developed phenomenology in a way which emphasized the lifeworld. At the same time, they tended to set aside Husserl’s concern to develop, for each of the scholarly disciplines, a set of phenomenologically based concepts.

Tensions and divergences can be seen in phenomenological psychology. The emphasis may be on exhaustive description or on the development of essential structures of experience (see Giorgi, 1970; van Manen, 1997), and the descriptive emphasis may be idiographic (Smith et al., 1995). And there is debate about whether the empathic understanding required for phenomenological work might move towards interpretation (more of this below).

Especially in the American context, phenomenology and existentialism have been linked with ‘humanistic psychology’ (Misiak and Sexton, 1973). The purpose of this loose group of psychologists was to develop a way of pursuing the discipline which avoided the determinism of behaviourism and (as they believed) psychoanalysis. What ‘determinism’ means here is the view that human behaviour and experience are to be regarded as the inevitable outcome of the set of variables (some internal, some environmental) which are in action on the person at a given time. In determinism, strictly understood, there is no place for a contribution of the person in how they will act. A profound concern that psychology should not be determinist in this sense led a number of authors, notably Bühler (1971), Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1967) – many of whom were psychotherapists – to call for a ‘third force’ of psychological thinking (Bugental, 1964) to counter the antihumanistic tendencies of the psychological mainstream.

The approach which I have personally espoused over nearly 30 years is existential phenomenology, with its fundamental concept of the lifeworld. In detail, people’s lived experience of their situation may be quite specific, but all lifeworlds do have universal features such as temporality, spatiality, subjective embodiment, intersubjectivity, selfhood, personal project, moodedness, and discursiveness (Ashworth, 2006; Ashworth and Chung, 2006).

For existential phenomenology, human beings are taken as free by virtue of being conscious (consciousness entailing the capacity to envisage alternatives
to what currently is), and resources such as language are tools for thought rather than, primarily, constraints on it. This is not to say that people are fully able to exercise the liberty which consciousness provides. Several authors within the existential-phenomenological tradition, such as Hannah Arendt (1998), have stressed that social arrangements (both local intersubjective ones and large-scale political structures) are required for the practical exercise of freedom.

In its broadest meaning, then, the phenomenological approach has the task of elucidating the taken-for-granted assumptions by which people navigate their lifeworld. To describe what everyone knows may seem a pretty empty ambition! But this impression is wrong. It has been argued: (a) that people don’t “know” – we act according to taken-for-granted understandings about our world which are for the most part pre-reflective, so elucidating them can often be a revelation; and (b) “everyone” may have taken-for-granted understandings which enable a roughly-shared communal life to take place – but there is scope for a great deal of idiosyncrasy.

In fact, the unique in human experience has been the focus of a further source of qualitative psychology.

Idiographic Psychology – G.W. Allport

Of the earlier writers to whom the humanistic psychologists look with particular admiration, Gordon Willard Allport (1897–1967) is notable for his concern that psychology should not neglect the unique in individual experience and behaviour. Allport was a member of a generation for whom behaviourism was almost definitive of, at least American, academic psychology, yet he was remarkably independent and, in contrast to anything that could be regarded as mainstream at the time, developed a theory of personality that stressed the distinct configuration of traits and tendencies which constitutes the uniqueness of each individual:

I object strongly ... to a point of view that is current in psychology. Eysenck states it as follows: To the scientist, the unique individual is simply the point of intersection of a number of quantitative variables.

What does this statement mean? It means that the scientist is not interested in the mutual interdependence of part-systems within the whole system of personality ... [and] is not interested in the manner in which your introversion interacts with your other traits, with your values, and with your life plans. The scientist, according to this view, then, isn’t interested in the personality system at all, but only in the common dimensions. The person is left as mere ‘point of intersection’ with no internal structure, coherence or animation. I cannot agree with this view. (Allport, 1961: 8; his italics)

In this statement, the holism of Allport’s approach is plain, and his interest in the idiographic approach to psychological research logically follows. The individual may be studied as a unique case. The psychology of personality does not
need to be exclusively nomothetic (that is, restricting its attention to general dimensions on which individuals vary). The nomothetic approach assumes that the behaviour of a particular person is the outcome of laws that apply to all, and the aim of science is to reveal these general laws. The idiographic approach would, in contrast, focus on the interplay of factors which may be quite specific to the individual. It may be that the factors take their specific form only in this person; certainly, they are uniquely patterned in a given person’s life (Allport, 1962).

As tends to be the case with psychologists who take a humanistic line, Allport considered in some depth the meaning of the self. He tried to cover a very great deal of what is linked in ordinary language in some way or other to the notion of self, using the coinage ‘proprium’ – to include both (a) people’s conception of the self and the aspects of their world which they may be said to identify with; and (b) the ‘integrative’ mental function that may be labelled ‘selfhood’.

Despite his insistence on the importance of the idiographic approach, Allport did not adopt an exclusively qualitative approach to research. Rather, his recommendation would be to study an individual person by using as many and varied means as possible. But he did pioneer some interesting qualitative approaches, such as the analysis of ‘personal documents’ and the use of ‘self-reports’ as a means of understanding the individual (Allport, 1961: 401–14; 1965).

Where Gordon Allport used qualitative methods, this largely reflected his concern with the study of the individual as a totality. He himself recognized that his holistic and idiographic interest had affinities with Gestalt theory and with existentialism. But Allport does not seem to have been interested in a qualitative psychology set up from the viewpoint of persons themselves. In the end, his is a psychology which will describe the person in individual complexity, certainly, but it would be carried out from the external vantage point of a psychologist for whom personal documents and other ‘subjective’ material can be used as evidence.

The World as Construction

What image of psychological life is suggested as a basis for qualitative research? We have seen James’s description of consciousness, the focus on experience in existential phenomenology, and Allport’s idiography. All these implicitly invite us to think of the person as a perceiver:

All other forms of conscious experience are in one way or another founded on perceptual, sensory consciousness. In general terms, Husserl contrasts the self-givenness of perception ... with that of a very large class of forms of consciousness that are ‘representational’ ... or work through a modification of presencing, which Husserl terms ... ‘presentification, ‘presentation’ or ‘calling to mind’ (not just in memory, but in fantasy, wishing, etc.). When we remember, imagine or fantasize about an object, we do not have precisely the same sense of immediate, actual, bodily and temporal presence of the object. (Moran, 2005: 166–7)
And perception is not a construction or representation but is direct access to the experienced object.

Of course, individuals are very active in their perceiving – they search, they pay attention selectively, they make choices, and their perception always has a meaning which is related to their lifeworld. But the approaches to be discussed in the rest of the chapter do not see the person as a perceiver so much as a conceiver or a constructor. Research focuses not so much on individuals’ perception of a lifeworld as on their construction of it. The person is a sense-maker.

Two authors are indicative of the move to the idea of construction as the way many qualitative researchers approach the investigation of the individual’s grasp of their world. I will deal with them in reverse historical order because the earlier, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), has arguably a more deep-rooted ongoing influence on current qualitative research through the ‘symbolic interactionist’ movement than the later, George Kelly (1905–1967). Mead provides an appropriate link with later sections of this chapter.

George Kelly (1905–1967)

Kelly’s (1955) approach centres on conception rather than perception. For Kelly, people act in accordance, not with the way the world actually is, but according to their ‘construction’ of it. However, Kelly did not give us a detailed theory of the development in childhood of the capacity to construe the world, nor did he apparently prioritize the social basis of thought and selfhood (though he gives a great deal of attention to relations with others, and to the various ways in which an individual’s way of seeing the world coincides with that of other people). So, though Kelly was undoubtedly a constructionist, it would be controversial to label him a social constructionist, and whether constructs are to be seen as falling within discursive structures or not is moot.

The ‘fundamental postulate’ of Kelly’s theory of personal constructs expresses the constructionist outlook strongly – ‘a person’s processes are psychologically channelled by the way in which he [sic] anticipates events’. Kelly wants us to regard the person as acting as an informal scientist who views the world (‘events’) by way of categories of interpretation (‘constructs’) which are open to modification in the light of experience. Since reappraisal is thought to be possible by conscious reflection on one’s construction of the world, we have here what Kelly called ‘constructive alternativism’.

Kelly takes the view that we all have our own construction of events. But there are rather powerful limitations on the extent to which my construct system and yours can differ. Though each construct system is individual, Kelly speaks of the need for the contributors to a joint activity to be able to ‘construe the construction processes’ of the other participants. In other words, though we might not share the others’ outlooks, for joint action to occur we must know what the others’ outlooks are. So Kelly notes that individuals may include within their own system of cognition knowledge of the perspectives of
others. To interact with another person, of course, requires knowledge of this sort. Many constructs are shared by people in common – indeed, to the extent that constructs can be communicated, they can be shared.

Essentially, Kelly views people as relating to reality (a notion which he strongly asserts) through their own developing system of constructs, and this system is materially affected by the person’s coexistence and interaction with others. It is important to mention that Kelly does not dissent from the view of the self which we have noted in other authors. The *me* is a construct like any other.

Kelly provided a valuable new research technique, a logical scheme by which the researcher might specify in an organized way individuals’ construct system. It was intended to facilitate assessment without sacrificing either individuality or changeability. This was the *role construct repertory grid* (*Rep Grid*) in which the associations and dissociations between certain objects of experience – usually people well known to the individual – are mapped in terms of particular constructs (maybe one such construct would be kindly/cold). This exceedingly flexible tool has been used in a wide range of investigations (Bannister and Fransella, 1971). It may be used idiographically, but there are ways in which nomothetic procedures can be based on it. For instance, mathematical characteristics of grids can be derived, and the variation in such things as the complexity with which people construe a certain realm of experience can be investigated.

It is to be emphasized that Kelly saw the Rep Grid merely as a tool; he and subsequent personal construct psychologists value personal accounts as ways of eliciting personal constructs. It must also be said – in view of the fact that claims are made that Kelly represents the phenomenological position (e.g. Mischel, 1993) – that Kelly dissociated personal construct theory from phenomenology (though there is evidence in his work that he did not know the phenomenological literature in any depth, see Ashworth, 1973), and phenomenologists (e.g. Bolton, 1979) similarly distance themselves from his work, arguing (among other things) that it is too cognitive and that the fundamental postulate and corollaries entail presuppositions for which the phenomenological justification is absent. We can see, in any case, in the light of the argument that is being developed in this chapter, that Kelly’s emphasis is on *construing*, not *perceiving*.

**George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)**

G.H. Mead’s work is an important source of the constructionist orientation in qualitative psychology (Mead, 1934; see Ashworth, 1979, 2000); it was absorbed during the 1950s and 1960s into the school of social research referred to as ‘symbolic interactionism’.

Symbolic interactionism is radically social. Mead (1934: 186) tells us:

> What I want particularly to emphasise is the temporal and logical pre-existence of the social process to the self-conscious individual that arises within it.
Mind and self are products of social interaction, then. It is almost built into the name of the discipline, ‘psychology’, that the focus is on the individual person. Mead, instead, argued for the priority of the relationship of communication between caregiver and infant as the source of the mentality of the infant. He argued (he did not base his thinking on systematic evidence) that communication of a rudimentary kind between infant and carer comes before the development of the infant’s capacity for thought. Indeed, it comes before the capacity for self-reflection. So infants interact with caregivers before they ‘know what they are doing’ or ‘who they are’. The meaning of the infant’s action becomes ‘known’ by the gradual internalization of expectations about how the others in the situation will react. So thought arises in a social process, and the individualizing of thought is a later development, which is in any case largely dependent on the use of the social tool, language.

It is important to notice how central to Mead language and other systems of symbols are. (It should be clear now why the school of thought is named ‘symbolic interactionism’.) And, very importantly, linguistic symbols are a system of socially shared, not idiosyncratic, meanings.

There are two fundamental consequences of the idea that social interaction comes before thinking and selfhood, and that the latter are built from social materials. First, inner thought and external communication are basically similar. They are made of the same stuff. Mead expects no problem of translation of thought into word. Note also that, in internalizing language the child is not just internalizing a symbol system but the system of activity. The process of conversation is being internalized; symbols are part of interaction, or discourse. Second, the self is part of this. Having acquired the capacity to reflect on one’s own actions, one can build up a self-concept or identity. And the capacity for self-reflection develops through the reactions of others to the child’s behaviour.

The view of Mead and the other symbolic interactionists – the term is due to Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) – contributes to qualitative psychology a highly social outlook: the person is first of all a member of society and only later (in the context of other people) becomes an individual. Hence it is appropriate for qualitative psychology to look to the symbolic systems of society – both those which are linguistic in the simple sense and those which are embedded in the forms of activity, the practices, of the culture. Mead’s outlook is one important source of the approach of discourse analysis and discursive psychology. Other foundational thinkers in this area include Goffman (1959) (for the relation between Goffman and the existentialists, see Ashworth, 1985) and Garfinkel (1967). Qualitative methodology (often ethnographic, i.e. ‘participant observation’) is normally seen as the appropriate approach for research arising from symbolic interactionist and related theories.

One way of reading Mead, then, is as an early social constructionist theory. Individual selves and mental processes arise in a social context, and the ‘content’ of thought and selfhood is to be understood in the light of the meanings which are available within the culture in which the person is immersed. However, there is another emphasis, equally present in Mead (Ashworth, 1979;
For, if mind and self are products of social interaction, it is equally true to say that it is individual interaction that constitutes society. Mead does not envisage a social milieu made up of roleplaying automatons – far from it. Having developed the capacity for mind and self as a result of interaction, the individual is then able, relatively autonomously – albeit in a continuing social context – to develop selfhood and personal tendencies of thought. Mead provides a social psychological theory with implications which include an element of individual agency. People are constructed and are also constructors.

The distinction between a perceptual and a constructionist outlook is not absolute. Berger and Luckmann (1967) in their influential book *The Social Construction of Reality* took their theoretical direction especially from the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (e.g., 1972). Nevertheless, it is as well to note the different tendencies. Qualitative psychology may be more concerned with attempting to reveal the lifeworld (the perceptual tendency) or with how one's sense of reality is constructed.

### Interpretation Theory: Hermeneutics

We have noted the distinction – rough and ready though it may be – between the forms of qualitative psychology that tend to adopt a perceptual approach and those that are constructionist in orientation. If we were to turn constructionist thinking back onto the question of the nature of qualitative research itself, we could hardly fail to find ourselves confronting the question, ‘What processes of construction have the researchers themselves employed in coming up with the findings they have presented?’ For a constructionist, all is construction. Both Mead and Kelly explicitly asserted that all science, including all forms of psychology, is a matter of construction. Further than this, the conclusions of a research activity have to be regarded as interpretations. Psychology is going to be an interpretive activity.

In his unrivalled study, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970), Paul Ricoeur distinguished between two kinds of interpretation (using the term ‘hermeneutics’ to refer to the use of a theory of interpretation):

- **The hermeneutics of meaning-recollection** aims at faithful disclosure. For instance, studies concerned with the lifeworld of people with a certain disability, intended to inform others of the nature of their experience, would be instances of interpretation aimed at ‘meaning recollection’.
- **The hermeneutics of suspicion** aims to discover, behind the thing being analysed, a further reality which allows a much deeper interpretation to be made, and which can challenge the surface account. Plainly, psychoanalysis is definitively an instance of ‘suspicion’; arguably, feminism can be as well.

The hermeneutics of meaning-recollection applies to any account of psychological life, surely. It is hardly explicit interpretation at all. In fact, though
qualitative research adopting the perceptual model of psychological life would usually reject the hermeneutic label altogether, it certainly would be included within Ricoeur’s broad definition of the hermeneutics of meaning-recollection. Indeed, it could be argued that this definition is too broad. Note that it would be in accord with the hermeneutics of meaning recollection for a psychological research methodology to involve interviewing research participants on some aspect of their experience, analysing the interview transcripts in such a way as to elicit their experience exceedingly faithfully, and then checking with the participants themselves after the analysis is done to ensure that the research account is faithful to their meaning. Of course, this is a frequent step in qualitative research.

Whether interpretation is the strong form that we see fully developed in psychoanalytic practice – the hermeneutics of suspicion – or not, Palmer (1969) usefully characterizes hermeneutics, the general theory of interpretative activity, as the method by which

something foreign, strange, separated in time, or experience, is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation or translation is somehow ‘brought to understanding’ – is ‘interpreted’. (Palmer, 1969: 14)

Such interpretation may be a matter of elucidation (in the mode of ‘meaning recollection’), or radical (in the mode of suspicion).

Heidegger has been mentioned in earlier pages, but a recognized early discussion of hermeneutic method is found in the early work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). In Being and Time (1927/1962), he attempted an analysis of the everyday manner in which human beings go about their interpretative sense-making. For him, as with the constructionists, we live in an interpreted world and are ourselves hermeneutic; we are interpreters, understanders. For qualitative research, the hermeneutic approach provides a new view of the meaning of data. Interview research, for example, is the record of a process by which the researcher interprets the research participants’ constructions of their world. This is reflected in Jonathan Smith’s way of doing phenomenological analysis (see Chapter 4).

It was partly the divergence between Husserl and Heidegger, on the question of whether phenomenology is truly a disciplined description of experience or whether interpretation is inevitable, which led to a rift in phenomenology (similar to, but not precisely the same as, the perception/construction divide) that still affects phenomenological psychology.

The Discursive Turn and a Tendency to Postmodernism

The first half of the twentieth century saw a striking move in several very different modes of western philosophy which began to focus on language use as
somehow ontologically primary. The new understanding is that language does not just reflect the world of experience, but rather the world for us is constituted by our shared language. Language is in a sense the prime reality.

We have already seen one line of thought which takes this position – G.H. Mead and the symbolic interactionist tradition. A separate ancestral line also implicated in the rise of a discursive psychology is found in the ordinary language philosophy deriving from Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) later work (Philosophical Investigations, 1953). Wittgenstein’s rejection of the idea that there can be a ‘private language’ – by which he criticized the view that understanding is an inner process – and his early avowal that the boundaries of my world are coextensive with the reach of my language, are plainly important to discursive psychology. So is the Wittgensteinian account of the social world in terms of discrete ‘language games’ constituting or correlated with ‘forms of life’. (Austin, 1962, should be mentioned in this context.)

So, for Wittgenstein:

• A way of life and the language employed match, or are the same thing.
• We need to think of discourse use as a delimited language game appropriate to certain circumstances.
• It is in the nature of a language to be collective – there is no ‘private language’.
• The idea of raw sensations on which language ‘acts’ to produce meaningful perceptions should be abandoned.

In a very different realm of philosophy to that of the ordinary language philosophers, we find Heidegger (1889–1976), dissident protégé of Husserl, putting the view that experience does not ‘presence’ the world directly, but that presencing is an act of interpretation in which language use is fundamental.

Language was once called the "house of Being." It is the guardian of presencing, inasmuch as the latter’s radiance remains entrusted to the propriative showing of the saying. Language is the house of Being because, as the saying, it is propriation’s mode. (Heidegger, 1957/1993: 424)

This quote gives a flavour of the writing of the later Heidegger. I read him as meaning that anything that we can say ‘is’, has linguistic form. It is language that, in this sense ‘houses’ it and ‘brings’ it to vivid presence. The importance for us of this from Heidegger is that it, too, shows the discursive turn – but now in phenomenological philosophy. Interpretivism is involved in Heidegger’s stance, then, but the discursive turn, most strongly emphasized in the chapters of this book, perhaps, in Chapters 6 to 8, can also be seen in his thinking. Other sources of discourse analysis are mentioned by Willig in Chapter 8.

We can also see a link here with the constructionist turn discussed earlier. Here, however, a particularly ‘strong’ form of constructionism is implicated. In particular, (1) language and other cultural sign systems gain especial importance as at least the means by which the individual constructs reality, and
maybe as the heart or foundation of that construction such that the individual’s grasp of their world is made of the possibilities of such cultural resources; (2) the person is understood less as a unique individual, and more as a member of society, with ways of conceiving of reality that are typical of a historical epoch of a certain culture; and (3) the psychologist is very much part of this web of cultural construction. The third of these new emphases means that research has to be seen as a joint product of researcher and researched (part of what is often termed ‘reflexivity’). It also means that psychology itself needs to be seen as part of cultural activity – a science which emerged from a particular period in the history of a certain society, and which cannot be detached from the interests and concerns of that society.

Social constructionism and the idea that interpretation is universal take us within a hair’s breadth of postmodern thinking. Kenneth Gergen has summarized the constructionist stance, extending it to the entire postmodern movement, in the following statement:

If one were to select from the substantial corpus of post modern writings a single line of argument that (a) generates broad agreement within these ranks and (b) serves as a critical divide between what we roughly distinguish as the modern versus the post modern, it would be the abandonment of the traditional commitment to representationalism. (Gergen, 1994: 412)

By representationalism, Gergen seems to be pointing to the assumption, which I have previously called the perceptual tendency that we can directly describe experience. Gergen asserts that this is not possible. Siding with the constructionists, he argues that experiences cannot but be shaped by our constructions of events. Indeed, he is making an even stronger statement than this. For Gergen, qualitative psychology does not strictly reveal a lifeworld, and a person’s system of personal constructs does not relate the individual to reality. Instead, all that can be discovered by qualitative psychology is a kind of network of elements (let’s call them segments of discourse), each of which gains its meaning purely from its position within the total system.

Gergen points out that this radicalization of the social constructionist perspective, whereby our conceptions do not touch the world, but all is construction or all is text (Derrida, 1976), is a central notion of postmodernism. It has many important implications for qualitative psychology.

One inescapable epistemological consequence is that the discursive turn undermines entirely the correspondence theory of truth which is assumed as a fundamental by much of psychology. This is the view that the truth of a hypothesis or theory or idea is to be found in its correspondence with ‘outer reality’. Experimental design, for example, hinges on this notion. But if reality is not accessible except through discursive practices, then the separateness of idea and the real is lost. (Interestingly, lack of a separateness of the idea and the real is also the case with phenomenology, despite the fact that much
phenomenology does not make the discursive turn, because 'reality' is bracketed and put out of play in order to reveal the structures of consciousness and the lifeworld.

Modernism takes it for granted that our perceptions and constructions do relate to the real world and it allows the further assumption that ongoing progress is possible in research. This is because modernity has the fundamental notion that there is a non-negotiable, solid truth or reality about which it is possible to attain ever more accurate knowledge. The researcher can elaborate the structure of scientific constructs in a direction which approximates more and more to the truth of actual reality.

Modernism characterizes both the world of natural science and technology and the social and political world. It assumes that there are recognized criteria of scientific research or scholarly activity by which knowledge advances. In marked contrast, postmodernity can be viewed as a cultural movement for which such strong criteria of validity no longer exist (since the connection between ‘reality’ and human constructions has been dismissed). The idea of progress has nothing to refer to, because there is no standard against which to judge an innovation of theory, practice, product or policy that would enable one to see that it is an improvement over what previously existed.

Plainly, most psychology is modernist in its assumptions. There is a true reality to be uncovered by the activities of its researchers, and findings at one moment in time are the stepping-stones to refined findings later on. Postmodern thinking questions this (Kvale, 1992), and an important implication is that psychology can no longer present itself as ‘outside human society, looking in’. It is not detached, but one among the many discourses within the culture – a discourse-space, a particular realm of social cognition and practical activity with its own rationality. In this view, qualitative psychology should not pretend to reveal progressively true, universal human nature, but should make us aware of the implicit assumptions (about ‘human nature’ and kinds of human experience) that are available to the members of a social group for the time being.

A key figure in this mode of thinking was Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Like other postmodern thinkers, he asserted the primacy of social constructions, or discourse (e.g., 1971; 1973a, 1973b). Foucault’s constructionism (like that of all postmodernists) is a fully social one. The power of discourse does not come from the individual speaker-actor, but from the culture. And discourse constitutes the individual.

Perhaps Foucault’s major contribution to postmodern social science was to emphasize the relationship between knowledge and power, or discourse and control. Foucault’s last, uncompleted, work, The History of Sexuality (vol. 1, 1981), stresses control-through-discourse, arguing that the discourse-space of sexuality is one in which the individual defines himself or herself. Foucault finds it no accident that morality is treated most centrally as sexual morality,
for in the self-examination that awareness of sexuality entails, a process of personal self-monitoring is established.

Whereas Foucault was, at least at one stage, interested in the relationship between discourse and other features of the social world, Derrida (1981) regards all as, in the end, discourse. Such discursive sovereignty also contrasts with the hermeneutics of Freud, for whom interpretation is grounded in the primary, biological processes of libido. For Derrida, there is no hermeneutically privileged realm – there is no area of knowledge in which the certainty of absolute truth can be found.

Conclusion and Links to the Chapters in This Book

This chapter has shown the slow and subterranean development of ways of thinking which, together, constitute the qualitative sensibility in psychology. I have not strayed far over the borders of the established discipline, yet our scholarly neighbours in the social sciences have in some cases been the source of ideas that have been sparingly incorporated in qualitative psychology. One tendency that is to be encouraged, then, is qualitative psychologists’ growing commerce with neighbours, both methodologically and in terms of subject matter. Disciplinary divisions do not stand up to phenomenological or discursive scrutiny.

Some historical currents within the discipline have been neglected for lack of space. The impact of psychoanalysis deserves proper recognition, both because of its focus on accounts of experience, and because of the dangers of the hermeneutics of suspicion to which it can succumb, and which may pose dangers to qualitative psychology more broadly. Similarly, the strong relationship between phenomenology and Gestalt theory (Gurwitsch, 1964) was historically extremely important. I have neglected the impact of existential psychiatry (Binswanger, 1963; Boss, 1979; Laing, 1965). Finally, I have not discussed one of the strongest movements pressing the claims of the qualitative sensibility over the last few decades which has been Feminism (Gergen and Davis, 1997; Tong, 1991; Ussher, 1997; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995) in its seizure of the high epistemological ground, in its quest for voice, in its concern that psychological thought and the process of psychological research should acknowledge the centrality of power, and with the need for equalization of the researcher/researched relationship.

I have used the phrase ‘the qualitative sensibility’ in this chapter, yet there is sufficient evidence to doubt the unity of mind of qualitative psychologists. The perceptual and the discursive tendencies seem rather distinct in their understanding of the human condition and the purpose of qualitative research. In fact, there are overlaps. Nevertheless, it would be roughly true to say that social constructionism moves in the postmodern direction, and that this leads
to one form of qualitative psychology. A different form seems to originate from the Husserlian understanding of phenomenological research, which seeks universals of human experience (an undertaking which has modernist features). However, existential phenomenology, for example, is not quite characterizable in either modernist or postmodernist terms. Thus we can see a diversity of approaches, a flourishing of difference but we can also see a unity, a qualitative sensibility.

Let me finish with a rough-and-ready mapping of the following chapters of this book in relation to the conceptual field I have laid out. Of course, this is not a definitive model and it is possible some of the authors would see some of this differently:

- The phenomenological psychology of Amedeo and Barbro Giorgi (Chapter 3) is Husserlian and treats of experience or awareness in the broad meaning of the term of that philosopher (in which bodily relatedness to the world has characteristics of intentionality as well as the attentive ‘mental’ consciousness as commonly understood).
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis (outlined by Jonathan Smith and Mike Osborn in Chapter 4) focuses on experience, while allowing that both the research participant and the researcher are entering into interpretation. They also note the importance of attending to the idiographic.
- With Kathy Charmaz’s Chapter 5 we are introduced to grounded theory – a technique of analysis emerging from the symbolic interactionist tradition in which ‘what the people themselves say’ is of utmost importance in founding the analysis. However, as Charmaz points out, there are different versions of grounded theory which mean the researcher can have one of a number of theoretical approaches which guide their understanding of the structures that emerge – they may be constructionist or experiential or even more positivistic in their outlook.
- Michael Murray’s piece on narrative psychology (Chapter 6) emphasizes the idea that it is a prime human characteristic to make sense of our circumstances by constructing stories. Narrative psychology is clearly at the intersection of the world as construction and the discursive turn.
- In his account of conversation analysis (Chapter 7), Paul Drew takes the observation that the outcome of qualitative psychological research is a co-constitution of the researcher and the researched as a theme of research, drawing on the work of the ethnomethodologists. Here, perhaps, the prime reality is the process of interaction and the process of discourse.
- Carla Willig (Chapter 8) draws attention to two particular modes of discourse analysis, the approach of discursive psychology (in which the individual is an agent who draws on socially-available discourses), and that inspired by the work of Michel Foucault in which the individual is constituted by the available discourses of the person. In the second case we can see the influence of the later Heidegger and his notion of enframing, in which a culture may have a mode of life such that there is an enveloping understanding of what reality is like.
- Focus groups are considered by Sue Wilkinson (Chapter 9) as a qualitative technique and, like the technique of grounded theory discussed in Chapter 5, there is some flexibility in the theoretical approach which the researcher may use. Again, we have a key issue of qualitative research generally: where does ontological priority lie – with the individual, the group, the interaction among the members of the group, the wider society?
• In Chapter 10, Peter Reason and Sarah Riley take this question of ontology further, for cooperative inquiry goes as far as it can in eliminating the distinction of role between the researcher and researched. Cooperative inquiry is usually an intensively practical matter – where we experiment on our situation and consider the outcomes.
• Finally, Lucy Yardley attempts, in Chapter 11, to address the question of validity as it arises anew for researchers who adopt a qualitative position.

It is worth underscoring the value of the variety of approaches within qualitative psychology. They have a number of emphases, but it is arguable that the richness of the human condition is such that no one tendency would encompass the whole. Allport’s idiographic psychology is needed in order to approach the person’s grasp of their world no less than the sociocentrism of some kinds of constructionism. Pluralism in qualitative psychology is to be valued. Pluralism of qualitative outlook and also awareness of human diversity.

It is in this context that qualitative psychology of whatever tendency should be judged. For it is usually only qualitative research that has a proper awareness of the diverse ways in which individuals (perceptually or constructively) grasp their world – and will, in particular, provide a hearing for the voices of the excluded.