

# Book review: Discursive Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Issues by Cristian Tileagă and Elizabeth Stokoe, eds.

Jowett, A

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Jowett, A 2016, 'Book review: Discursive Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Issues by Cristian Tileagă and Elizabeth Stokoe, eds.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol 13, no. 3, pp. 267-269

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1156392>

DOI 10.1080/14780887.2016.1156392

ISSN 1478-0887

ESSN 1478-0895

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

***This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14780887.2016.1156392>***

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

Tileagă C, Stokoe E. 2015: *Discursive Psychology: Classic and contemporary issues*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

It will soon be thirty years since the publication of three seminal books in discursive psychology: Potter and Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and social psychology*, Edwards and Mercer's (1987) *Common knowledge*, and Billig's (1987) *Arguing and thinking*. However, there are numerous other texts from these authors and other scholars in the form of journal articles and book chapters that have been foundational in the development of discursive psychology. 'Discursive Psychology: classic and contemporary issues' claims to be the first collection to systematically and critically appraise these 'classic' articles in the field of discursive psychology. The editors describe the book as being "about the evolution, contribution and impact of the body of work known as Discursive Psychology" (p.1).

The editors define Discursive Psychology (DP hereafter) as the examination of "how psychological concepts (memory, thought, emotion etc.) are shaped for the functions they serve, in and for the nexus of social practices in which we use language". Yet, as many readers will be aware, DP is far from a homogenous approach. The editors acknowledge this 'diversity' and refer to the schism that has developed within DP as two parallel 'trajectories'. The first, it is suggested, has taken a conversation analytic approach to cognition, while a second strand is referred to as 'critical' DP and is described as being more closely aligned with poststructuralism. The editors themselves could be said to represent these two strands, being leading discursive psychologists of different ilks. Of course, as the tenants of DP make us acutely aware, any account, including the editors' account of DP, is only one of many possible versions that could be provided. As Billig (2012) notes, Harre and Gillett's (1994) version of discursive psychology is different from that which has developed at Loughborough University, yet the book is clearly focused on the Loughborough School of DP with the work of non-Loughborough scholars excluded and not considered 'canon'.

The book consists of a collection of commentaries and reflections on key ideas expressed in 'classic' articles and book chapters written by past and present members of Loughborough University's Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG). These key thinkers are Charles Antaki, Michael Billig, Susan Condor, Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margret Wetherell. Although listed alphabetically by the editors, the contribution of Edwards and Potter largely dominate the book. This should perhaps come as little surprise given that the term 'discursive psychology' was itself coined in their book of the same title (Edwards, Potter 1992). And another key thinker, Michael Billig, already has his own festschrift within the same book series (Antaki & Condor, 2014). Most of the 'foundational texts' are journal articles published in the 1980s and 90s although a few were published post 2000. Commentaries on these texts are written by a mix of early career and more established scholars whose work has been inspired by their ideas. The book is divided into four parts: Part I) Epistemology and method; Part II) Cognition, emotion and the psychological thesaurus; Part III) Social categories, identity and memory and; Part IV) Prejudice, racism and nationalism.

The editors identify an ambitiously wide-ranging set of aims for the book in the introduction. They suggest that the book aims to make these classic texts more accessible to a larger audience while also advancing the field by engaging with them critically. It also seeks to set each paper in its historical academic context while also exploring its contemporary relevance. Although not every chapter does each of these

things in equal measure, read in its entirety I would say that the book on the whole fulfils these aims. The editors suggest the book does not aim to outline the main theoretical tenets of DP, yet many of the key tenants are rehearsed (repeatedly) by various contributors throughout the book. For those well versed in DP this might be a little monotonous, although having the key ideas explained by different authors, who apply them to different topics, might well be useful for those less familiar with DP. Given that many of these classic studies were written around the same time, by the same group of authors, it is perhaps not surprising that there is some repetition when each contributor seeks to set their target paper in its academic context.

To demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the classic texts many of the authors take the ideas from the target text and explore them within their own data. They also discuss subsequent DP work on the topic at hand. Yet to fully consider the contemporary relevance of these texts it is important not only to examine how work in DP has progressed since their publication but also to look at how alternative approaches have developed. For instance, Dixon and Taylor (Chapter 18) refer to contemporary developments in the cognitive psychology of attitudes when considering Potter and Wetherell's critique of attitudinal research in the 1980s. This is particularly important because, as Billig (2012) has noted elsewhere, the more publications there are to be read within DP (or within any sub-discipline for that matter) the less time there is for reading outside of one's chosen area, and if we are not careful a generation of discursive psychologists will think they know the faults of cognitive psychology based on critiques from the 1980s and 90s. In other chapters however, I felt some major contemporary developments were ignored. For example, Childs and Hepburn's chapter on discursive psychology and emotion (Chapter 8) discusses (their own) recent discursive research on the way crying and upset are displayed in talk but it makes no mention of the recent 'turn to affect' in the social sciences that has in part developed as a critique of discursive research. Neither do they mention Wetherell's (2012) recent work on affective-discursive practices that attempts to bring scholarship on affect and discursive psychology into productive dialogue. While Childs and Hepburn's work on emotion represent important developments within DP, and is very different to Wetherell's approach, one might think that Wetherell's contemporary contribution to the field deserves a mention given her status within the book as one of DP's founding key thinkers.

The editors state that contributors were asked to engage critically with their target texts, yet one should not expect to find any fundamental critique of DP. In the introduction the editors ask questions like "How can DP inspire a new generation of (social) psychologists?" and "What are the intellectual threads that can push DP into the future?" The notions that DP *should inspire* a new generation of (presumably discursive) psychologists and that it *should have a future* in the discipline are thus taken for granted. The level of critique however does vary from chapter to chapter. Some do little more than praise the importance of the classic text, followed by a demonstration of how those ideas are of contemporary relevance. Others more fundamentally critique the argument in the classic text but remain safely within the boundaries of DP. For example, in their chapter Goodman and Speer question the distinction Potter makes between 'natural' and 'contrived' data but they do not differ significantly from Potter theoretically, they simply come to a different conclusion. There are some chapters, however, that push the boundaries a little further. For instance, in their chapter Brown and Reavey sympathise with DP's critics on some important points. They also critique the dogmatism of Edwards and Potter, who, they claim, can appear so committed to their paradigm that they don't seem to be able to

see the virtue of other ways of doing psychology. The chapter by Dixon and Taylor on prejudice is equally controversial by suggesting that a study of the extra-discursive such as embodied practices and physical environments may enrich DP. As Dixon and Taylor note, their argument runs along similar lines as more recent work by Margret Wetherell which has "both vigorously defended the discursive approach and acknowledged the need for research that integrates analysis of linguistic practices with analysis of other kinds of material and embodied practices" (285). It was contributions such as these that I felt made the book most contemporary. I say this not because I necessarily agree with the critiques, nor because I dislike DP, but because it is intellectual disagreement and debate that will push the field forwards rather than uncritical adulation.

Part I of the book on 'Epistemology and Method' may be of particular interest to those who teach qualitative methods, although the chapters in this section are theoretical discussions of methodological issues and not guidelines for how DP research should be done. DP is generally not discussed in relation to other qualitative approaches (other than conversation analysis), although the editors do briefly attempt to distinguish DP from other qualitative approaches in the introduction. They suggest that while DP "can be broadly situated within 'qualitative psychology', it does not share its overall ontological and epistemological orientation. Neither does it share its methods" (p. 5). While it is true that DP does contrast quite sharply with many other qualitative methodological approaches, they appear to treat 'qualitative psychology' as an otherwise homogenous category with a shared ontological and epistemological stance. I felt this was perhaps a little unhelpful for students grappling with the theoretical differences between the wide array of methodological approaches. That is, however, a minor quibble.

The book will be useful for academics and postgraduate students alike who are taking a discursive approach in their work. Chapters of the book can be read alone or in any order so one may wish to read a particular chapter of relevance after reading the classic text that it is based on. PhD students working within a DP perspective may benefit from reading the book in its entirety. Indeed, I've already recommended it to one such student. Those who teach discursive psychology in relation to social psychology may also find the book useful. I would not recommend the book as an introductory text for undergraduate students because, as the editors themselves note, there are other books that specifically aim to introduce the basic tenants of DP. But the book will be invaluable to those who teach DP and it no doubt deserves a place on the bookshelf of any budding discursive psychologist.

## References

- Antaki, C. 2014: *Rhetoric, ideology and social psychology: essays in honour of Michael Billig*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Billig, M. 1987: *Arguing and thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. 2012: Undisciplined beginnings, academic success, and discursive psychology, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 413-424.
- Edwards, D. & Mercer, N. 1987: *Common knowledge*. London: Methuen.
- Edwards, D. & Potter, J. 1992: *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.
- Harré, R. & Gillet, G. 1994: *The Discursive Mind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. 1987, *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.

Wetherell, M. 2012: *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding*.  
London: Sage.