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# **DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY: INTRODUCTION**

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## WHAT IS DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Discursive psychology (DP) is the application of discourse analytic principles to psychological topics. In psychology's dominant 'cognitivist' paradigm, individuals build mental representations of the world on the basis of innate mental structures and perceptual experience, and talk on that basis. The categories and content of discourse are considered to be a reflection, refracted through various kinds of error and distortion, of how the world is perceived to be. In contrast, DP *begins with* discourse (talk and text), both theoretically and empirically. Discourse is approached, not as the outcome of mental states and cognitive processes, but as a domain of action in its own right.

In DP it is the business of talk and text to define the nature of the world under description, including the mental states, perceptions, motivations, dispositions, thoughts, prejudices, and so on, of any persons involved, whether as actors in described events or as the producers and recipients of descriptions (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Both 'reality' and 'mind' are constructed by people conceptually, in language, in the course of their performance of practical tasks (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996a; Potter, *et al.*, 1993). Because of this emphasis, shared with ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, on the situated, action-performative nature of talk, DP favours the analysis of records of natural interaction, or textual materials produced as part of life's activities (newspaper reports, medical records, written testimony, etc.), rather than using experiments, surveys and interviews to generate research data.

For theoretical, methodological and empirical reasons, DP takes discourse to be central to everyday life. Most social activity involves or is directly conducted through discourse. Furthermore, even where activity is 'non-verbal' (embodiment, physical actions and their settings, etc.), its sense is often best understood through participants' discourse. Discourse is the prime currency of interaction, and if we are studying persons embedded in

practices, including institutional settings, then discourse will be central to that study. Let us consider in turn three features of discourse that relate closely to how it has to be analysed: it is *situated*, *action-oriented*, and *constructed*.

### *Discourse is situated*

DP focuses on discourse, which it regards as 'situated' in two ways. First, it is *occasioned* in the conversation analytic sense of this term (see section 1 of this book). That is, talk and texts are embedded in sequences of interaction, and in various kinds of mundane and institutional activity. This is not a mechanical contextual determinism; talk is *oriented to*, but not *determined by*, its sequential position and setting. Thus a 'question', say, sets up the normative relevance of an 'answer', but an answer is not inevitable or necessary, and things do not break down if it is not provided. Answers may be deferred or withheld altogether (Heritage, 1984). Likewise, the fact that talk appears in a school or a doctor's surgery does not mean that it must thereby be pedagogic or medical. Rather than being made presumptively omni-relevant by the analyst, institutional activities and identities are made relevant by participants themselves, by being invoked and oriented to, or indeed subverted and ignored (Schegloff, 1997).

Second, DP considers discourse to be pervasively *rhetorical* (Billig, 1987, 1991). Claims and descriptions offered in talk are often designed to *counter* potential alternative versions, and to resist attempts (whether actual or potential) to disqualify them as false, partial or interested (Edwards & Potter, 1992). That is, they can have both a defensive and an offensive rhetoric (Potter, 1996a). For example Billig (1991) argues that when people offer evaluations of something (an activity that social psychologists might call 'expressing an attitude'), they are typically countering some other evaluation. This means that evaluative

discourse is shaped not merely by how people generally think about things, but by the contingencies of argument and the alternatives in play at the time that an evaluation is produced (cf. Pomerantz, 1984).

Analysis, therefore, takes into account the sequentially occasioned, situationally oriented, and rhetorically designed nature of discourse. DP's particular focus when approaching discourse in *institutional* settings is on how psychological matters are introduced, defined, and made relevant to the business of those settings. Psychological themes are generally pervasive in how such settings work, as they are in mundane talk, but they are sometimes also part of an institution's official normative goals or agenda, such as in educational and therapeutic settings, where how people think and feel are a central focus of concern.

#### *Discourse is action-oriented*

Discourse performs actions or practices of various kinds – agreements, blamings, invitations, displays of neutrality, and so on. 'Action' or 'practice' (the precise term is not meant to carry weight here) invokes the vast range of practical, technical and interpersonal tasks that people perform while doing their jobs, living their relationships, and participating in heterogeneous cultural domains. It is central to people's lives, and therefore central to understanding those lives. Following the convention in conversation analysis, DP uses the notion of *action-orientation* to emphasize that actions are pervasively being done even in ostensibly factual, descriptive discourse, and to distance itself from a 'speech act' approach that assumes that some discrete set of words correspond to a discrete act.

The corollary of DP's focus on discourse as action is its respecification of cognition. Instead of cognitive entities and processes being the principal *analytic* resource, as they are in

mainstream psychological research, they are approached empirically as participants' *ways of talking*. The focus is on the way cognitions are constructed in talk, and how their implications are oriented to. Taking 'attitudes' again as an example, rather than treating these as inner entities that drive behaviour, in DP attitudes are evaluations that are studied as part of discourse practices (Potter, 1996b, 1998). Such an approach might consider the way evaluations are organized interactionally, as in Pomerantz's (1978) study of compliments; it might consider how attitudes are interactionally produced through social psychological methods (Myers, 1998; Puchta & Potter, forthcoming); or it might consider the way negative evaluations of minority group members are turned from potentially accountable personally held 'attitudes' or 'prejudices' into more 'safely sayable' factual descriptions (e.g. Edwards, 2000a; Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

This non-cognitivist reformulation of 'attitudes' avoids the circularity of many social psychological studies, where evaluative *discourse* (in response scales) is turned into underlying *cognitive* entities (attitudes), which are in turn used to explain *actions* (involving more discourse). It avoids the uncomfortable blurring of everyday and technical notions in the attitude and belief domain, by taking peoples' evaluative terminology (attitude, belief, opinion, position, view, etc.) as *topic* rather than as a competing but less adequate theory of behaviour (cf. Edwards, 1997, on psychology and common sense in general). It makes sense of the troubling variability in people's evaluative talk, which stems from the fact that people produce evaluations as parts of various discourse practices and their 'occasions', rather than expressing pre-formed, all-purpose mental entities when asked to do so by a researcher. It focuses attention on life as a practical realm where evaluations are part of getting things done, rather than existing as disembodied assessments waiting to be produced in moments of reflection.

## *Discourse is constructed*

DP is constructionist in two senses. First, it studies the way *discourse itself is constructed*. Words, metaphors, idioms, rhetorical devices, descriptions, accounts, stories, and so on, are drawn on, and built, in the course of interaction and in the performance of particular actions. For example, descriptions may be assembled in ways that present some piece of conduct as orderly and required by the circumstances, as just what anybody would have done, or else as unusual, specially motivated, and implicative of the actor's particular psychology (Edwards, 1994, 1997). Second, it studies the way discourse *constructs versions of the world*. That is, it studies how versions of inner life, of local circumstances, of history and broader social groups and structures are produced to do particular things in interaction. In DP, then, discourse is both *constructed* and *constructive*.

Although DP is a constructionist approach, its emphasis on the construction of *versions in discourse* distinguishes it from cognitive constructionisms ranging from Neisser (1967), to Moscovici (1984), to Berger and Luckmann (1966). The essence of DP is to study construction – how versions are assembled and stabilized as factual and independent of their producer – as a discourse activity. Whereas cognitive constructionism tends to guide the researcher away from considering people's practices, DP's emphasis on the construction of specific versions encourages the researcher to consider the practices that those versions are part of, and the particular work that they are performing.

At the centre of DP there is an inversion that, initially, appears counterintuitive. In traditional psychology there is *reality* on the one hand, that is the setting – the 'stimulus conditions' that enclose actors – and there is *cognition* on the other, conceived as something existing and quietly computing inside the actors. Activity is treated as something secondary, the output of this system. DP inverts this. Activity is treated as primary, and reality and

cognition are secondary. That is, DP focuses on what people are doing, and how, in the course of their discourse practices, they produce versions of external reality and of psychological states. It asks how people categorize and formulate the world, establishing certain particulars as relevant, characterizing its moral flavour, and it asks how people at the same time formulate a relevant 'inner' world of beliefs, values, emotions and dispositions, that make their actions accountable. The notion that actions take place within a kind of play-off between an outer reality and an inner world of thoughts and experiences, is one of a range of ways that people talk and account for themselves. DP's task is to study how people do that, and what they do with it, rather than to adopt or reject it as our own explanatory framework. In ethnomethodological terms mind and reality, and their interplay, are DP's topic rather than resource (cf. Wieder, 1988).

#### DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY: RESEARCH EXAMPLES

Much of the research literature in discursive psychology has reworked standard psychological topics such as causal attribution (Antaki, 1994; Edwards & Potter, 1992, 1993); attitudes (Billig, 1987; Potter, 1996b, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987); memory (Edwards *et al.*, 1992; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Middleton & Edwards, 1990); classroom learning (Edwards, 1993; Edwards & Mercer, 1987); prejudice (Edwards, 2000a; Gill, 1993; Speer & Potter, forthcoming; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), identity (Antaki, 1998; Edwards, 1998; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), script theory (Edwards, 1994, 1997), emotion (Edwards, 1997, 1999; Frith & Kitinger, 1998; Harré & Parrott, 1996; Locke & Edwards, forthcoming), and violence and aggression (Auburn *et al.*, 1999; Clarke *et al.*, forthcoming; McKinlay & Dunnett, 1998; Hepburn, 2000). It has also introduced topics new to psychology, such as the relation between interaction, mental state attributions and social institutions (Edwards, 1995; te



Molder, 1999), and the construction and establishment of factual accounts (Edwards & Potter, 1992; MacMillan & Edwards, 1999; Potter, 1996a; Wooffitt, 1992).

Rather than attempt to review this and other related work, we offer two brief illustrations of these strands of DP. We focus briefly on ‘prejudice’, and then examine how talk in a counselling setting, including how relationship problems are defined, orientates to various normative and interactional requirements of that setting.

### *DP and Prejudice*

We have noted that people construct versions of the world that attend to their factual status, to the psychology of participants in reported events, and to the current interaction in which versions are offered. These moves are often done simultaneously (Edwards & Potter, 1992). For example a mental state (belief, certainty, fear, doubt) may be produced as determined by the external world, which may itself be produced as known through repeated experiences (Edwards, 1994). Another way of grounding factual claims is to offer them as reluctantly arrived at, or as counter to one’s presumptions and biases (Edwards, 2000a; Potter, 1996a). These (and other) *ways of talking* counter the possibility, which may be at stake in the current interaction, that you believe what it suits you to believe, or what you believed before you looked, that your beliefs are a function of mental predisposition rather than external reality — that is, they attend rhetorically to a possible dismissal as pre-judgement, or prejudice.

Extract 1 is taken from an interview from the early 1980s (R is the interviewee; I is the interviewer) in New Zealand concerning a controversial South African rugby tour, prior to that country’s abandonment of apartheid (see Edwards, 2000a, for an extended discussion of this and other examples).



2                   on immigration?

3                   (.)

4     **I:**       How do you [feel about

5     **R:**                    [Oh yes.= There's got to be.

6     **I:**       Ye[:h

7     **R:**        [Unfortunately,

8     **I:**       my[e:h

9     **R:**        [I would love to see the whole wor:ld y'know,

10               jus' where you: (.) go where you like,

R appeals to necessity in contrast to personal preference or desire, a disposition formulated as an emphatic, even extreme counter-preference (“would love”, “whole world”, line 9) for a world where people can “go where you like”. Note the symmetrical appeal to both sides of the psychological equation, to an external known world (“there’s got to be”, line 5) that constrains a reluctant belief or opinion (line 7 “unfortunately”, line 9 “would love”). R’s reluctance is not a free-standing indication of his attitude, but deals with the interviewer’s specific framing of the questions (both line 1 “do you think...” and line 4 “how do you feel...”), and to the possibly unwelcome inferences about him that would be available were he simply to support apartheid (cf. Antaki & Wetherell, 1999).

It is important to emphasize that this kind of analysis entails no commitment to the genuineness or falsity of R’s reluctance, preferences, nor any other mental state that might be conceptualized, managed by, or at issue in the talk. DP analyses it all as *ways of talking* that can be unravelled through a detailed analysis of how specific descriptions are constructed in ways that perform discursive actions within sequential, rhetorical sequences of talk.





interactional outcome of this can be seen in the couple's joint and emphasized agreement with the formulation (lines 11-13).

Third, and less obviously perhaps, this avoidance of taking sides, and the treatment of the events as neither bad or worrying, can be part of a broader emphasis on how the couple can constructively work toward repairing their relationship. One step will be to become more relaxed about discussing their problems and less fearful of its consequences. Moreover, "complicated" is a descriptive term that sets up relationship problems as a kind of puzzle that can be unravelled via counselling. That is, it provides for the counselling which is to come, as a sensible option where the technical skills will be put to enthusiastic work sorting out complications. These latter orientations of the formulation "rich and complicated lives", and of its specific location in the talk, are rather speculative on their own, and with regard to just this one extract, but could be part of a larger analysis of how participants' psychological states, personalities, dispositions, pathologies, motivations, emotions, intentions, and so on, are formulated in ways that orient to the nature and business of counselling, as an activity setting.

One interesting feature of our couple counselling materials is how people *display* themselves as, say, making efforts at understanding the other, or as hopelessly opposed. Conflicting perceptions, thoughts, feelings and evaluations, for example, are *produced as* conflicting, at loggerheads despite all efforts, and therefore ready for, and in need of, intervention. Opposition and impasse are not merely psychological preconditions for counselling that couples find themselves in, but are actively produced in how they talk, particularly at the outset when telling the counsellor why they have come (this being routine first session business). The conventional notion of couples who do not properly understand each other, or who suffer from an inability to communicate, although effective as an *account* for relationship failure, can be a poor description of couples whose conflicting stories may be

exquisitely designed to display conflict, and may be closely oriented to, and predictive of, each other's alternative perspective.

It is a feature of counselling at work that the couple undergoing counselling make themselves available for it (or sometimes resist it), in how they talk. Their display of mutual opposition and impasse provides for the counsellor's even-handed, neutral treatment of them, as a couple with "rich and complicated lives" for example, and as a kind of puzzle awaiting solution. Extract 4a is close to the start of the same couple's first session, coming a short time after extract 3.

**Extract 4a**

- 1      **C:**    Whe:n:::, (.) before you moved ov↓er here, hhow was  
2                    the marriage.  
3                    (0.4)  
4      **W:**    ↑O↓h.  
5                    (0.2)  
6      **W:**    I- (.) to me: all alo:ng (.) right up to now, (0.2) my  
7                    marriage was rock solid.  
8                    (0.8)  
9      **W:**    Rock solid.= We had arguments like everybody else  
10                    had arguments, (0.4) buthh (0.2) to me there was no  
11                    major problems. Y'know? That's (0.2) my way of  
12                    thinking but (0.4) Jimmy's thinking is very very different.

The idea that W's version of their marriage not only conflicts with H's (examined below), but is *produced as* conflictual, making conflict hearable or visible as such, is supported by various details. Note the use of extreme case formulations, in how W defines





- 18     **H:**     >When we start'd datin' we was in there,<  
19             <EV'ry single week> we'd fight.  
20             (0.2)  
21     **H:**     We were at each other the who:le time.

Again H's account does not just find itself in contrast to W's, but is designed in ways that point up and maximize that opposition. What W called "arguments" have become "we'd fight" (line 19), so it was both *severe* (fights rather than arguments) and *recurrent*, again deploying extreme case formulations in "every single week" (line 19) and "the whole time" (line 21). Like W's picture of a rock solid marriage, H's picture of perpetual and severe conflict stems right from the start of their relationship, from when they first started dating (lines 15-18). The extreme case formulations are important because they index both W and H *going to* extremes discursively, in depicting not just the nature of their relationship, but the extent of their disagreement about it (Edwards, 2000b).

H's preface "being a jealous person..." (line 14) looks a bit strange where it is placed, but it refers to something W had said a couple of minutes previously (not included here, but see Edwards, 1997) when she identified a major problem of their marriage as H's excessive and long-term disposition to fits of jealousy. Its placement here, at line 14, displays H's uptake of W's account in extract 4a as relevant to that accusation – that theirs was an essentially solid marriage suffering from H's being an unreasonably "jealous person" – and provides it as a preface to his own account of a marriage characterized from the start by mutual and pervasive antagonism. The thing of special interest for DP is how mental and emotional and dispositional state descriptions such as 'jealous' or 'jealous person' figure not merely as actual psychological states, nor even as participants' all-purpose cognitive understandings of their psychological states, but as parts of situated descriptions, to be

analysed for their production at a specific point in the talk, as oriented to a particular rhetorical alternative alive in that talk, and to the counselling setting in which it occurs.

We can begin to see that these are not merely different and inconsistent accounts produced by W and H, the stuff of communication failures and misunderstandings, for instance. They are contrasting accounts constructed precisely in opposition to an actual alternative, in that they display an orientation to that alternative and its evidential and rhetorical grounds. They are constructed in extreme terms, maximizing differences and opposition. We take this not merely as an indication of how opposed this couple is, but as a performance of some kind, a display for the counsellor and for counselling, of two persons at an impasse and in need of help. This kind of talk sets their problems up as counselling-appropriate and counselling-ready. It shows, in answer to the counsellor's inquiry, why they have come.

To summarize, W's and H's opposed versions display the following features:

- (1) extremity, displaying strong commitment to a position and maximizing opposition;
- (2) acknowledgement, a clear orientation to the other person's opposed version;
- (3) symmetry, in which the opposition is direct, counterpointed, detailed;
- (4) reformulation, where specific alternative descriptions are offered.

Extract 5 comes from a different couple and counsellor, again close to the start of their first session. W is the first to respond to C's request to tell "why you went to Relate in the first place", and extract 5 is how she ends her account.

#### **Extract 5**

- 1      **W:**    And then: (.) u:m: (2.8) 'n that's when I decided to: (.)  
2                    uhh w- we tried to sort it out ourselves didn't we, (0.6)  
3                    a:nd (0.7) we seemed to be going round in cir:cles.  
4                    H-he: had his thoughts I had my thoughts (0.6) and

5                   we just didn't come to an agreement on anything.  
6                   (.)  
7       **W:**     And that's when we decided we ought to come (.)  
8                   to Relate.

In extract 5 W explicitly formulates a kind of stand-off or impasse as their reason for seeking counselling ('Relate' is the counselling organization). Having tried to solve their own problems (line 2), W and H have hit an impasse, and these are offered as explanatory precursors for now seeking help. As in extracts 4a and 4b, W's description of relationship troubles, whatever its basis in fact, is shaped as a motivational account for being here, as an account of troubles that is oriented to normative preconditions for counselling – they are opposed, stuck, having tried and failed to help themselves. The expression “going round in circles” (line 3), defines their problems as *relationship* troubles of an idiomatically familiar kind, recurrent and unresolved. It captures the sense of impasse that, in extracts 4a and 4b, was produced by extreme and opposed versions. Note also the precise symmetry of “he had his thoughts I had my thoughts” (line 4), repeating the same verbal formula while at the same time defining their troubles as psychological, opposed ways of thinking. Again, there is the use of extremity (“on anything”, line 6), emphasizing the size of the gulf between them. Finally, there is the performative relevance or upshot of these descriptions, their availability as an answer to C's inquiry – their reason for being here (lines 7-8).

In addition to making explicit descriptions of their relationship, the couple in extract 5 *display* their opposition in the way they describe and narrate events in their lives, using extreme case formulations, symmetrically opposed versions and reformulations of what each other says. In doing so, they display an acute orientation to what the other has said or is likely to say, and an orientation to the requirements of counselling and the prospects of



Note various features of the counsellor's interventions here. The expression "because your marriage is in a mess" (lines 1-2) is reminiscent of the other counsellor's "rich and complicated lives" in extract 3. In the same way, it dissolves the two conflicting versions into a description of *relationship*, and avoids alignment with either party's opposed and extreme position. The counsellor picks up and formulates their troubles as *symmetrical*; H has, ironically, gone and done just what he feared W might do (lines 5-8). W takes this as an opportunity for extrematized criticism of H; note again her use of the extreme terms "never", "everything else", "exactly" (lines 11-14). The counsellor once again resists being recruited into alignment with W against H, formulating their troubles as something that has "happened" (line 15, a nicely non-agentive *process* rather than *action* verb), and glossing it as "a kind of vicious circle that's going round" (lines 15-16; note that this is not the same counsellor and couple as in extract 5, where W also uses the expression "going round in circles").

The counsellor's formulation of the clients' troubles as symmetrical, circular and systemic (relationship stuff rather than individuals) sets up those troubles as recognizable-to-counselling. She spells that out in extract 7, in the form of an emblematic pattern of symmetrically opposed perspectives.

### **Extract 7**

- 1      **C:**    it's it's what I call the Jack and Ji:ll situation, that (.)  
2            Jack will say I go to the pu:b (.) because Jill nags.  
3            (0.6)
- 4      **C:**    Jill will say: no:, (1.8) I only na:g because he goes  
5            to the pu:b.  
6            (0.5)
- 7      **C:**    And he'll say no: I go to the pub because you nag



## DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS

In Wieder's (1974) ethnomethodological terms, the descriptions and formulations we have looked at here are multiformulative and multiconsequential, just as they are in any kind of discourse. They formulate the world and the identities of the participants in a range of different ways, and they have a range of practical upshots. Our general point has been to show the value of treating discourse as *occasioned* (in this sequence, in counselling talk), as *action-oriented* (addressing a range of practical counselling tasks), and as both *constructed* (from particular terms and devices) and *constructing* (of the clients' problems in ways that prepares them for counselling work).

Discursive psychology's interest in institutional settings is in how the psychological is worked up and recruited for various kinds of institutional business and orientations. Sometimes, as in schools and counselling settings, there is an obvious, official concern with matters of 'mind', with what people feel, think, know and understand. But psychological matters are pervasive in all kinds of discourse and social interaction, given the general relevance of intentions, motives, thoughts, plans, memories, and so on, to life's accountability. We find psychological themes across a very broad range of studies of situated talk, even when those studies are concerned with ostensibly sociological rather than psychological problematics. Examples include Pollner's (1987) classic study of how 'reality disjunctures' are resolved in traffic courts; Wieder's (1974) treatment of motives and understandings in accounts of rule-following in a half-way house; and Lynch and Bogen's (1996) studies of the uses of 'memory' in the Iran-Contra hearings (cf. Edwards & Potter, 1992b). The ways that discourse categorizes and attributes mental states, competencies, dispositions, character, emotions, motives, and so on, are part of the fabric of public

accountability. It is the project of discursive psychology to study how that works, alongside related studies of talk in mundane and institutional settings.



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