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## A discursive psychology of institutions

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## **Developing a discursive psychology of institutions**

Over the last decade or so discursive psychology has developed as a distinct perspective within social psychology, psychology and social science more generally (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Edwards, 2001). One of the things that differentiates it from other approaches is its conceptualisation of psychology itself. Most social psychological takes as at least a central topic an inner representation or processing system of some kind. This is true of social cognition work, of social representations research, and of many strands of newer approaches to subjectivity. Inner representations and processes are seen as central to understanding human action. This paper is not intended to criticise this view; rather it will further develop a discursive psychological alternative.

Discursive psychology takes a different approach to thinking and other elements of cognitive representations and processes. It focuses on the practical role of representations and processes. These things are analysed as useful resources for action, for getting things done. In this it builds on the traditions of linguistic philosophy (and particularly Wittgenstein, 1953/1958) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Coulter, 1990). However, it has moved forward from these traditions by drawing on the analytic resources of discourse analysis and conversation analysis (Drew, 2003; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 2003; ten Have, 1999; Wetherell, 1998).

DP asks what is psychology for? Why is there psychology? What are the wide range of categories, constructions, orientations and so on used to do? And the way it goes about studying these things is through considering the ways they figure as issues for the participants' themselves. What are people doing with psychology? How are they orienting to psychological displays, claims, constructions and so on?

How are they deploying psychological categories? How are they constructing individuals, say, as sites of accountability as opposed to collectives, institutions or objects? In asking these questions it starts to rework our disciplinary understanding of the nature of psychology.

The points made so far are characteristic of different strands of discursive psychology over the past decade. In this paper I want to push forward the discursive psychological project by considering how it might develop a specific approach to (some features of) institutions (building in part on Edwards & Potter, 2001). That is, how far can discursive psychology start to provide a new way of understanding concrete organizations and their operation? This is a rather different approach to social organization that most late C20th social psychology which aims to identify the operation of *generic* social processes, independently of institutions or historical settings (Gergen, 1982). The aim in discursive psychology is to show the way institutions such as therapy, education, courts are characterised by specific ‘psychological business’. That is, how do particular psychological (or, more cautiously, ‘psychological’) terms and orientations have institutional roles in particular settings? Indeed, how are certain central features of institutions constituted by the performance of this business? I will illustrate this using a specific example.

### **Child Protection and Concern**

The focus here will be on calls to a child protection helpline run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty (NSPCC) in the UK. This study is part of a broader collaborative project with Alexa Hepburn. More details of various aspects of the project and its findings can be seen in Hepburn (2004) and Hepburn and Potter (2004). More details of the specific material discussed here can be found in Potter and Hepburn (2003).

The child protection helpline is a central element of the NSPCC's child protection strategy. It fields more than a quarter of a million calls each year. It is staffed by paid professionals who must all have had at least three years field social work experience. These people have the title Child Protection Officers (henceforth CPOs) to highlight the central aim of the job that is to take reports of abuse and refer those reports to either social services or the police. The CPOs have a statutory requirement to pass on all reports where there is credible evidence of abuse whatever the wishes of the caller. Calls were recorded on minidisk and subsequently digitised for analysis. All callers actively gave their permission for their call's to be used for research and training.

The research reported here started with an initial corpus of 40 abuse-reporting calls (eliminating calls within the NSPCC, wrong numbers, attempts to donate and similar). This was the basis for Potter & Hepburn (2003). The current paper supplements this corpus with examples chosen to illustrate particular points.

When listening to calls it is easy to overlook what happens in the first few moments in favour of focusing on the more dramatic aspects of the unfolding report. However, the openings have some elements that are particularly interesting for what they reveal about discourse and institutions. In about 60% of cases the start of the call includes a construction that uses the term 'concern' or something similar. Let me start with this.

In the OED the word 'concern' has both an objective and subjective definition. It is an 'object of concern', a thing in the world, and it is the associated subjective or psychological qualities of being anxious or troubled. These two senses are not independent – the subjective qualities are related to the objective, the trouble in the world is what the person is troubled about. This is an interesting topic for discursive psychological analysis, as one of the central themes in discursive psychology is the

way that versions of the world and versions of psychological states are linked together in talk for the purposes of action (Edwards, 1997). ‘I was really angry’ can be part of a moral critique; ‘he just slapped me for no reason’ can be an account for upset (Edwards, 1999; Locke & Edwards, 2003). The semantics of concern as presented in the OED suggest that it is a notion that brings the objective and subjective together in a rather tight manner. This is a start point for analysis.

### A Canonical C-Construction

The following example shows the canonical pattern of early actions in NSPCC calls. Note that the CPO intervenes very early to initiate the ethics exchange; however, I have not included these sometimes lengthy exchanges here. The call is transcribed using the conventions for representing talk developed by Gail Jefferson (these are laid out in the appendix below; for more detail see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999). I am going to be most focussed on the ‘expressions of concern’ that appear on lines 7-13 and 17-20. For reasons that will become clearer below I will refer to them as c-constructions.

#### Extract 1 LB neighbour concern

1 ((phone rings))  
2 **CPO:** Hello NSPCC Helpline can I help you:?  
3 **Caller:** Good after[ noon >I won]der if y'  
4 **CPO:** [((clears throat))]  
5 could< .hhh  
6 **CPO:** [ Ye:s certainly:, ]  
7 **Caller:** [I'm concerned about-] ←1  
8 (0.2)  
9 **CPO:** Yeh,  
10 (0.2)  
11 .h  
12 **Caller:** about a child that lives next

13 door to me.

14 **CPO:** Tk.h ri::ght, could- before you go on

15 ((ethics exchange))

16 **CPO:** ↑↓kay: fine yeh go on:, sorry to stop you,

17 **Caller:** Yeah I'm- I'm concerned about °h° (0.2) ←2

18 my next door neighbours an they got a

19 little girl about six. an she's

20 always cry:in',

21 (0.2)

22 .Hh

23 **CPO:** R[i:ght,]

24 **Caller:** [I can] hear them through the wa:ll now

25 an mum's shoutin at 'er like anything.

26 (0.7)

27 Tk 'I don't want to see you get away from

28 me:,' an (0.3) °.hh° an I mean it's

29 really loud.=huh

30 (0.3)

31 **CPO:** Ri::ght.

32 **Caller:** I mean I didn' 'ave a too brilliant

33 upbringingin so I w'd know what it's li:ke

34 so. Hh

35 (0.4)

36 **CPO:** Ye- ri:ght yeah:=an this: is: something

37 that you've >been worried about for a<

38 whi:le [have you?]

39 **Caller:** [It has ] yes I've got a ↑friend

40 who works in child protection and she's

41 told me to ri- if I'm worried, ring in.

Let me start with a number of observations about certain aspects of the start of this call.

First note that at line 14, after the first c-construction, the CPO does not treat the caller as having completed an action. His 'before you go on' treats the caller as having more to say and being about to go on to say it. This is reinforced by his 'sorry to stop you' on line 16, treating the caller as having been stopped from something. Second, note the CPO's 'right' on 14 and again on line 23. I want to highlight in particular what these turns are *not* doing. In particular, they are not assessing the prior turn, nor are they moving on to new business. They are simply acknowledgement tokens (Jefferson, 1984; Schegloff, 1982). These two points show that the CPO is treating the c-construction as the start of something rather than something complete.

The third point to note is that after the intrusion of the ethics exchange the caller resumes with a reiteration of the c-construction. This suggests that the c-construction has a particular social-interactional function in the call. The fourth point to note is that the caller continues after the acknowledgement token on 23 with a range of descriptions that suggest violence and abuse, and attend to the caller's knowledge and motive for calling.

What are c-constructions doing? Let me offer some suggestions built on the observations above and then explore them with further examples.

*1. C-constructions are prefacing moves.*

C-constructions are hearably incomplete. They are treated here by both caller and CPO as elements of talk that project a possibly extended narrative. The acknowledgement tokens treat this as, at least potentially, to include institutionally relevant issues that are to come in the extended telling.



*2. C-constructions display the caller's (appropriate) stance.*

These constructions show their attitude toward the object of the narrative, typically some kind of abuse. The topic is treated as serious, potentially damaging or upsetting. Conversely, and relevantly here, they are not treated as things that the callers feel good about, are entertained by, or get pleasure or sexual excitement from. The c-construction is the caller's first opportunity to establish appropriate motivations for making the call.

*3. C-constructions project collaborative unpacking of the narrative.*

These constructions project collaborative unpacking in the sense that they do not start with a definitive claim about the status of the abuse. Rather they invoke a concern (or similar 'psychological' item), which can be made more (or less) definitive in the course of talk with the CPO. The initial stance is open with respect to the NSPCC actionability of what is to be described.

A second example can provide further illustration. Again this is very start of the call.

**Extract 2: WO Car witness 11.1.02**

1 **CPO:** NSPCC child protection helpline.  
2 =good afternoo:n.  
3 **Caller:** .H hi good afternoon u:m: (0.4)  
4 I ↑have concerns about er:m the  
5 treatment of a chi:ld. 'at I  
6 witnessed today: (0.2) u:m (0.1)  
7 a- this lunch ti:me.  
8 **CPO:** O:kay: y- er: can I just stop you  
9 fer a mo:ment.  
10 ((ethics exchange))  
11 **CPO:** Okay let's have a chat about what  
12 your concerns are an then we can

13 decide what the most: (.) appropriate  
14 course of action might be:.  
15 **Caller:** Yep >that's fine< ↑basically >what happened  
16 was I was< sitting: >it's ↑probaly about  
17 half an hour ago sitting in the car  
18 with my boyfriend. having< [some]:.  
19 **CPO:** [Mhm.]  
20 **Caller:** (.) lunch:, .hh in a car park in  
21 [Town],  
22 **CPO:** Right.

Note again the c-construction positioned immediately after the greeting exchange.

The c-construction prefaces the report of witnessing the treatment of a child. Again, the CPO treats the caller as developing a report rather than having performed a self-sufficient action ('can I just stop you' – line 8). It displays the caller's stance to that treatment (explicitly 'concerned' rather than any relevant alternative). There is a delicate mix of stance and neutrality here. While concern characterises the caller's stance, the descriptive term 'treatment' does not yet prejudge its nature (actual or moral). It leaves this to be established collaboratively.

This collaborative unpacking is explicitly formulated by the CPO after the ethics exchange. She constructs what will go on as a 'chat' about your concerns that will lead toward a decision. Glossing the talk as a 'chat' suggests that it will be collaborative and informal (Antaki, 2000). Note also that the decision is constructed as something done together – 'we can decide' rather than 'I will decide'. In extract 2 we saw that both caller and CPO use c-constructions. However, even if the caller does not start with a c-construction in about a third of cases the CPO will use such a construction attributively as in lines 11-12 above.

## **An Analysis of Deviant Cases**

Further justification for the conclusions of this analysis is provided by a consideration of cases in of abuse reporting that do not use c-constructions. If the analysis here is correct then they will either be performing some different activity or there will be managing the tasks done by the c-construction in a different way. Across the corpus there are three classes of deviant cases which do *not* start with c-constructions: (1) calls where the caller is calling on behalf of someone else; (2) calls where the activity is other than reporting abuse (such as complaining about social services); (3) calls from identified professionals. The opening of the first class of calls is pragmatically complex, but more focused on the caller's warrant for speaking on behalf of another than the caller's own stance on the putative abuse (see Potter & Hepburn, 2003, for discussion). The second class of calls is typically less concerned with collaboratively unpacking a report, but in complaining about legal process or social services actions in what turns out to be an established case. Such callers are less focused on collaborative unpacking as they already have a developed take on the nature of the abuse that is integral to their complaint. The third class of calls is from professional callers. I will focus on those here to illustrate how the analysis develops.

There are a number of reasons why callers speaking from professional categories rarely use c-constructions. First, such callers may be treated as entitled to know about abuse in a way that lay callers may have to earn such an entitlement (Potter, 1996; Sacks, 1992; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990). So they do not present concerns to be jointly unpacked. Second, and interestingly, their stance to the victim can be primarily institutional; they do not need to implicate psychological concern as a motive for calling or to manage their stake as someone who cares. They have an occupational membership that cares for children. Third, and conversely, their institutional stance to the victim works against various interests that callers with

personal relationships to the victim (estranged partner, neighbour) might have for fabricating information or making hoax calls. For these reasons they have less reason to use c-constructions.

Let me briefly consider an example of this kind. Note the way the caller describes their identity as a 'health visitor' very early.

**Extract 3. JX Health visitor**

1                   ((phone rings))  
2 **CPO:**           Hello NSPCC can I help you?  
3 **Caller:**       ↑Hel↓lo: I don't know if I actually got  
4                   (0.2) the right number I'm a- a health  
5                   visitor.  
6                   (0.2)  
7                   Er[: : m] (.) in North Berwick.  
8 **CPO:**           [Yeah,]  
9                   (0.3)  
10 **Caller:**       .Hhh a::nd >I've actually g-< er:m  
11                   >I've got a child on my caseload<  
12                   he's thirteen.  
13                   (0.5)  
14 **CPO:**           Righ[t.]  
15 **Caller:**       [Wh]o er:m (0.3) i:s: (0.3)  
16                   threatening to kill himse:lf he's  
17                   being aggressive (0.4) all sorts  
18                   of real problems.=  
19 **CPO:**           =°Oh dear.°  
20                   (0.6)  
21 **CPO:**           .Hh can ↑I [jus-]  
22 **Caller:**                                   [Erm ]  
23                   (0.2)  
24 **CPO:**           Before you go any further can I just ask

25                   you a question.  
 26                   ((ethics exchange))  
 27 **CPO:**           so you've got a chi:ld on your caseload  
 28                   age thirtee:n.  
 29 **Caller:**       Yeah.  
 30                   (0.2)

After noting some uncertainty about the right number, the caller presents as a 'health visitor' (lines 4-5). She follows this with an organizational characterisation of her relationship to the victim: 'I've got a child on my caseload' (line 11). Note also the way that after the ethics exchange the CPO repeats this organizational characterisation (line 27), orienting to (displaying an appreciation of) the caller's institutional identity. The presentation as a health visitor goes with the absence of much of the asymmetrical unpacking seen in calls from lay people. The caller baldly lists specific problems: the child is 'threatening to kill himself' is 'aggressive'. The absence of c-constructions in cases such as these is further confirmation that c-constructions have a specific practical function in the opening of calls from lay callers who are reporting abuse.

### **Psychology, Epistemology and Institutions**

Up to now I have focused mainly on examples that use the lexical item concerned. However, I have used the name c-construction rather than concern construction because not all such constructions use this lexical item. Indeed, what this analysis identifies is a practice that uses a family of 'psychological' constructions. Some of them uses 'concern' but others replace the term with some other term or some more complex construction that plays the same role in the talk. That is, there are other constructions that work as (1) prefacing moves, (2) that display the caller's stance and (3) that project collaborative unpacking of the abuse report in the same slot in the unfolding call. For example, callers and CPOs can use constructions

including terms such as ‘worried’ or idioms such as ‘going out of my bleedin head’.

Take a fresh example. The following call comes via the NSPCC operator, which is

why the CPO does not start with an identification-oriented answer in line 1, but

simply with ‘hello’ (compare the extracts above).

**Extract 4: MT Grandmother suspicions**

1   **CPO:**            Hello:.  
2   **Caller:**        I: wonder if: er I’m- d- (0.3)  
3                    I may be barkin up the wrong tree:.  
4                    (0.3)  
5   **Caller:**        .Hhh but erm (0.4)  
6   **CPO:**            .Dh could ↑I ↑just em: (0.4) tk  
7                    (0.2) a:sk you something [quick]ly,  
8   **Caller:**    [ Yes, ]  
9                    ((ethics exchange))  
10                   (0.4)  
11 **CPO:**            .Hh so: wh- (0.5) s’I’m sorry I  
12                    interrupted you I [p’rhaps stopped the]  
13 **Caller:**    [ Right   no                ]  
14 **CPO:**            flow:,  
15 **Caller:**        e- [i- it’s] just a- an a- (0.3) tk  
16 **CPO:**            [.Hhh    ]  
17 **Caller:**        (0.2) i- it’s ↑probaly nathing but I  
18                    j- it’s a gut feeling.  
19                    (0.3)  
20 **CPO:**            Yea[h : : ] they’re important aren’t  
21 **Caller:**        [(I’ll)]  
22 **CPO:**            [↓they I] think.  
23 **Caller:**        [ Erm:    ]  
24                    (0.8)

25 **Caller:** It's a ↑little girl of (0.3) erm (0.5)  
26 she's (0.3) she's three, (0.3)  
27 **CPO:** Yeah..

The caller starts with a disclaimer about 'barking up the wrong tree'. This may already be a sign of trouble. After the ethics exchange the caller evidences more trouble with a series of cut offs and false starts (line 15) and a further disclaimer – 'its probably nothing' (line 17). It is only here that the caller produces the c-construction – 'it's a gut feeling'. Note that it does not use the word 'concern', but it does invoke a 'psychological state'. Perhaps because the false starts and disclaimers indicate she is in some difficulty the CPO responds supportively ('they're important aren't they' lines 20-22). The call continues with a more or less standard collaborative unfolding of a possible abuse narrative. We can see this c-construction prefacing what is to come and initiating the collaborative unfolding. The 'gut feeling' construction on its own may not display the caller's stance – however, this may be part of the reason why 'its probably nothing' is added.

The general argument here, then, is that there is a class of c-constructions which can include terms such as 'worried', or more elaborate constructions such as 'I'm going out of my bleeding head' or 'it's a gut feeling'. Why should these other constructions be used rather than the more standard 'I'm a bit concerned...'? This is not an easy question to answer without further systematic study of these constructions, probably focusing on the kind of interactional environment they might appear in. Nevertheless, the specific constructions used are likely to reflect the fine tuned way in which words are drawn on to do particular actions in particularly interactional and institutional contexts. They are part of the pervasive indexicality of conversation that ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts have done so much to explore (see Heritage, 1984, for summary). For example, in the case of Extract

Four the ‘gut feeling’ (particularly in the context of the caller’s disclaimers about her knowledge) hearably projects some shortcomings of the narrative to be delivered. And indeed, the caller has some trouble in explaining the precise nature of the feeling. The ‘gut feeling’ construction is not just clumsiness, but projects a specific and finessed accountability for the claims to be delivered in the immediately following part of the call.

More broadly, we can understand the value of this set of psychological constructions in terms of the institutional role of the helpline. One way of thinking about this is in terms of the different trajectories that the calls might take. At one extreme the trajectory of the call comes to focus increasingly on the object – an abused child, an attack or incident, and its features. Such calls become less and less about the caller and more and more about features of persons and events (bruises, addresses, family relationships) that will be needed for social services or the police to follow up on the call. At the other extreme, the trajectory of the call comes to focus increasingly on the caller and his or her psychology. It will come to centre on the ‘psychological stuff’ of worries, anxieties, misunderstandings and misperceptions and may involve personal moves of reassurance. The c-construction provides an orderly start to the calls for either of these trajectories or alternatives that mix elements of both.

From the point of view of the basic institutional practices of the NSPCC, the c-construction manages a fundamental epistemological asymmetry. On the one hand, with respect to the call, the caller knows about the particular events and actions that they are phoning in about and the CPO does not. The CPO is crucially dependent on that knowledge. On the other, with respect to the call, the CPO knows about the procedures of child protection work, the policies of the NSPCC, what reports are appropriately actionable and so on. A referral will not be made unless the CPO



assesses it as appropriate. The c-construction is a superb way of dealing with the potential troubles that this asymmetry throws up. In projecting an unpacking of concerns, worries, or gut feelings the caller lets the child protection appropriate status of what will be reported be decided by the CPO. The CPO is treated as the person who knows about child protection, reliable signs of abuse, social services work practices and so on and can decide on appropriate actions.

The situation parallels that of visiting the doctor. Patients know about their symptoms – where it hurts and how much and so on – but the doctor knows about illnesses, injuries and the nature of treatment. Patients orient to this by showing the doctorability of their problems – their good reasons for visiting the doctor – without prejudging the technical diagnostic issues that are the province of the doctor’s knowledge (Heritage, forthcoming). By starting with a c-construction the caller to the NSPCC helpline prepares the way for a collaborative telling where the action-worthy nature of the information can be assessed by the CPO.

From the point of view of the CPO, the concern construction provides a basis for taking the abuse claims seriously, without either assuming or questioning their truth or appropriateness for the helpline. In this way, c-constructions offer a special kind of neutrality. In particular, they head off potentially troubling sequences where the caller asserts the existence of some abuse and the CPO then asks the basis for that knowledge. Such sequences might suggest rather more disaffiliative doubt or scepticism, as opposed to the collaborative coming-to-a-view that results from unpacking concerns.

### **Discursive psychology**

What I have tried to do in this article is illustrate what is distinctive about a discursive psychological approach and how that approach could provide a new way of considering the relationship between psychology and institutions. Rather than

considering psychological phenomena as mentally encoded entities and processes the focus is on psychological terms and orientations being used to do things. Here I have shown how c-constructions are drawn on to do the work of the NSPCC helpline by both callers and CPOs, and how they manage a number of potential problems that arise in this work.

To end with, it is important to emphasise three things. First, the focus on the practical role of psychological phenomena does not make their psychological status any less relevant or important. It is precisely the role of the notion of 'concern' to both index the individual speaker and her or his stance, and the object of the concern. This kind of analysis starts to capture what kind of thing it is to be a person in interactional terms and how that personhood is accountably related to unfolding practices. Second, this focus on psychological phenomena does not require that psychological states and processes of some kind do not exist. Rather it suggests that the study of such things is likely to benefit from careful attention to the specific practices that people are involved in and the sorts of 'competences' that those practices require. Third, as this study has illustrated, the analysis of these practices does not require a prior understanding of, or analysis of, cognitive phenomena. Discursive psychology can work as an autonomous field of study. For more detailed discussion of these difficult issues see Edwards (1997) and Potter and te Molder (2005).

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### **Appendix: Transcription Symbols**

[ ] Square brackets mark the start and the end of overlapping speech.

↑↓ Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement.

→ Side arrows are not transcription features but draw analytic attention to particular lines of text.

Underlining Signals speaker's emphasis.

CAPITALS Mark speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech.

°I know it,° Raised circles ('degree' signs) enclose obviously quieter speech.

(.8) Numbers in round brackets measure pauses longer than 0.2 seconds.

(.) A pause of 0.2 seconds or less.

((text)) Additional comments from the transcriber.

\*Why?\* ((smiley voice)) Asterisks enclose characteristics of the speech which is described in the brackets.

::: Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.

hhh Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.

.hhh Inspiration (in-breaths).

- Ye:ah,            Commas mark weak rising intonation, as used sometimes in enunciating lists.
- Ye:ah.            Periods (stops) mark falling, stopping intonation, irrespective of grammar.
- ?                  Question marks signal question intonation, irrespective of grammar.
- > <              Enclosed speech is produced noticeably *quicker* than the surrounding talk.
- < >              Enclosed speech is produced noticeably *slower* than the surrounding talk.
- =                  Equals signs mark the immediate latching of successive stretches of talk, with no interval.
- (...)              This shows where some within-sequence, or prior within-turn, talk has been omitted from a data extract.