

# **Cognitive distortions as social practices: An examination of cognitive distortions in sex offender treatment from a discursive psychology perspective.**

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# **Cognitive distortions as social practices: An examination of cognitive distortions in sex offender treatment from a discursive psychology perspective.**

## **Abstract**

This article presents a critique of the concept of cognitive distortion as it has been developed within the domain of sex-offender treatment programme theory and practice. Drawing upon a discursive psychology perspective, it is argued that cognitive distortions should not be considered as mental entities but as social practices. This argument is illustrated by closely examining how offenders' accounts of their offences during sex offender treatment sessions were organised. Recordings and transcriptions of treatment group sessions were analysed for the occurrence of regular patterns of talk and interaction. This analysis focused on how minimisation was achieved through well documented rhetorical and conversational devices (conversational repair, narrative contrast devices). An orientation to cognitive distortions as a resource was also illustrated through examining its use by group members to admonish a focus offender and through a narrative reflexivity device. These findings suggest that the notion of cognitive distortion and its role in treatment settings should be reconsidered. Furthermore, it is suggested that a discursive psychology perspective can also make a highly relevant contribution to the evaluation of treatment group processes and that further research is needed in order to examine in detail the way that treatment groups are socially organised.

**Keywords:** sex offender treatment, cognitive distortions, discursive psychology, conversation analysis, evaluation

# **Cognitive distortions as social practices: An examination of cognitive distortions in sex offender treatment from a discursive psychology perspective.**

## **Introduction**

This article presents a critique of the concept of cognitive distortion as it has been developed within the domain of sex offender treatment programmes (SOTP). This critique builds upon work already conducted based on a discursive psychology perspective (Auburn, 2005; Auburn & Lea, 2003; Lea & Auburn, 2001). It also takes cognisance of a growing body of criticism by those who work within the field of treatment programme theory and practice concerning the assumptions and efficacy of current treatment regimes (Maruna & Copes, 2005; Maruna & Mann, 2006; McMurrin & Ward, 2004).

A recurrent claim made by professional and academic disciplines involved in the treatment of sex offenders has been that such offenders can be differentiated from their non-offending counterparts in terms of basic psychological variables, in particular the presence of cognitive distortions (Abel et al., 1989). The beliefs, attitudes and related cognitive processes that offenders appear to hold about their entitlement, sexual and otherwise, over other adults or children, and the receptiveness of these groups to sexual contact are assumed to be a necessary condition of their offending. This view, in one form or another (e.g. as sets of beliefs or as implicit theories) has been the dominant position on the aetiology of sexual offending, particularly the offending of child molesters (for recent reviews see Gannon & Polaschek, 2006; Gannon, Ward, & Collie, 2007). The challenge for those working in this field has been to develop instruments which can identify and measure such distorted beliefs and attitudes and in turn treatment programmes which, *inter alia*, change or eliminate such distortions (Brown, 2005; Carich & Calder, 2003; Grubin & Thornton, 1994).

Whereas on this view the pathology of sexual offending derives from cognitive distortions as necessary cognitive precursors, the argument made here is that the manifestation of cognitive distortions by offenders should be re-conceptualized as shared social practices. This re-conceptualization follows from adopting a discursive psychology perspective (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Discursive psychology starts from the detailed examination of the organisation of social interaction in its natural setting which here comprises the specific setting of the sex offender treatment group. The analytic focus is on the identification and description of what happens when treatment groups meet and how participants engage with one another to accomplish projects relevant to that setting.

There are two related ways in which cognitive distortions can be regarded as constituting social practices. First, particular descriptions or versions of events as told by offenders are assembled from the everyday rhetorical and other linguistic devices available to all competent members of society. It is no surprise therefore to be able to identify and document these practices in offenders' accounts and such practices being used in order to pursue particular projects for the treatment setting at hand, such as mitigating responsibility. The precise way in which speakers assemble such descriptions makes available to hearers particular inferences about the motivations of the narrative characters. Describing events in particular ways, therefore enables offenders to display their motives and thereby their putative responsibility for the trajectory of events. It is in a detailed examination of the organisation of their accounts that offenders can, for example, be seen to achieve 'minimisation'.

Second, the notion of distortions is a resource drawn upon or oriented to within treatment settings by the participants themselves. The inferential context (Puchta & Potter, 2004) of the treatment setting makes available the possibility of 'seeing' cognitive distortions in the activities and talk of those involved in the setting. By using the notion of cognitive distortion or orienting to it as manifest in the activities of the participants, the members of the groups

can be seen to get a significant part of the ‘business’ of the treatment programme done. For example the notion of cognitive distortion can be utilised by group members to display the inadequacy of an offender’s version, or can be oriented to by the offenders themselves who can display their concern about the likely uptake of a part of their account as distorted by the other members of the group. At these points offenders can engage in discursive work to repair possible negative inferences about themselves and direct hearers to an alternative account which counteracts these inferences. Thus cognitive distortions are not something that people have but something that people *do* and in ‘*doing*’ them, the notion of cognitive distortion can be seen to be an available resource for participants, integral to the business of conducting sex offender treatment.

### **The ontological status of cognitive distortions**

Cognitive distortion has become a concept central to an understanding of sexual offending: “... nowhere has the notion of the criminogenic nature of excuse making had greater influence than the applied world of offender treatment, where excuses and justifications are often assigned the specialist label of cognitive distortion.” (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 157). On this account it is argued that offenders hold a range of beliefs, attitudes and perceptions which in turn are taken to be necessary conditions for their offending (e.g. Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). Instruments based around questionnaires have also been developed which are designed to assess the nature and extent of distortions held by a person. Respondents are asked to rate their agreement with items such as “Sometime in the future, our society will realize that sex between a child and an adult is all right (sic)” (Abel et al., 1989), “Women should oblige men’s sexual needs” (Hanson, Gizzarelli, & Scott, 1994) or “I believe that sex with children can make the child feel closer to adults.” (Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, & Burns, 1999). Responses to such assessment instruments are claimed to distinguish offenders from ‘normal controls’ (e.g. Murphy, 1990, p. 334). Distortions are described as beliefs which are

implicated in offending and which allow for minimisation of the perpetrator's responsibility for the crime, provide the basis for depersonalising explanations and justifications for the crime, and ultimately denial and refutation of the crime (see Schneider & Wright, 2004).

Discursive psychology takes issue with this cognitivist model and the assumptions which underpin it. A range of objections have been advanced, including the essentialism inherent in such conceptions (Harre & Gillett, 1994; Papadopoulos, 2008) and the tendency to ignore the ideological grounding and functions of the way such notions are formulated (Billig, 1991). However, it is in the way that language is treated by such cognitive approaches which is the major point of difference. Within cognitivist approaches, language is treated as a more or less direct route to mental entities and processes such as attitudes, beliefs, attributions, implicit theories, etc. (e.g. Marziano, Ward, Beech, & Pattison, 2007). In turn these mental entities and processes are taken to be the causes of or at least implicated in directing action.

Discursive perspectives take a contrasting position, such that language and particularly talk is taken not as a 'window-on-the-mind' but as action oriented. Talk is designed to achieve particular interpersonal and ideological projects for the moment at hand.

In relation to cognitive distortions whereas the cognitive perspective would treat text and talk as a route to the speaker's attitudes and beliefs about sexual entitlement, a discursive perspective would examine how this sort of talk was assembled, how the putative object of talk (say women or children) was discursively constructed and what interpersonal and ideological effects followed from these discursive constructions (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Ideally too, discursive perspectives would examine these aspects of talk and text in naturally occurring contexts rather than those which have been contrived for the researcher (e.g. via questionnaires, experimental manipulations or semi-structured interviews).

*"Discursive approaches study peoples' social practices. They are typically sensitive to the way discourse is situated (sequentially and rhetorically), to the way it is*

*oriented to performing particular activities and to how it is both constructed (assembled from words, metaphors, commonplaces and so on) and constructive (bringing particular versions of the world into interaction). ... Hence, analyses of talk enable an examination of how speakers construct their social realities and business done by these constructions.” (Wiggins & Potter, 2003, p. 514).*

In sum, cognitive perspectives treat talk as a resource providing access to other, principally mental, entities whereas discursive perspectives treat talk as the topic of investigation in its own right. Cognitive distortion, on this account, is not a term that describes or indexes a psychological entity or process implicated in offending (the criminogenic perspective) but a lexicalised term that has acquired a specialist status within the professional arena of treatment and which is utilised to construct, in part, the lived experience of those populating the treatment setting, and to transact particular sorts of business or actions within that setting. This potential re-working of the concept of cognitive distortion in turn demands that the settings where cognitive distortion is relevant are examined closely for how it might be deployed by the participants.

### **A discursive approach to sex offender treatment**

To date little empirical research has been conducted which examines the organisation and function of interaction specifically within the sex offender treatment context. However, that which has been conducted furnishes a fuller understanding of how *all* the participants, facilitators and offenders, undertake the activities constituting treatment as a co-ordinated, joint accomplishment. For example, MacMartin and LeBaron (2006) have shown through close attention to the co-ordination of talk, gesture and gaze, how facilitators manage a range of tasks simultaneously including maintaining the appropriate involvement of offenders in the treatment sessions. Such studies demonstrate the complexity of implementing treatment programmes, including the requirement of facilitators to manage competing institutional and

interactional demands, as well as how offenders undertake both co-operation with and resistance to treatment goals.

The data presented here was obtained from audio recordings of sex offender treatment sessions<sup>1</sup> which followed the then current national programme of sex offender treatment and which had been designed for use across different prisons in England and Wales (Grubin & Thornton, 1994; Thornton & Hogue, 1993). It was broadly based on cognitive-behavioural principles with a strong relapse prevention component. The data consisted of recordings from one group of eight offenders plus the group facilitators (who in turn were drawn from probation officers, prison officers and prison psychologists). Video recordings of sessions from the treatment programme for this group were made available to the researchers and from these recordings those sessions which required one of the offenders to take the 'hot seat' were identified. When on the 'hot seat', the offender was asked to provide an account of their main offence and the events which had led up to it. During this account other members of the group could challenge or ask for clarification. These sessions were of interest as being those most likely to yield versions of the offences which could be heard to contain distortions such as minimisation, justifications, excuses or denials. The selection of sessions was further constrained by identifying the 'hot seat' sessions of three offenders only. These offenders had been convicted of different sex crimes namely rape, incestuous abuse, child abduction and molestation. This procedure yielded recordings of approximately 10 sessions (20 hours of material).

The analysis was based on the methodological principles of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003). Recordings of the selected sessions were initially transcribed orthographically. The transcriptions and recordings were then read and listened to many times in order to identify sections which displayed consistent ways of organisation in the talk. A corpus of these features of talk was then assembled and transcribed in detail using



Jeffersonian conventions (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Schegloff, 2007; see Appendix). The exemplars which made up the corpus were then examined closely. Discursive psychology, drawing upon the principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; ten Have, 1999) attends to the following features of talk: how talk is organised as an orderly sequence of activities, how activities are assembled by the participants, what actions are performed by the identifiable components of the practice and what interactional functions such practices can be seen to fulfil. In assembling and analysing a corpus, exemplars are added to or subtracted from it depending upon the direction of the analysis. Moreover, several different corpuses of exemplars can be assembled from the one data set depending upon the particular focus of analysis.

In the sections which follow, practices which were evident within the treatment group setting and which were relevant to a consideration of cognitive distortions are illustrated.

### **Accomplishing minimisation**

A significant component of the treatment programme required the offender who was on the 'hot seat' to provide a lengthy narrative of their main offence. These narratives were often initially invited by one of the facilitators. Typically these narratives began by setting out a frame which indexed one or all of the following features: character, activities, time and place of the event. This frame enabled listeners to orient to the events and the characters who subsequently populated the narrative (cf. Westcott & Kynan, 2004).

As recognisable discursive objects, narratives display a number of features. One of the most significant is that every narrative is a version of events which is constructed or designed precisely for its context and for its recipients. Moreover, for every version there is a potential alternative telling which can potentially undermine or counter the version told; Edwards (1997) calls this feature of narratives their 'could-have-been-otherwise' quality. During the course of the sessions, for example, it is apparent that the facilitators have access to file

information on the offender and his offence(s), so that they will often produce items of information drawn from witness statements or other reports, which can contradict the offender's version. Thus narratives often appear to be designed in such a way as to anticipate and subtly undermine possible counter versions. Given that the version produced is one of many possible versions, one aim of discursive psychology is not to determine the accuracy or otherwise of the narrative, but by examining the details of its construction, to identify what its components are potentially designed to achieve and how participants orient to them. Furthermore, since one requirement of the SOTP is that the offender should appear as one of the narrative characters, one of the aspects displayed in the narrative is the way in which identities for the characters, including the speaker himself are projected. It is in the course of narratives that rhetorical and other conversational devices are found. These devices position the speaker within the narrative in such a way that inferences are available about his responsibility and relationship to the other narrative characters. It is in the construction of such narratives and through the discursive practices performed therein that minimisation of responsibility can potentially be achieved.

### ***Repair in the achievement of minimisation***

One widely observed practice in ordinary talk is repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977). Repair is where a speaker or hearer reformulates a section of the speaker's talk such that the repaired section is noticeably a reworking of a 'trouble source' or 'repairable'. Repairs can, though not exclusively, be corrections of some error that the speaker has made. Repair is overwhelmingly undertaken by the speaker themselves (what has been identified as self-initiated self-repair) and as such often goes unremarked by hearers in turn displaying the epistemic rights the speaker has to reporting events as they experienced them. However, repair is important in so far as it identifies a potential trouble source for speakers, what the troublesome aspect of the events is and what the speaker projects as the 'correct' version of

events. Narratives as told by offenders during the SOTP sessions contain many instances of such self-initiated self-repair (see Extract 1).

Extract 1. D/2A/am/A<sup>2</sup>

1           Richard   .h So: (0.6) >when we got home  
2                    then we had< erh (1.5) cuppuh coffee:  
3                    (1.0) a::ndtt (1.0)  
4 →                I put on a: (1.0) some records=  
5                    =while we were (0.3) drinking  
6                    (0.2) .hhhh (it wozz a) mixture of an LP  
7                    (0.5) a::nd (1.5) onnit was a (0.4)  
8                    tune called the stripper (1.7)

The self-initiated self-repair occurs with the phrase ‘I put on a – pause – some records’<sup>3</sup> (l. 4). The repairable is ‘a record’ and it has been repaired to ‘some records’. Both versions would count as accurate versions of events, hence the repaired version is not a correction simply for the purposes of accuracy, but a correction with respect to the inferences it makes available. The version of events that the speaker is projecting through his repair to ‘some records’ is that after coming home from a night out with his family, he played a number of music discs one of which contained a particular tune which has a mildly sexually provocative theme (‘The Stripper’). This version plausibly implies that the evening went on for a period during which it was possible to play more than one record. It also provides a narrative context for making inferences about the speaker’s motivation or more precisely lack of motivation in playing this particular record. This version suggests that putting on this record with this tune was not a deliberate and premeditated action on his part. This way of reading his motives is reinforced by his description of the record as ‘a mixture’ of songs. Allowing the version of ‘I put on a record’ to stand as the version of events, suggests more serious inferences about his intentions to embroil the other participants in sexual activity by deliberately selecting this record with this tune. As the repaired version stands, the insertion into the scene of this tune can be heard to be an accidental or at least unintended event. Subsequently, one of the other narrative characters is described as responding literally to this tune and so initiating an

episode of abusive sexual activity. The narrative is a version where this repair is central, assembled to show that this other character and not the offender initiated this activity.

### ***Organisation of narrative events in the achievement of minimisation***

A well documented device used by speakers in the course of narrating events is to organise their telling around a two part contrast. This sort of organisation was identified by Jefferson (2004) which she summarised as having the following format: “At First I Thought X, Then I Realized Y” (p. 131). This device often identifies an ordinary or innocuous understanding of an event as the first thought when in fact that event turned out to be extraordinary. She cites as an example, testimony given by a secret service agent to the Warren Commission who was in the motorcade when President Kennedy was assassinated (see Extract 2).

#### Extract 2. Jefferson, 2004, p. 152

“I heard a noise from my right rear, which to me seemed to be a firecracker. I immediately looked to my right, and, in doing so, my eyes had to cross the Presidential limousine and I saw President Kennedy grab at himself and lurch forward and to the left. ... I jumped from the car, realizing that something was wrong, ran to the Presidential limousine.”

In this report, the agent identifies his first thought as a relatively innocuous event (a firecracker going off), but then ‘realizing’ that this was a much more serious and extraordinary matter. Part of Jefferson’s analysis of these sorts of reports, argues that the first part (‘I thought’) is not just a factual report of what was thought but an assertion of what in principle could be a correct way of understanding the event. She goes on: “By asserting the in-principle correct, ordinary alternative, the what-actually-happened is shown to be odd, surprising, exceptional; to be in-principle wrong. That is, although this thing did happen, it merely happened. It is an incidental occurrence. In principle, things like this do not happen.” (p. 145). Moreover, a function of such reports is a normalising one, such that the speaker is projecting an image of themselves as someone who has an ordinary understanding of events. This function has been summarised as ‘showing one’s commitment to the normal’ (p. 154).

Just such a normalising device was noticed too by Wooffitt (1992). Wooffitt interviewed members of the public who had claimed to have experienced paranormal events. A regular feature of their descriptions of these events was a two-part contrast device which Wooffitt called: ‘I was just doing X when Y’. The X component of the device was typically an ongoing mundane activity in which the speaker was involved. The Y component was then an event which turned out to be anomalous (see Extract 3)

Extract 3. Wooffitt, 1992, p. 133-4

‘The speaker is describing the circumstances in which she first encountered the “presence” or spirit of her recently deceased husband. She has just been informed of his death by two representatives of the RAF’

1           IE           a::n:deh (.) they drove me (.)  
2                       to (.) Angelsey (1.5)  
3                       a:nd (0.5)  
4 X                   we were all sat round (.) ehm in a room (0.6)  
5                       and I know >thut< (0.3)  
6                       I know it sounds silly but  
7 Y                   I knew that David was there  
8                       he was behind me .hhs

Given the ubiquity of contrast devices such as these in ordinary talk which often act to normalise the person who experiences the events, it is not surprising to find similar devices in the accounts of the offenders in the treatment groups. The offenders are being asked to describe an event which can be glossed as a serious sexual offence committed by themselves. One of the issues therefore is how they got to be in a position of committing this offence; how can they account for the occurrence of such an anomalous event. Contrast devices are available as a way potentially of accounting for the eventual crime in terms of events that happened to the perpetrator, when otherwise he would be going about his normal business. Our analysis of such moments in the telling of their offences suggested the following sequential organisation: Part 1 – scene setting, Part 2 – a shift in the definition of the situation (Auburn & Lea, 2003). Part 1 can be heard as designed to counteract other versions of the events and to establish the quotidian concerns of the offender as the main narrative character.

Part 2 then sets up an anomalous and unexpected shift in the situation which is designed to show how the critical events leading up to the offence could plausibly have followed from such quotidian concerns, and to mitigate the offender's responsibility for the subsequent events (see Extract 4).

Extract 4. H/3b/S2

(The offender is describing how he obtained a key which he later used to gain access to the house where the victim was sleeping.)

1           Mike       As I (.) turned away from the door  
2                       he just arrived  
3                       you know >he just< pulled up  
4                       'e just come in the gate  
5                       (0.7) so I went in to the 'ouse °with 'im°  
6                       (0.8) and we were talking (0.5) ahhout summin'  
7                       I think he were talking about what he'd done  
8                       °down in Milgarl  
9                       he'd just done a seminar or something°  
10                      (1.2) u::mm (1.4)  
11                      I told him about the phone call  
12                      I'd made to me uncle  
13                      (0.9) a:nd (2.2)  
14                      on the back door (0.6)  
15                      to go out the back door  
16                      which would be you know directly to my [home]  
17                      you know down the back path you know  
18                      (1.4) there's two doors from the kitchen=  
19                      = the first door leads out to a little  
20                      sort of (0.8) u:mm (0.7) tiny hallway  
21                      °you know sort of thing°  
22                      with a freezer in it  
23                      and like (.) you know (.)  
24                      brushes and that (0.5)  
25                      and then there's a back door. (0.8)  
26                      next to the back door there's a hook (0.4)  
27                      with a back do- with a key on it (0.2)  
28                      right this: this key key was always kept  
29                      on this hook right  
30 X                    (2.1) as I walked out the door  
31                      I was still speaking to Pete  
32                      >and Pete was behind me<  
33 Y                    (1.0) umm (3.2) on impulse (0.6) °right°  
34                      and (0.3) purely on impulse  
35                      (0.8) I grabbed the key  
36                      (.) as I walked (0.6) out the back door=  
37                      as I opened the back door I grabbed the key  
38                      'cuz it's up you know (1.9)  
39                      shoulder height (0.3) the hook (1.0)  
40                      di- (I had no idea I didn't know)  
41                      you know 'till I actually saw the key  
42                      (0.5) which has always been there  
43                      and always- y'know  
44                      probbly still is.

In terms of the sequential organisation outlined above, part 1, the display of quotidian concerns, runs from lines 1 to 12 and part 2, a shift in the definition of the situation, from lines 13 to 45. The first part is notable for the way it expresses the very ordinariness of this encounter. For example in lines 6 to 9, the systematic vagueness (Edwards & Potter, 1992) with which the conversation is formulated testifies to its utter unremarkableness. At line 13 through to line 29, the speaker starts to recount the events which turned into something anomalous. He initially provides a description of the layout of the back door area of the house which leads up to a particular item of information relevant to the sequential development of the narrative, that the key to the back door was kept on a nearby hook. This description, can be heard as an insertion between the mundane events and the eventual anomalous events and achieves two things. First, it sets up the speaker's adequate positioning for the anomalous events to come in so far as everything was in the 'right' place for this event to *happen to him*. As a corollary to this positioning, this section is oriented to possible alternative versions, and in particular sceptical hearings of the events to come, in particular that he knew where the key was located and had planned to remove it. The shift in the definition of the situation is managed using the same device as that which Wooffitt identified. In this case the continuing activity which serves as the mundane backdrop to the anomalous event (I was just doing X) is at lines 30 to 32, with the particular action being 'I was still speaking to Pete' (l. 31). The sudden anomalous event (when Y) is then described at lines 33 to 35: 'on impulse right, and purely on impulse, I grabbed the key'.

In this description of events, it is evident how the contrast organisation is oriented overall to the normality of the speaker as the leading narrative character. The action which precipitates the shift in the definition of the situation is described using the past tense as a finite, limited action. Moreover, it is qualified as a moment of impulsivity, a sudden action

occurring outside the boundaries of normal, considered, mundane behaviour. As with the examples from Jefferson and Wooffitt, this narrative construction of events can be heard as the speaker's 'commitment to normality'. He is positioning himself as a normal human being, normally oriented to and concerned with the mundane business of life. The anomalous event is outside his normal repertoire, it is a moment of unconsidered impulsivity occasioned by the presence of the key in that particular position.

### ***Conclusion***

The examples given in these preceding two sections show a different way of approaching minimisation. There seems little doubt that something recognisable as minimisation is occurring at these junctures in the offenders' narratives in so far as the inferences available from the narrative construction mitigate the speaker's responsibility for or agency in the events. However, these 'minimisations' are here treated as occasioned activities, that is as everyday, 'available-to-everyone' rhetorical devices deployed to produce certain effects for the hearers. They are social practices which amongst other activities allow the speaker to project an identity which is more or less responsible for these particular events. Minimisation is here best thought of not as an identifiably pathological aspect of sex offenders but as falling within the class of activities otherwise called excuse making and justifications which Maruna and Mann (2006) have identified as widely evident in sex offender treatment. Moreover, there is nothing in these practices which approximates the notion of cognitive distortion as presented in the introductory remarks, that is beliefs, attitudes or other 'self-statements' about the offender's entitlement with others. The offender has to all intents and purposes simply provided descriptions of events (the actions and locations involved), and through assembling these in a particular way made available inferences about his involvement in the events and his responsibility for them.



## **Orienting to cognitive distortions**

This view that minimisation is an activity occasioned by the context is further reinforced by noting something else about these sequences of talk. In these examples the other members of the group do not bring these moments to the attention of the speaker as ones where he is minimising. On those occasions where other group members actually do draw attention to something like cognitive distortions, then such claims can in part be made because the group members have available a lexicon of cognitive distortion terms which can be used as resources for performing these sorts of observations and thereby some of the business of the treatment group. In this section examples are discussed where group members explicitly orient to potential minimisation. The first analysis shows that such orientation can be a practice for drawing attention to the inadequacy of the offender's narrative and hence that it requires reformulating. The second analysis shows how offenders themselves orient to their own narratives as potentially distorted and undertake repair work to cancel or avoid that sort of accusation. Even if cognitive distortions are not to be thought of as mental entities implicated in offending behaviour, they never the less have a reality as a resource which the participants can draw upon to transact some of the business of the treatment group.

### ***Using 'minimisation' as a formulation to display the inadequacy of narratives***

In institutional settings as diverse as counselling or psychotherapy, radio or T.V. news interviews, radio phone-ins or industrial relations settings, formulations are frequently used discursive devices for pursuing the specific business of those settings. Formulations are those occasions where a speaker summarises a part of the talk produced previously by another speaker. A formulation can be a summary or the *gist* of what has been said before, or it can be an implication or *upshot* of what has gone before; in any event the formulation will of necessity transform and delete elements of the prior talk. Thus in producing their formulation the speaker will be oriented to what is relevant to the pursuit of the business in hand.

Following a formulation, there is an expectation that a response either agreeing or disagreeing with it will follow with a normative preference for agreement to the formulation.

Disagreement can of course occur but it is usually discursively marked as such by the speaker. The following is a clear example of this practice.

Extract 5: News Interview (from Heritage, 1985, p. 108-109)

The Chairman of the Prices Commission, a UK government agency for monitoring prices and protecting consumers from unscrupulous practices by retailers is being interviewed on TV. The Chairman(C) is explaining to the interviewer (Int) the concerns they have about the price of tea in the shops.

1           C           What in fact happened was that in the course of last  
2                       year, .hh the price went up really very sharply, .hh  
3                       and uh the blenders did take advantage of this: uh  
4                       to obviously raise their prices to retailers. (0.7)  
5                       .hhh They haven't been so quick in reducing their  
6                       prices when the world market prices come down. (0.3)  
7                       .hh And so this means that price in the sh- the  
8                       prices in the shops have stayed up .hh really rather  
9                       higher than we'd like to see them.  
10                      (0.7)  
11 →       Int        So you- you're really accusing them of profiteering.  
12           C        .hhh No they're in business to make money that's  
13                      perfectly sensible.

The formulation is produced by the interviewer at line 11. In this case it is an upshot or implication which arises from the Chairman's prior description. It is clear that this formulation transforms what the Chairman has said to create a position which is more confrontational and critical of the tea blenders than the more measured and designedly neutral account given by the Chairman himself. The phrase 'prices have stayed really rather higher than we'd like to see them' has been transformed such that the Chairman is 'really accusing them of profiteering', a far more discreditable motive. This formulation can therefore be seen to pursue the business of a TV interview whereby the formulation produces a position which has greater newsworthiness than the Chairman's original statement. In terms of the response

to this formulation, the Chairman expresses disagreement and this disagreement is warranted through the production of an account aligning their behaviour with normal business practice.

Taking this understanding of formulations further, Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar (2005) have argued: “The very fact that formulation can be tendentious – can offer a reading which is pregnant with interpretation, and not necessarily in tune with the original speaker’s professed interests – suggest that its use might help the institutional objectives of psychotherapy.” (p. 628).

In the data from the sex offender treatment groups, it is possible to see the lexicon of cognitive distortions used in this ‘tendentious’ sense to formulate the upshot of a ‘hot seat’ offender’s prior talk (see Extract 6).

Extract 6: T3 1of1 29-59

‘Richard’ is the offender on the ‘hot seat’. He is explaining to the group how he came to develop an abusive relationship with his daughter. The other group members are generally sceptical of his explanations. The names refer to other members of the group who are also offenders except ‘Tom’ who is one of the group facilitators.

1 Richard >I’m not I I’m just saying I< I was trying to manoeuvre  
2 (1.8) >it it< (0.1) wasn’t (awful) at the time but i wa-  
3 I was [trying to manoeuvre something like]=  
4 Bill [Richard Richard (.) Richard (0.3) ]=  
5 Richard =I manoeuvred my wife (0.5)  
6 [into, ]  
7 → Bill =[Richard] Richard the way it was coming across  
8 I (don’t know) about me: (.) but (it seems) to be the  
9 same (.) for Mike as it is for me (.) right  
10 .h er things just seem to happen (0.7)  
11 Mike Yeah (0.6)  
12 Bill You’re doing==  
13 Richard No they didn’t se-  
14 [yeah yeah they seemed to happen but] =  
15 Bill =[ ( ) ]  
16 Tom [hahahaha]  
17 Richard = [I was ] I was manoeuvring it all the time  
18 Bill (and me)  
19 (1.7)  
20 Mike [(No but this is )]  
21 Richard I [know I I wa- I was making] (0.1)  
22 I was making those things happen where I could  
23 (0.4)  
24 Tom (Chris) ex[plain what’s happened ]

25 Richard [(even) ( ) (.)] shu:ɹ  
 26 (0.9)  
 27 → Chris Minimising everything °aint he° (0.1) making  
 28 it nice and pretty [(picture)]  
 29 Mike? [Passive ]  
 30 GM Yeah  
 31 Chris Yeah [that's what i was thinking]  
 32 Mike [Passive pretty picture ]  
 33 Chris (0.6) Yeah  
 34 (0.7)  
 35 Robert? You- your not [coming across (as genuine)]  
 36 Richard [But it it it's not  
 37 it's not a pretty pict[ure  
 38 Chris [>But but but< (0.2)] no what they  
 39 want is dead honest (.) down to >nitty gritty stuff<=

At line 7 one of the offenders in the group (Bill) provides a formulation of the offender's (Richard's) account of his offence so far. This formulation is an upshot or implication of the prior talk, in it 'Bill' suggests that he and, as he understands it, another member of the group interpret this account as one in which Richard is not taking responsibility for his offence (l. 7-10: 'the way it was coming across ... things just seem to happen'). The choice of terms and its particular construction also imply that this account is deficient for the purposes of the group's business. Following this formulation, the offender himself (Richard) engages in quite vigorous denial of this way of hearing his account of events (l. 13-14). His denial appears to be oriented to the position which this formulation attributes to him, that is as someone who is denying or minimising his offence and his response makes a strong claim for his agency in determining the events (l. 17: I was manoeuvring it all the time; l. 22: I was making those things happen where I could).

This assertion of his agency seems to be largely ignored by the others. Instead, the interaction moves to a second formulation which uses the lexicon of cognitive distortion. The prison officer facilitating the session ('Tom') calls upon one of the other group members ('Chris') to 'explain what's happened' (l. 24). It is not clear why the prison officer would want to turn to another group member, but one plausible reason is that whatever explanation is expected it will be one which can be seen to be recognised by all group members and not just the (institutionally appointed) person facilitating it. In other words this explanation is one

which is demonstrably understood jointly by members of the group. At this point ‘Chris’ responds and provides a second formulation of the offender’s prior talk. In this formulation he uses the ‘technical’ term of minimisation (l. 27). This term formulates the gist of the offender’s prior talk; it packages up all that has been said previously and summarises it in this one term. Its effect is to delete and transform all the previous detail and attribute a motive which is implicated in that prior talk. It is both *about* what has been said before and also a contribution to the current interaction in so far as it pursues the business of the treatment group. In addition to the use of this technical term, there are other noticeable discursive features of this formulation. First, it is formulated as an extreme case (l. 27: *minimising everything*) (Pomerantz, 1986). Amongst other functions, extreme case formulations are often used to warrant the incorrectness of a particular action. Second, the formulation is tagged with the interrogative ‘ain’t he’ which valences the questions toward agreement and indeed there follows a chorus of agreement with this assessment from the other group members.

These two formulations (at l. 7-10 and l. 27-28) work in tandem. They are designed to pursue the specific business of the treatment setting. The first attributes a mutually understood position to the ‘hot seat’ offender as providing an inadequate account of his offence. The second upgrades this formulation and makes more explicit its inadequacy through employing the lexicon of cognitive distortions. The group member (Chris) who formulated the offender’s version as ‘minimising everything’ then goes on to characterise what would count as an adequate narrative. He says (l. 38-39): ‘what they want is dead honest down to nitty gritty stuff’. Here then, we see the term minimisation, as an element in the language game of offender treatment, used to admonish the hot seat offender by positioning him as someone who engages in distortions and also to display explicitly the inadequacy of this account and what sort of account it is normatively obligatory to produce.

### ***Repairing potential minimisation***

In reporting on events, one of the intended consequences for the speaker is to convey to hearers that the events in question happened in precisely the way described. Not only do such reports index the events in question, but they also index the speaker (Edwards, 2005). From the manner and content of the report, hearers not only make sense of ‘what happened’, they can also draw inferences about the speaker, for example, that they might be lying or complaining; in other words hearers also make sense of the motivations or characteristics of the speaker which are indexed by the telling of the account. It is in relation to this concern about how descriptions of events index the speaker that an orientation to cognitive distortions is often displayed by the offenders.

One of the characteristics of narrative is that speakers can switch between time-frames. As one would expect, the main body is narrated within the past tense. However, there are occasions where speakers shift from this narrative time-frame and address the hearers directly within the present context of the telling. These moments were given the label ‘narrative reflexivity’ in order to indicate that speakers design them in order to reflect or comment on the ongoing past-tense narrative (Auburn, 2005). Broadly speaking such moments are designed to guide the hearers’ understanding of the events in the narrative in particular ways which in turn avoid the attribution of particular characteristics to the speaker. This reflexive activity displays a clear orientation to the potential attribution of cognitive distortions as a way of understanding the speaker’s motivation (see Extract 7).

#### Extract 7. B/D1T4S1/Tr28

The speaker is describing a sexual assault on a young woman in which he and an accomplice were involved.

9            Robert        she said what do you want now,=  
10                        =I said ↑well (0.2) don't know  
11                        I said uh (0.3) lets do it shall we=  
12                        =and she said well ↑yeah: OK (0.5)  
13                        and I- (0.2)

14 → she was petrified  
 15 → I know that now↓ (0.8)  
 16 and I took my jacket off (0.2)  
 17 and laid it down (0.4) for her (1.2) to lie on↓  
 18 (2.3)

In general shifts from the narrative time frame to the current context of the telling are marked by particular linguistic features. This example shows the typical features of this shift. In the early part of the extract (lines 9-13) the speaker is describing the events as a sequence of actions. These events are described in the past tense ('she said', I said'). It is also noticeable that the actions are the parts to an exchange of talk between the speaker and the victim at the time of the assault and that the speaker chooses to actively voice these parts (Wooffitt, 1992). Active voicing is a way of projecting detail from the events in question and hence the accuracy of the speaker's recall of the events. At line 13, this narrative flow is interrupted and the speaker moves to provide a description of the state of mind of the victim (l. 14 – she was petrified). The moment of narrative reflexivity then immediately follows (l. 15) with a description of the how and when the speaker has come to this understanding. The statement 'I know that now' is provided in the present tense and qualifies his knowledge of the state of mind of the victim. The qualification suggests that this understanding was not available to him at the time of the assault but has occurred to him at the time of this telling. After a brief pause, the speaker returns to the narrative time frame, and resumes his telling of the sequence of activities which occurred at the time of the assault, starting this section with the connective 'and' (l. 16), and reverting to the past tense.

This moment of narrative reflexivity displays the speaker's orientation to the possible ways of hearing these events and his moves to cancel or repair potentially available inferences that he is distorting the events. In this example, the description which he has provided could imply that this was an encounter between two adults who talked about the possibility of having sex, with the female character finally giving her consent (l. 9-12). Within the context of the treatment group this sort of implication could be challenged as

minimisation of the events, and the failure to take responsibility for the crime. The interruption to the flow of the narrative and formulation of the victim's state of mind seems designed to display that the offender recognises the more realistic response of the victim to this encounter and to counteract an accusation that he is distorting his account of the offence. It is noticeable that he uses an extreme description of the state of the victim – she was petrified (l. 14) as opposed to say frightened, nervous or simply anxious. This description counteracts possible accusations that he is minimising. At the same time, the moment of narrative reflexivity (l. 15), qualifies the epistemic status of this observation. So rather than knowing at the time of the assault that the victim was 'petrified', the speaker identifies this understanding as having come to him later, more precisely during the treatment sessions themselves.

One way of understanding these moments is as 'inference directing' devices. Thus by interrupting the narrative flow and moving to the current context of telling, the speaker can direct the hearers to a particular way of understanding what has just been recounted (or in some cases is about to be recounted – see for example Extract 3, l. 6). Such inference directing is in turn designed to cancel potentially damaging or face threatening inferences available from the sequence of events described. In this exemplar, the speaker has designed his narrative to avoid an accusation of minimisation by acknowledging the state of mind of the victim and also attributed this understanding to the experience of the treatment sessions. He is thus potentially displaying both an understanding of the real experience of the victim and his own treatment progress and motivation to change through an increased awareness of the impact of his actions on the victim.

## **Conclusions**

This brief overview of discursive psychology oriented research on the conduct of the SOTP has sought to demonstrate the utility of undertaking a detailed examination of how treatment



groups are interactively accomplished. In particular it has shown: 1) mundane, 'available-to-everyone' conversational devices such as self-initiated self-repair, formulations and contrast structures are deployed in narratives by offenders often in order to position themselves as less culpable for the offences of which they have been convicted, 2) both the concept of and the lexicon of cognitive distortions are evident in treatment sessions as resources oriented to by participants. They can be used by group members to admonish and show the inadequacy of the account being produced by the 'hot seat' offender. Moreover, offenders themselves are alert to the possibility of being accused of displaying distortions and undertake discursive work to police this attribution. Together, these findings indicate that it is important to examine how treatment groups function and how identity and reputation (Goffman, 1963) are projected in and through the group interaction.

One important outcome of this research is that examining this aspect of SOTPs can contribute to their evaluation which complements more traditional approaches based upon outcome measures, such as recidivism and reconviction rates (e.g. Cann, Falshaw, & Friendship, 2004; Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Lalumiere, 1993), attributional assessments (Larsen, Hudson, & Ward, 1995) or a range of attitudinal and other cognitive measures related to treatment targets (Beech, Fisher, & Beckett, 1998). The way in which a discursive psychology approach can contribute to more 'process' oriented evaluation needs to be developed more fully. However, given that it is based on the close analysis of the actual observed interaction, it offers a more direct understanding of treatment processes than indirect measures such as retrospective evaluations of group process (e.g. Beech et al., 1998; Beech & Fordham, 1997). It provides a foundation for feeding back observations of forms of conduct during treatment to practitioners and engaging in a discussion about the effectiveness of particular practices as well as potential alternatives. This approach has been successfully undertaken in the medical field with regard for example to

general practitioner interaction with patients (Heritage & Maynard, 2006; Maynard & Heritage, 2005).

It is all the more surprising that examination of the interaction during treatment sessions has not been systematically undertaken since one component which has been identified as central to the implementation of these programmes is their basis in group work. This component encourages 'cognitive distortions' to be challenged and "... represents to the clients socially acceptable values and models normal social interactions against which their distorted patterns of thinking and behaviour are thrown into relief." (Barker & Beech, 1993, p. 40). Thus the group basis of the prison based SOTP is not simply that it is a more efficient medium for its delivery, but that this very medium provides an essential component of treatment in so far as the group's interpersonal relationships are used as tools for implementing change. For example, Blud, Travers, Nugent, and Thornton (2003) have said: "Process variables such as the relationship between programme facilitator and participant ... may be crucial to successful intervention, but there is little research evidence on the impact of these kinds of variables." (p. 72) (See Brown (2005) for a summary.)

Finally, in accord with other recent critiques it is worth considering the continuing status of the notion of cognitive distortion. Maruna and Mann (2006) have commented: "The inconsistencies in defining cognitive distortion and the lack of empirical evidence that these rationalizations precede offending suggest that the topic should be treated with more caution than it typically is." (p. 161). Maruna and Mann argue that excuses and justifications are typical of the sort of activities which are taken to be cognitive distortions within the sex offender treatment context. However, they point out that making excuses and justifications are a typical and normal part of people's social engagement with one another. Why then make a special case amounting to an attribution of pathology against those who have been convicted of sexual offences? As a consequence during treatment offenders are in a situation

whereby they are condemned for making excuses or minimising their responsibility, but also taken to be dangerous offenders if they fully acknowledge responsibility for the crime of which they are accused.

The argument made here endorses many of the points made by Maruna and Mann. It extends their argument by asserting that cognitive distortion is in a sense an artefact of the very situation which is designed to uncover and challenge them. The inferential context of sex offender treatment allows its participants to 'see' distortions in their activities and use these perceptions to constitute and transact much of the business of treatment groups. The points made here suggest a radical reconsideration of the notion of cognitive distortions which could in turn contribute to a move away from a 'deficit' model which has dominantly influenced treatment programmes to date (McMurrin & Ward, 2004).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This data was collected in 1995/6 under a treatment programme syllabus which has since been revised. It could be argued that the findings reported here are of limited value given the revisions to the syllabus. However, I would argue that this analysis identifies well established social practices available to all competent members of society and which are likely to occur under any regime where offenders are asked to account for their past actions.

<sup>2</sup> All extracts have a code which indicates their source in the original corpus. All names and locations in the extracts have been changed from the original.

<sup>3</sup> 'A record' is an UK English term for a long-playing vinyl audio disc.

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## Appendix: Transcription conventions

In the transcriptions lines were numbered for ease of reference. Speakers were indicated by abbreviations indicating their role. Thus 'Off(D)' denoted offender D as the speaker (IE in extract 3 denoted the interviewee)

The aim of transcription is to reproduce as accurately as possible how the section of talk was actually spoken. To this end, the talk is often represented phonologically rather than orthographically and is complemented by a set of conventions which indicate prosodic and other non-verbal characteristics of the spoken text. The conventions used in the transcriptions were based on Jeffersonian notation as outlined below (see Hutchby, & Wooffitt, 1998, for a summary).

<u>Don't</u>	Underlining indicates stress or emphasis
(2.0), (.)	Numbers in brackets refer to pauses in talk in seconds and tenths of a second. Those less than two-tenths are indicated by (.)
(sort of)	Words in brackets indicate the transcriber's best estimate of an unclear section of speech. Empty brackets indicate a section of talk but which was too indistinct to transcribe accurately.
hh	A sequence of h's indicates an audible out breath, the number of h's indicates the relative length of the out breath
.hh	A sequence of h's preceded by a full-stop, indicates an in breath, the number of h's indicates the relative length of the in breath
:	A colon indicates an elongation or stretching of a particular syllable or sound, the number of colons indicates the relative length of the stretching
> <	'Greater-than' (and 'less-than') signs enclose speech which is noticeably faster (slower) than the surrounding talk

- = Equal signs indicate continuous talk between speakers, or the continuation of one speaker's talk across different lines of the transcript
- ↑ ↓ Pointed up and down arrows indicate a marked rise or fall in the speech intonation
- ◦ Degree signs enclose talk which is lower in volume than the surrounding talk.
- A hyphen after a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption
- A right pointing arrow identifies a line in the transcript which is of particular analytic interest.