# 10 Analysing Children's accounts using discourse analysis

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Discourse analytic approaches to research depart from understandings of the individual and of the relation between language and knowledge provided by positivist and post-positivist approaches. This chapter sets out to show what this might mean for studying children's experiences through, for example, interview-based research, and how a discourse-analytic approach may bring into play conceptual resources that are particularly valuable for research with children. First and foremost, discursive approaches highlight the interpretative nature of any research, not only that with children. As a consequence, they challenge the conventional distinction between data collection and analysis, question the status of research accounts and encourage us to question taken-for-granted assumptions about distinctions between adults and children. Hence our emphasis here will be on the active and subjective involvement of researchers in hearing, interpreting and representing children's 'voices'.

The case has already been made for listening to children, as earlier chapters describe, however, we want to highlight processes involved in (to follow the aural metaphor) *hearing* what children say. We share the view that it matters 'that some people speak and that others are merely spoken' (Probyn, 1993: 72). Hence we present a particular discourse-analytic approach as compatible with the aims that unite the authors of this book, 'of captur[ing] children's lived experiences of the world and the meanings they attach to those experiences from their own perspectives' (Hogan, 1998: 2). However, discursive approaches locate these meanings at a cultural, rather than individual level. They therefore reframe the research enterprise as the production of a culturally situated account of cultural meanings and practices ('discourses'), often through the study of how particular individuals are able to draw on, or are positioned within, these discourses. 'Hearing children's voices' is an active, subjective process in contrast with the positivist depiction of data collection as a neutral process of gathering pre-existing facts that are unmediated by our perceptions and unchanged by our practices of description and representation.

In this chapter we highlight two aspects of a discourse-analytic approach to describe what it can offer research with children. The notion of discourse

that we introduce points to the importance of context, and we highlight how discursive approaches insist on the contextualization of both the accounts children give researchers, and the accounts researchers give of these accounts in two key ways. First, a discursive approach to research with children studies the statements of particular children and their interlocutors in the context of cultural understandings of child*hood*. It seeks to understand what children say in relation to (a) what it was possible for them to say (Foucault, 1988); and (b) what it is possible for us (particular adult members of a particular culture) to hear them saying. Second, discursive work insists that analysis is similarly grounded in the context in which it is produced, hence the significance of the particular researcher in producing a particular analysis. This brings matters of interpretation to the fore. As researchers, we inevitably bring into the practice of research political, conceptual and ethical resources that any technical approach cannot in itself specify or provide. This means that, from the outset, we caution against either over-attributing political potential to features of discursive approaches, or on the other hand ignoring them. The discourse-analytic approach discussed here is informed by feminist research and theory, which distinguishes it from more general approaches to discourse analysis (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). The features that we argue make this approach valuable for research with children relate to understandings of the individual (the subject) and of power. These derive from the post-structuralist-informed approach we employ. Post-structuralist ideas fuel useful challenges to prevailing models of language, representation, and (claims to) knowledge (Burman, 1990; Weedon, 1987). Indeed this starting point for discourse analysis has implications for the nature of research itself.

It is because discourse-analytic research draws attention to processes of interpretation that we do not see the research interview as providing researchers with a clear 'window' through which children's experiences can be seen. Researchers themselves have to be brought into view within the frame of the research since, we argue, the interview is an inter-subjective process in a very particular social context (Mishler, 1986; Ribbens, 1989). Hence interpretation enters into both hearing and the analysis of what children say, and beyond this into how it is represented within research reports. This is why researcher reflexivity needs to go beyond the research dialogue (in the interview or any other 'data collection' exercise) to encompass the political judgements and subjective processes that enter into interpretative, authorial and editorial decisions about our representation of 'children's voices' (see also, for example, Marks, 1996).

## Language, Subjectivity and Childhood

Discourse analysis, as its name suggests, is an approach to analysis, rather than to 'data collection'. Its epistemological stance runs counter to that of positivist and post-positivist approaches. As discourse analysts, we cannot offer a distinct method or set of techniques. Instead we invite readers into

ways of viewing the interview, the analytic processes and the status of the accounts generated. This chapter focuses on describing the general features and implications of this critical epistemology, since there are profound implications for how research is understood. We therefore do not discuss 'age-appropriate' research methods or techniques that one would consciously alter with the age of the child. Indeed the points we identify as the potential contributions of discourse analysis to research with children are no more particular to research with children than with other participants. However, perhaps precisely because of this, they have, in our view, particular relevance for children.

An approach that begins from a questioning of the conventional model of the individual is particularly valuable for those groups of people, such as children, who have historically been denied full subject status. It offers not simply inclusion for children in the category of the 'normal subject', but adds further weight to the critique of this (modernist) subject that has been developed from feminist, post-colonial, psychoanalytic and post-structuralist perspectives (see, for instance, Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1998; Rose, 1989). The idealized model of the subject, to which children have been compared and found lacking, has the irrational, like the emotional and traces of the unconscious, sanitized from it. Yet adult and child participants alike may 'interweave fact and fiction both consciously and unconsciously' (Mayall, 1994: 13) in their accounts, and we might use the more complex model of the subject this suggests to critique the narrow understandings of the normal subject in psychology and other modernist disciplines. Children's apparent deviation from the category of 'reliable informants' might not mark them out as special case after all, and indeed could help us question presumptions about the subject and about interview accounts in general (Burman, 1997a, 1998). This modernist notion of subjecthood is culturally dominant and increasingly globally pervasive, its individualism being accelerated under neoliberal capitalism (Burman, 1995a, 1997b, 2001). Walkerdine (1988) showed how the value accorded rationality means that those deemed less rational can be seen in a general sense as less 'civilized'. The superior presumption of 'development' in this modernist framework is used to warrant patronizing, controlling or colonial attitudes towards those viewed as more primitive, be they children or other (usually non-western, non-European) societies (Burman, 1994c, 1995a, 1995b, 1999). Feminist and post-structuralist thinking (for example, Burman, 1994a; Moi, 1985; Walkerdine, 1988) has highlighted the ways in which children and women have been viewed as differing from the ideal subject.

Furthermore, dominant western constructions of the child – as incomplete subject, at risk of being less rational, self-controlled or reflexive (Burman, 1994a) – can themselves be better evaluated via a discursive approach. This insists upon a reflexive framing of the 'object' of study so that the cultural 'taken-for-granteds' come under scrutiny. Thus the issues discourse analysis raises about the status of accounts have particular significance for *adults*' interpretations of children's experiences. Children's 'voices' cannot be heard outside of, or free from, cultural understandings of childhood and the cultural

meanings assigned their communication (for example, Alldred, 1998). What distinguishes childhood researchers influenced by social constructionist or broadly post-structuralist approaches is the attention to the social construction of childhood alongside what particular actual children have said (Burman, 1992, 1994a; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1996; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992). Being reflexive about analysis means stepping back from the tools and conceptual resources employed, including the categories invoked and subjecting them to the same scrutiny.

Discursive approaches can inform analysis of material generated in a range of ways. While typically analyses are based on transcribed accounts of interview-based research[1], it is possible to analyse any type of verbal or visual text with this approach (see Parker & The Bolton Discourse Network, 1999, for analyses of material drawn from different media). The text need not necessarily be an account of speech by one person, or of a conversation between people, but could equally be a verbal account derived from the researcher's description of an object or a cultural practice, as we shall see later.

Discourses are frameworks of meaning produced in language. They operate independently of the intentions of speakers or writers, as ideas that cohere and not only reflect the social world, but serve to construct it. Michel Foucault's work on the power of expert knowledge through individuals' own understandings is particularly relevant for examining the power of discourses of child, adult, individual, and so forth, and for the post-structuralist informed work described here. Drawing on Foucault, Ian Parker defines a discourse as 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (Parker, 1992: 5). Thus, psychological discourses of the self or of the nature of adulthood compared with childhood become constitutive of our experience (Rose, 1989, 1993; Steedman, 1995). Notwithstanding the many varieties of 'discourse analysis'[2], common to all are three ideas: first, that language is structured so as to produce and constrain sets of meanings; second, that the social world can only be accessed and interpreted via language; and third, that this therefore means that it can only be studied via an approach that explores the work done by language. This is significant for the way research interviewing is understood, as we shall explore.

Discourse analysis is, then, an approach to interpreting verbal material that connects with critiques of the positivist empiricism and expert knowledge that characterized modernity. Its roots lie in the questioning of assumptions about representation across the social sciences from the late 1960s onwards (Parker, 1989). For example, in psychology the ethogenic approach (Harre, 1979; Harre & Secord, 1972) that was the forerunners of discourse analysis saw interview accounts as pieces of a jigsaw, but this metaphor proved limited because it implied the picture could be completed. Instead, the notion of 'interpretive repertoires' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) invites attention to both a range of possibilities and the sociocultural sourcing of individuals' accounts. Significantly, this allows for multiple and potentially contradictory accounts that do not have to be squared with each other, and is compatible with the idea that a person's account relates to a *perspective* rather than to their (unified) identity. People's utterances could be seen as

functioning to create certain effects for them in the conversation (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), rather than simply reflecting 'their perspective' (as if this was unitary and static).

This attention to textuality, in terms of taking seriously the different forms of description available and provided, recognizes that different ways of describing something have different consequences for how we understand it. For example, whether a child is being 'naughty' or 'expressive' (see Walkerdine, 1998) illustrates how language constructs what it 'names' and therefore embodies value judgements. This means that discourse-analytic work seeks neither to identify features intrinsic to children, at the expense of either differences between them or of their commonalities with adults, nor does it identify the accounts any particular child participants gave as necessarily defining or entirely representing their individual 'perspectives'. Rather, every account generated is treated as partial – both in the sense of being incomplete (for within this framework there is no complete account) and motivated or shaped by individual social agendas.

## From Analysing the (Isolated Deficient) Child to Children's Talk

Language can be seen as providing 'subject positions' for speakers to occupy rather than 'perspectives' (Henriques et al., 1998; Davies & Harre, 1990). As we speak, we are positioned and position ourselves in particular ways which serve certain functions. At another time or in a different context, we may occupy quite different subject positions. Acknowledging that the same person may be positioned differently at different times has profound implications. It challenges psychology's model of the 'the subject' as unitary, stable and consistent, (including the notion of identity that usually underpins claims to hear children's – or others' – voices). It insists that contradictions and multiple subject positions are ordinary features of everyday life, not something marking out the pathological individual. Where psychology would conventionally attribute these differences between people to differences of their development or cognitive abilities – locating the difference within the individual – different accounts can instead be understood as drawing on differential linguistic resources made accessible through particular cultural practices. Clearly some subject positions wield more power than others, and are differentially available to people by virtue of their social and institutional positioning with age and generational hierarchies being key limiting dimensions.

This move towards multiple, situationally constructed and constrained positions is significant for children, as for others for whom inconstancy or irrationality have been seen as marking their difference from the 'normal' subject. For example, when interviewing children about 'family', definitions of family that are logically distinct or even opposed can be interpreted without

attributing this to faulty reasoning. In one study, (see O'Brien, Alldred, & Jones, 1996), children talking in focus groups contradicted themselves, at one point saying something like 'he's not my real dad, he's my step-dad', and at another defining a 'real' parent as one who's 'there for you', thereby prioritizing social relationships, especially of emotional support, over biological kinship. While the psychological model of the subject typically locates these contradictions inside the individual speaker's head, the discursive approach locates them culturally, whereby contradictions express features of the culture and indicate the multiplicity of discourses in circulation. Rather than seeing this logical inconsistency as caused by an individual child's limited cognitive ability to recognize the permanence of relations across location (that is, that he is still your dad even if you never see him), the 'confusion', if any, is cultural, reflecting how a multiplicity of accounts (or discourses) of 'family' co-exist. Analysis of the group discussion transcript might further address the ways biological definitions of family can compete with social ones in claims to 'real family' status (as Edwards, Gillies, & Ribbens McCarthy, 1999 have explored in other interview material). Or it might examine the way different discourses of family construct different members, deploy different markers of membership and might be warranted in alternative ways – by appeals to truth ('it just is') or to experiential knowledge and subjective perspective ('in my family' or 'to me'). It might examine the meanings and values that are assumed and asserted, and make links between what was said in the discussion and what is going on at broader cultural levels.[3]

To limit analysis to a rational level about the technical definitions of family would clearly be absurd, because it understates both the generality of the issue – that adults, as well as children negotiate these different understandings of family in relation to our own experiences and values – and the personal and emotional significance of the discourses, and of each specific social context in which it is discussed. Instead, a post-structuralist discursive approach focuses on the way discourses function for speakers in the discussion in relation to the cultural power they wield, for instance, through a conservative 'family values' discourse or a psychological discourse of 'what's normal' or 'what children need' (Burman, 1994a). Rather than rushing to attribute features of the account of family to children as a specific group (whether in relation to their cognitive limits, irrationality, lesser abilities, lesser articulacy or reflexivity), children's talk about family can be seen as illustrating the range of available discourses of family that in turn reveal some of our current cultural concerns. Thus the research could highlight what the children's discussion indicates about a culture, rather than about those particular children's psychologies or orientations. It might offer an analysis of a society's cultural or sub-cultural ways of making meaning, the processes by which ideology is maintained and also by which we, as individual subjects (including as researchers!), are produced and our senses of ourselves sustained. While individual, psychic processes are, of course, at play in the generation of accounts, discourse analysis in itself does not provide an interpretive framework for these. Indeed, accounts that claim to be

able to do just this should be questioned. By not assuming that the accounts children give us simply tell us what is going on inside their minds, discursive approaches interrupt the temptation either to over-attribute to the particular individuals or to romanticize 'children's perspectives'.

## Reflexivity and Representation: Being Explicit about Interpretive Claims about Children

Social/emotional dynamics are typically edited out of research accounts because conventional data processing and analysis stages have tended to mop up or ignore the messiness of people's accounts (for example, Alldred & Gillies, 2002). Including such 'messiness' might appear to further children's otherness from the idealized subject. But deliberately framed to do so, this helps challenge the normativity of this sanitized area. A researcher might decide that taking the research dynamics as their focus for analysis serves children better by showing their insight and reflexivity, claiming for them a place within the conventional model of subjectivity.

For instance, we have each found that even young children can be reflexive and humourous about contradictions within their accounts (Burman, 1991, 1992; O'Brien et al., 1996). Seven-year-olds in the discussion group, referred to earlier were sympathetic to each other where the personal implications of a particular discourse challenged each other's understandings of their own families. For instance, a child who began with strong statement about the conventional family form allowed himself to be convinced by a girl who argued that her family was still a 'family' in spite of having 'no dad in it' (not just no co-residential father). An equally powerful plea for social and emotional factors to be given primacy was made by a Muslim girl, in whose own family biological and social roles did in fact overlap (O'Brien et al., 1996). Their open dialogue showed humility in letting someone 'change their mind', and empathy as they recognized how particular discourses of family might make people feel, and placed this above the 'face-saving' that sticking logically to their argument could offer.

Since social constructionist theory 'has warned that giving our "subject" a "voice" involves the fantasy that it is possible to have unmediated direct knowledge of experience (James & Prout, 1990)' (Marks, 1996: 115), an interview cannot be seen as an expression of the interviewee's own 'authentic voice', but as generated through such 'filters' as the participants' perceptions of the situation, the research focus, interview questions, likely audience and interpretation, as well as the structural constraints they face and their personal values and biographies. Discourse analysts therefore see children's accounts as reflecting any or all of these, and so potentially offering insight into relevant aspects of their perspective that inform their experience as children. However, they would also point out that the account might owe more to their being, say, a Londoner, black or a church-goer. That is, other aspects of their social identity may be more significant than their age in producing their perspective. Besides exploring what of an interview account

might be particular to them as particular children, discourse analysts keep a broader frame to look for what the accounts suggest about the human condition generally. The researcher's account of this introduces another layer, which we will discuss shortly.

## Doing Discourse Analysis

We now describe a way of conducting discourse analysis that highlights the researcher's role in producing not only the analysis, but also the text. That is, identifying as interpretive those stages arising before what is usually identified as 'analysis'. The particular approach we outline here draws on Parker's work (1992, 1994). We then draw on some examples from our previous work to highlight how interpretative dilemmas that discourse analysts face echo those of feminists in using any discursive or deconstructive approach (see, for example, Burman, 1990).

### Stage 1: Generating the text

For Parker (1992, 1994), the first stage of analysis is to turn the 'text' into a written form. Where research material has been elicited in an interview with a child, or similar verbal discussion, it usually comprises questions and responses that are typically tape-recorded and transcribed. The discourses employed can be examined in terms of how they function in the conversation. However, consumer artefacts can also be subject to the same kind of analysis, once they have been rendered a verbal text. Hence Parker (1994) takes the example of text from a children's toothpaste packet and shows how this cultural object reinscribes discourses of children, parents and health. He works with verbal features of the text, such as the 'Directions for use', to explore the construction of the dutiful parent, and of the child's medicalized 'need' for toothpaste, and but also shows how visual elements of layout, fonts, colours and the reference to children's fictional characters (in this case Punch and Judy) can be analyzed to show the way particular constructions of childhood are mobilized to lend the product the 'trustiness' associated with 'good 'ole days', 'traditional' childhoods. Thus he shows how visual elements (such as packaging) contribute to its meanings. So the starting point for analysis is the words, the textual account. Producing a verbal text is therefore the researcher's first task.

Acknowledging the process of production of the text to be analyzed highlights some key features of a discourse analytic approach. In the case of a visual image, discursive approaches, as Parker puts it, 'bring into focus connotations that normally twinkle on the margins of our consciousness' (1994: 96). In the case of interviews, they trouble the idea that there can be literal representations. Discursive approaches therefore highlight the representational and interpretive character of all stages of the research processes, from defining a text (producing it, in the case of an interview transcript) and before any

formal 'data analysis' begins. Mishler (1991) describes some of the decisions to be taken about representing the complexities of live social interaction – even a calm, polite, slightly formal interview conversation – in the two-dimensional form of a written account. Added to this is the recognition that hearing is an active process, and is always already interpretive, drawing on the meanings we already 'know'.

As anyone who has transcribed an interview or a lecture has found, transposing an auditory verbal account into a written one is not straightforward (Ochs, 1979; Stubbs, 1983; Tedlock, 1984). Not only might there be moments of indecipherability or ambiguity when re-playing the tape of an interview, there are decisions about selection regarding what constitutes legitimate material (does one transcribe the exchange with the person who 'interrupted' the interview, the offer of a cup of tea at the start, the discussion about research at the end, or all the 'innit' or 'y' know' utterances?). Deliberately adding (or withholding) punctuation involves decisions that alter the meaning of the same string of words, and moreover, might be done 'automatically' (this is discussed further in Alldred & Gillies, 2002).

Contrast, for instance, the word string 'yes no', which is surprisingly common at the start of a response, when punctuated 'Yes. No …' (meaning 'Yes' with an explanation following) as opposed to 'Yeh, no'. (meaning 'No', but beginning with an affirming gesture to the previous speaker). The person transcribing is using his or her own understanding of the meanings intended, and is thereby already engaged in an interpretative process in the 'data generation' stage, before what is conventionally recognized as the analysis stage. On top of this, there are active processes of remembering (of our understandings at the time of nonverbal communication and of intended meanings) which are selective, loaded and interpretative – and invoke the researcher's individual and cultural norms about memory and subjectivity in ways that we can perhaps only glimpse (Antze & Lambek, 1996). Multiple transcripts are thus possible from the same audiotaped interview (Mishler, 1991; Ochs, 1979). Rather than being an unproblematic starting point, an interview transcript is a new text, an artefact, that not only evidences the researcher's involvement in the interview dynamic, but is also produced by them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Mishler, 1986).

'Data analysis', as Scheurich (1997) argues, 'is not the development of an accurate representation of the data, as the positivist approach assumes, but a creative interaction between the conscious/unconscious researcher and the decontextualized data which is assumed to represent reality, or at least, reality as interpreted by the interviewee' (p. 63). The researchers are already 'in the picture' that, within conventional research models, they think they are merely looking at. Objects of research scrutiny do not just land on our desks but are the products of our interests, and as researchers we define and delimit them albeit within conditions – political, cultural, economic, institutional, disciplinary, funding and departmental – not of our choosing. However, even in post-positivist research where the researcher is no longer seen as a neutral tool 'representing' the world, declarations about the researcher's subjectivity can imply that admitting their 'biases' allows them

to be transcended (Bordo, 1989; Stanley & Wise, 1993). We insist that not only can such positionings not be wiped away, but that the researcher remains situated and the perspective particular even if it is that that is hegemonic for the period.

### Stage 2: Making connections: elaborating the discourse

Once the object of study has been defined and  a text produced, Parker suggests that the second stage of discourse analysis is to free associate as broadly as possible with the text: what meanings, associations and connotations could it have? It is the significance of the researcher in this elaboration of the text, as well as the first stage of analysis, that leads Parker (1992) and Burman (1994d) to suggest the value of working in a team. Working with others at this stage generates a broader range of associated meanings and helps researchers to notice the particularities of their own perspectives. Parker encourages us not to dismiss too quickly the quirky chains of association this might suggest because they can help to identify the meanings and associations that the interviewee may not necessarily have intended – and which the interviewer may be unlikely to notice because of his or her involvement in the interview conversation. These include drawing attention to banal conventions that mark assumed social hierarchies as well as idio-syncratic engagements with, or subversions of, these. Teams doing feminist interpretive work have developed particular approaches to help each other consider their own investments in particular analyses (for example, Gordon, Holland, & LaHelma, 2000; Stephensen, Kippax, & Crawford, 1996).

### Stage 3: Identifying objects and subjects: what is a child?

The third stage Parker describes is the identification of 'objects' in the text (the transcript or section of transcript). As a starting point he suggests item-izing the nouns referred to. What sort of a world is constructed by this account? What are the explicit items and what are the implicit objects that are also called into being? This list of 'objects', as things that are 'described' or, as this approach argues, 'constructed', also contains implied relations between them. The relationship between, say, 'books' and 'learning' involves 'reading' or 'studying' or 'looking at'. As we 'fill in' these relationships, we are elaborating the discourses that are at work in the text. Before identifying the discourses that 'hold together' these objects in particular understandings of the world, he suggests we do the same thing for 'subjects'. That is, to list all the categories of person referred to or implied by the text. These can go beyond explicitly institutional identity categories such as teacher and pupil to include other (perhaps less formal) 'subject positions', such as 'good reader', 'swot', and any assumptions about them, such as, for instance, 'white westerner', 'owner of the book', or 'hard at study'. It might include

those who are implicitly constructed in contrast to these subjects – 'disruptive pupils' or 'naughty boys'. Hence it becomes possible to explore to whom the text is addressed, and how the reader is positioned by assumptions structured around the particular array of subject positions that thereby work to persuade them to assume particular alliances.

### *Stage 4: Rights and roles: who can say what*

The next stage involves thinking about what can be said from each of the different subject positions identified. Within the meanings made available by the text, differential rights to speak are designated. Teachers are allowed to identify 'good readers' in ways that children are not, and the rules that govern access to these discourses are a key way of examining the power that resides in the different subject positions identified. Different subject positions carry particular sets of rights and responsibilities. Children can, of course, refer to 'good readers', but with different effects, notably without a teacher's professional authority (though perhaps expressing their desire to draw on this). This highlights the importance of examining how what is said *functions* in the text.

### *Stage 5: … and why: institutional links*

One can then interrogate the text by exploring the different versions of the social world that co-exist. What are the relationships between subjects in the text? And what are the implications for those who do not follow the rules implied? (They might appear silly, arrogant or irrational, for instance.) What penalties follow from not adopting the subject positions and their consequential discursive rights and responsibilities? While these questions can be asked of the text as a whole (in terms of the total range of explicit subject positions available), they must also be asked of each specific discourse identified. The relationship between teacher and pupil embedded in the discourse of teacher authority involves not just responsibility for the pupil in *loco parentis*, but an authority that results from the teacher's claim to expert knowledge of (or 'about') the pupil. It may also embody elements of adult–child and age-related status hierarchies, and perhaps borrow from the discourse of parental authority over children that serves to further naturalize adult–child authority relations. This is the unpacking of sets of cultural meanings, and although it is a stage more abstracted from the text, both, remember, are artefacts.

### *Further considerations – for, by or about children: what's at stake?*

Parker's (1992) version of discourse analysis identifies three further steps. Researchers should, he suggests, be concerned with how discourses relate to

institutions, power and ideology (p. 17). Foucault's (1972) analysis of the relations between discourse and practice highlights the operation of power through language so that material practices are always invested with meaning. Speaking or writing – the deployment of texts – is also a a 'practice,' which reproduces the material basis of an institution. Researchers should therefore examine the ways that 'discursive practices' work ideologically, in terms of sustaining or challenging institutions. Post-structuralist discourse-analytic approaches, in examining the relationship between children's own accounts and broader cultural understandings of children and childhood, do, of course, consider the social institutions of family and schooling, for instance. However, they also attend to the relations between these accounts and the research relationships and writing (and reading) practices that are structured by, and sustain, academic institutions. Thus Carolyn Steedman's (1983) analysis of children's writing addressed both written accounts produced by children and also how these can only be understood in relation to the body of literature about children's writing, including writing for children (see also Steedman, 1995).

Analysis should therefore involve identifying institutions that are reinforced or undermined by a particular discourse (Parker, 1992: 18) by identifying who stands to benefit from, and who loses out from, use of the discourse and what relations of power are structured in, and reproduced by, particular discursive practices (Parker, 1992: 19). Not all versions of discourse analysis would share this concern with ideology, but it follows from the post-structuralist understanding of the constructive power of language that discourses or 'discursive practices' (practices arising from particular discursive representations) have political effects, and serve to produce and distribute power in particular ways (see, for instance, Weedon, 1987). This is not to imagine that some discourses are ideological, while others are true, or to accept the idea that some people are victims of false consciousness. Rather it is an important reminder to attend to the power relations and political effects of discourses both within and beyond the interview setting.

Clearly, the process will vary with the type of text, the aim and focus of the analysis, however, Table 10.1 is offered as a summary of the steps described above.

## Interpreting Children's Accounts – Some Claims and Cautions

Analysis is a subjective and (spatially and temporally) particular process whereby sets of cultural meanings are generated from personal and political (and academically) situated locations. Meanings are 'not fixed by reference to positivist constructions of a simple, unmediated and directly observable reality', but 'by the intersection of multiple relations (too multiple to name) which reflect and produce structures of regulation (age, gender, class, "race", sexuality, etc.) constituting social realities' (Burman, 1992: 57). To state that

**Table 10.1   Conducting discourse analysis: A summary of analytic stages drawn from Parker (1992, 1994) and Burman (1992, 1996)**

1. Produce a written text (e.g., transcript), and reflect on processes involved in its production.
2. 'Free associate' with the text. Consider surprising and unsurprising connections and reflect upon the perspectives from which they derive.
3. Identify 'objects' constructed by elaborating the nouns in the text. Consider the meanings and values implied.
4. Examine the relations between objects.
5. Explore to whom the text is addressed and the how the reader is positioned.
6. Identify the different subject positions within the text and elaborate the rights and responsibilities that accompany each. Consider what can be said from each position and how this might function.
7. Examine the relations between subjects.
8. Examine the understandings that form connections between and among subjects and objects. Consider whether there are alternative versions of these relationships (discourses) in the text.
9. Consider the values and institutions that are reinforced or undermined by these discourses.
10. Consider who gains and who loses within each discourse, and map any relations of hierarchy, including of knowledge or authority.
11. Consider whether these discourses allude to alternative accounts and what this suggests about how they function culturally.
12. Reflect upon the political values and relations (discourses) that enabled articulation of the last three stages, and the personal investments in these perspectives and this particular analysis.

both the 'hearing' and the 'analysis' of what children say are active processes of interpretation raises complex questions about epistemology, including who counts as a 'knower', that highlight the significance of the researcher. Particularizing both the account given by interviewee *and* the account of this account given by the researcher changes the nature of the claims made for the published research 'findings'. For when research accounts are not seen as definitive statements of 'knowledge', they may be subject to scrutiny and to contestation, (including by competing claims to represent children's views), which undermines the seeming omnipotence of the researcher implied in conventional models of research. Recognizing that *hearing* children's accounts is an interpretative process directs our attention to some of the cultural taken-for-granted, including the implicit commonsense, as well as technical, parameters of our analysis. Recognizing analysis as an active, partial, particular process can help us to lay bare some of the conceptual/analytic/theoretical tools we use, and perhaps some of the everyday ones too. Research can and should be reflecting upon the world in which it itself takes place.

While arguing that do not only children's accounts rely on socially available and context-specific meanings, but so also do their analysis and representation by researchers, discursive approaches provide little guidance in determining specific interpretive matters. Instead, researchers' personal interpretations and political judgements emerge as crucial to the determination

of interpretive emphasis and ambiguity. This is why questions of reliability are eschewed in post-structuralist informed work in favour of reflexivity, which attempts to account for how a particular analysis was arrived at. Once it is accepted that interpretation can only ever be particular, then this means that there is no intrinsic value (such as claims to general 'truth') in common accounts (such as repeated measures notions of reliability). They might usefully aid the identification of hegemonic readings, as might team-working (although individual researchers are viewed as being as competent to do this as cultural members whose perspective is no more or less valid than the next person's), but this is not to fix with certainty a definitive meaning of a child's utterance. We argue that a feminist perspective can and should inform analysis in terms of content and interview dynamic, because as Burman (1992) explains:

> One of the places where feminist and post-structuralist concerns meet is in affirming reflexivity, both as structured within research relationships (no longer colluding in the sanitization of subjectivity, identification and emotion from research encounters) and within the theory-method relation. (p. 47)

The analysis and presentation of data are areas where the people researched have least power (Mayall, 1999). Processes of analysis, writing and reporting privilege the researcher's own perspective, since in producing an account we have interpretive, authorial and editorial authority, even where the 'content' is attributed to children. Enabling children to be (recognized as) active in the interview dynamic is one thing, but surrendering some of our control by allowing them to be party to the selection, interpretation or representation of their accounts is quite another, especially where we view responsibility for the politics of the research findings as remaining with the researcher. Reflexivity needs to extend to processes occurring within the academy, not just within the field (Probyn, 1993). Therefore feminist researchers try to discuss what we bring to the research relationship in terms of interview dynamics and the interpretation of the accounts where personal and political aspects of ourselves, which are formed through our current and historically constituted positions, inform the meaning we make.

Thus discursive approaches to the analysis of children's accounts generated through interviews might aim to recognize the culturally available meanings they rely upon, including those that constrain children's access to these meanings, or which differentiate between specific categories of children on the basis of their social positionings (for example, gendered, classed, racialized positions), as well as the particularities of an individual child's perspective and experiences. Discursive approaches encourage analyses that connect the microlevel (including within the particular interview dynamic and local cultures of meaning), with the macrolevel of broader social conditions and meanings (including what could not have been said from the subject position of child interviewee).

## Refusing Meanings

Paradoxically, if discourse analysis has particular value for the analysis of interviews with children, this is not because of something intrinsic to the approach, but rather because of what it refuses to provide. By refusing to provide the researcher with guaranteed stable meanings, the researcher has to acknowledge his or her own role with the processes of interpretation that give rise to these meanings. In order to warrant a particular analysis, we have to make explicit something of how and why we constructed its meaning in that way. Sometimes the seemingly self-evident nature of a particular interpretation can make it hard to justify – indeed sometimes it is hard to identify the process as 'interpretation', because the meaning of something can be so commonplace as to be 'obvious'. However, this might precisely be an opportunity to generate particular insights about cultural defaults and dominant meanings such as the differences between adults and children. Reflecting on the (personal and political) resources that inform our analysis can at least help to avoid reifying a particular analysis to imply that a given interpretation is inevitable and would necessarily be shared by another researcher. However, this need not lead to a relativist view that all interpretations are equally viable or valuable. Attending to the power relations conferred by structural research practices and subject positions elaborated within discourses not only highlights previously unacknowledged diversities of meaning, but also limits the possible range of interpretation. Not only are the frameworks and political commitment the researcher brings to analysis significant, but the relations these produce for researcher and researched, as well as the dynamics produced in the interview itself, must be scrutinized.

Including reflection on the research process in the 'findings' disrupts the notion that research interviews provide a 'clear window' onto children's experiences (Alldred & Gillies, 2002; Marks, 1996). Researchers can admit a situated analysis by making processes of interpretation as visible as possible, and avoiding the passive language conventions that imply that themes or discourses 'emerge' from the text in any immediate or disembodied way. However, research reflexivity should not replace a 'view from nowhere' with a 'dream of everywhere', but rather it should admit and explore the implications of the view from somewhere quite particular indeed (Bordo, 1990: 142; Haraway, 1990). For example, Erica has argued that attending to the power relations structured and reproduced in over-determined ways (as in the age–researcher conflation within the adult–child, researcher–researched relation) can fix the potential variety of interpretations of an interview exchange (Burman, 1992).

## Language, Gender and Power

In this extract from a corpus of interviews conducted with individual children in primary schools (from Burman, 1992: 52), Erica has invited a boy she is calling Ravi to ask questions of her:

| *Ravi* | Erica |
|---|---|
| *D'you park and put your bicycle in the other hall?* | Well at the moment it's just outside here. |
| *Parked? Outside there?* | Yes in the corridor because it's wet outside. |
| *Sometimes it can get stolen.* | Yes. |
| *Somebody may come in and he just get it and take it with them* | Have you ever had a bicycle stolen? |
| *Yeh. I had a bike stolen but I found it again …* | |

What struck Erica in later reading this transcript was the vague and ambiguous character of Ravi's statements. His use of the indefinite temporal qualifier 'sometimes', the impersonal pronoun 'it' and the passive infinitive 'get stolen' all manage to convey nothing specific about number or person and so suggest maximum indeterminacy. Through offering several alternative readings of the exchange, Erica shows how, while multiple interpretations are possible, 'analyzing the power relationship within which it occurred fixes that proliferation of meanings. Indeed, the indeterminacy is only apparent when the text is taken out of its (linguistic and wider discursive) context' (1992: 53).

First, the statement might be interpreted as friendly advice: 'Be careful. Sometimes …', although this cannot account for the failure of place or object specification. Second, it could be interpreted as an implicit threat ('if you don't do $x$ …') encoded in the (apparent) observation 'something might happen to (your) bicycle'. Here, within the genre of the gangster movie at least, 'sometimes' conveys a generalized menace. However, Erica notes how the context did not lend itself to this interpretation: 'If my interviewee had been double or treble his age (and height), and had reacted to the interview with hostility, and had said this with rather different intonation, and so on, then I might have interpreted it as a threat' (1992: 52–53). In a third reading, the as yet unspecified 'it' can be understood as specifically conceived for Ravi, with the 'sometimes' operating as a way of generalizing or shifting the object the 'it' refers to from Erica's bicycle to his own. The indefiniteness of 'sometimes' permits a transition of topic to the loss that Ravi goes on to discuss without making the shift too abrupt or rude a challenge to Erica's conversational control.

Hence Ravi's 'Sometimes it can get stolen' and its uncertainty with respect to whose bicycle is or has been stolen was interpreted by Erica as offering an area he wanted to talk about. The uncertainty therefore was not about Ravi's knowledge of his topic (as a typical 'competence'-based developmental psychological inquiry might assume), but rather was about the context of speaking, where it indicated an implicit request to suspend the terms of the conversation, the role play set up by Erica, (or suggests Ravi's recognition that he was deviating from it). This interpretation mobilizes an understanding

of adult–children relations in which age and authority are not only confounded, but also emphasized by the research relationship. Rather than indicating some conceptual or linguistic – or even conversational – deficit, then, this third reading illustrates both the deep connections between knowledge and power and Ravi's conversational skill in negotiating this. Hence, this analysis shows how texts beyond those under study must be drawn on to inform analysis and indeed will be, whether or not this is consciously recognized and acknowledged. Power relations, such as exist between adults and children, researchers and researched are not merely a consideration during reflexive analysis, but can be seen to have entered into the production, as well as the interpretation of discourse.

## Beyond the Objectification of Children: Putting the Researcher in the Picture

A post-structuralist informed approach to discourse alters the status attributed to a research account. First, we have written here in terms of 'eliciting' or generating accounts to highlight the active work of the researcher in generating interviewee accounts, usually via practices of questioning, and emphasized its joint construction in the discursive exchange and in the particular dynamic between researcher(s) and participant(s). Second, we have referred to the statements made in interviews as 'accounts' to ward off assumptions that these are representative in some essential way or define the participant's perspective. We have used the verb 'to hear' to acknowledge the active role of the researcher in attending, listening and making meaning of what the interviewee says – and 'making meaning' reminds us that this process is one of active interpretation. It is therefore culturally and historically specific and thus incomplete, particular and to some degree subjective. Meanings are grounded in the context of this particular form of social interaction (Mishler, 1986), which might include how children view the researcher, understand social research itself (Edwards & Alldred, 1999), and also how the particular topic is introduced and participation negotiated with children (David et al., 2001), as well as in relation to the broader social context of audiences such as social policymakers.

Discursive approaches problematize the assumption of literal representation or direct communication that conventionally frames researchers' accounts of interviews. For children's accounts in particular, the temptation to attribute authenticity to the accounts is bolstered by romantic discourses of childhood (illustrated in Wordsworth's 'out of the mouths of babes') and the association with the natural that is the flip-side of the attribution of 'civilized' rationality to (certain) adults. Broader social relations cannot be factored out of the research encounter, even if the interview process is consciously designed to critique the power relations it perpetuates. Researchers replicate structures of privilege through their proximity to institutions of knowledge, and this leads some (such as Patai, 1991) to argue that ethical

research is simply not possible in an unjust world. Taking up a position as one who knows, in relation to those who are oppressed, is fraught with ethical problems that are not assuaged by good intentions (see, for example, Gillies & Alldred, 2002), and some of the colonial practices maintained in the name of saving children are a case in point (see Burman, 1994c, 1999). At the very least, this requires that we focus on the potential losses as well as gains of particular approaches to research, or, indeed, involvement in research at all.

There are general issues of representation in and by research that feminists have queried (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996) and these have specific resonance in relation to children. In providing a research 'voice' for a particular group, we should recognize how we may simultaneously reinforce their construction as alien or 'other', and take our own (or the dominant cultural perspective) as central. Representing another can thereby inadvertently reproduce the very disempowerment it seeks to rectify (Opie, 1992; Reay, 1996). So while we share the democratizing impulse that lies behind wanting to use research to hear children's voices, we believe we must guard against the risk that, by drawing attention to them as a particular social group, we construct children as 'little aliens' (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), somehow essentially different from adults. We therefore hold in tension the benefits of extending subjecthood (through the status of research interviewee) to children, with a critique of the normativity of such subjecthood. Such reflection prevents us from assuming that our work is bound to be liberating (Marks, 1996) or even that an empowering experience for participants guarantees a progressive impact of research in terms of its cultural politics. Indeed, we must evaluate what particular representations mean for the participants, and for their social group in general (see Alldred & Gillies, 2002).

## From 'Giving Voice' to Textualizing Representational Practices

Discourses of 'giving voice' would seem to offer a way of treating children as active subjects and recognizing that they may have distinct perspectives on the world. Or, rather, that dominant understandings might be adult-centric. However, this need not rely on an identity-based approach that assumes a particular viewpoint follows from a particular identity (Bordo, 1990; Butler, 1990; Riley, 1988; Spivak, 1988), thereby reifying childhood as a universal state. Rather, researchers should assert the particularity of the accounts elicited and be wary of research rhetoric that implies that a reading claims to be representative (see, for example, Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Henwood, Griffin, & Phoenix, 1998). Similarly, in seeking to recognize the subjective perspectives of those who are researched, we must also recognize the particularity of the researcher, rather than allowing his or her/our

perspective to remain naturalized in the research account (Probyn, 1993; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Ticeneto Clough, 1992).

In placing children's voices in 'the public sphere', we need to examine the broader context of meanings brought into play. We need to ask through what cultural understandings of children are the words of any child 'heard', and how our account of them will be heard. Does it, in the specific context and debate, serve the interests of children to present them as having a distinct perspective? Or does it serve children better to show that their perspectives are not fundamentally different from adults' or even that differences between them are regarded as significant? It also means admitting who makes such decisions.

Responsibility for interpretation and political decision-making can be owned but not guaranteed. In addition, when doing research with and about children, we require them to make themselves understood in adult terms or to speak to adult agendas (for example, Alldred, 1998, after Grossberg, 1989). What are the particular implications of Patai's (1991) concern, given that researchers representing children's views do so within a power relation in which the researcher–researched relationship is confounded with the adult–child hierarchy (Burman, 1992)? Given the double-edged nature of offering children some of the rewards of full (research) subject status (such as their representation through research), researchers must use their political judgement about how and when to (claim to) represent children (Alldred, 1998). This is not a question to which a method can provide an answer (Burman, 1990).

We hope to have conveyed something of the possibilities of discourse-analytic work in research with child participants. It can offer detailed descriptions of the relations of meaning and power within particular cultural understandings, but cannot offer generalizable findings or indications of the frequency with which particular discourses are employed except insofar as it takes seriously the impact of enduring social divisions on specific social interactions.[4] We have tried to disentangle what the approach itself can offer ethical research practice, and what researchers themselves must bring to it in terms of political awareness and a commitment to social justice. A researcher's political and personal values come into play via his or her reflexive self-positioning within the research frame and are necessary in order to warrant particular interpretations and in order to problematize unexamined assumptions about the contribution of research to struggles for social justice.

While discourse analysis can be employed to analyse what children say, it rejects some of the theoretical underpinnings of the voice-as-perspective approach. So we end here by reiterating our caution against assuming that the political advantages for children in having their voice heard through research are self-evident or straightforward.[5] Rather than either upholding or deconstructing the subject of the 'voice' discourse, a discursive approach can help us think through what is at stake in adopting or critiquing it within particular sites of intervention.

## Notes

1.  We will not describe the interview process here, but see Burman (1994d) and, for a wide-ranging discussion of issues raised in qualitative social research, see Ribbens and Edwards (1998). The general points such texts make about reflecting on research practice have particular implications in relation to children, for instance, a concern with how participants are contacted raises issues of whether parents or teachers act as gatekeepers, making or limiting decisions for children or re/presenting the research to them in particular ways, affecting the context in which the research topic has meaning (see Burman, 1991, 1992; David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001).
2.  These range from conversational analysis and psycho-linguistic approaches in psychology to post-structuralist approaches to cultural objects and practices in cultural studies (see Fairclough, 1989; Parker and The Bolton Discourse Network, 1999; Wood & Kroger, 2000).
3.  For instance in the legal system, which increasingly recognizes the complexity of contemporary family forms and that parental and adult sexual partnership roles do not always overlap (Alldred, 1999).
4.  See Parker and Burman (1993) on the problems of discourse analysis, and Burman (1990) on the limitations and political noncomittal nature of post-structuralist approaches.
5.  As Hogan (1998) and others have noted, hearing children's views is not only a concern in academic research, but increasingly in practitioner domains such as health (though notably not in education, see Monk, 2002) as service-user feedback (for example, Davie, Upton, & Varma, 1996). This reflects the extending consumer ethos, in which empowerment packages are sold as individual consumer rights, that forms part of the broader cultural context for 'hearing children's voices', and the conditions that make this view of research possible; including the political discourse of rights, of voice-as-empowerment as well as legislative frameworks on children's rights (see also Burman, 1996). This broader reflection on how a society views its children (and discourses in which children and adults are united, such as in that of consumers) is what Parker (1992) is advocating as the consideration of institutional contexts of research within the analysis of discourse.

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