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# Discursive Psychology

Sally Wiggins and Jonathan Potter

## INTRODUCTION

Discursive psychology begins with psychology as it faces people living their lives. It studies how psychology is constructed, understood and displayed as people interact in everyday and more institutional situations. How does a speaker show that they are not prejudiced, while developing a damning version of an entire ethnic group? How are actions coordinated in a counselling session to manage the blame of the different parties for the relationship breakdown? How is upset displayed, understood and receipted in a call to a child protection helpline? Questions of this kind require us to understand the kinds of things that are 'psychological' for people as they act and interact in particular settings – families, workplaces and schools. And this in turn encourages us to respecify the very object psychology. Discursive psychology does not start with a 'technical' story of mental processes, behavioural regularities or neural events that are happening somewhere below and behind the business of interaction. Rather it starts with the categories, constructions and orientations through which a sense of agency, say, or severe distress, or

a moment of understanding are displayed in a piece of interaction in a particular setting.

Discursive psychology is not focused on discourse because it is interested in the psychology of language as a topic amongst others (prejudice, social influence, etc.) as it has been traditionally understood. Indeed, it takes a very different approach to language than is common in psychology. It is focused on discourse because it is the primary arena for action, understanding and intersubjectivity. It starts with a view of people as social and relational, and with psychology as a domain of practice rather than abstract contemplation. Its methodological principles follow from its meta-theoretical, theoretical and conceptual arguments, although these are further supported through their empirical fruitfulness.

This chapter will introduce the perspective of discursive psychology. We outline theoretical and methodological features, using examples from current research to elucidate our arguments. In doing so, we demonstrate the potential influence and future development of discursive research methods within psychology. We start by outlining the theoretical and intellectual roots of

discursive psychology (occasionally, DP) and its emergence within psychology. We then focus on contemporary issues and debates. For example, what is the importance of everyday practices? What is the status of cognitive notions in DP? And how does it deal with seemingly intractable topics such as embodiment? We will overview key studies to highlight what is distinctive about DP. The chapter will also detail the practicalities of DP research, from the initial stages of gaining ethical approval and collecting data, through to transcription and analysis. Examples from our own research on eating practices will be used to illustrate some of these stages in more detail. Finally, we consider limitations of the approach, and speculate as to the future of discursive psychology.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY OUT OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discursive psychology was developed out of a particular form of discourse analysis that was outlined most fully in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) highly influential book *Discourse and Social Psychology*. This pioneered qualitative discourse research in psychology, providing the basis for some of the first qualitative papers in empirical journals such as the *British Journal of Social Psychology* and *European Journal of Social Psychology*. Potter and Wetherell's book reconceptualized the topic of social psychology and outlined an alternative methodological approach that could be used in place of the experiments and questionnaires that had been the mainstay of published psychological work at that point. It drew on conversation analytic work on both everyday and institutional settings (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Levinson, 1983). It also built on post-structuralist ideas. Some of these were from the Foucaultian tradition of Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine (1984); others drew on thinking from Barthes, Derrida and other continental figures, as seen in the earlier work by Potter,

Stringer and Wetherell (1984). There is also an important debt to the work of Wittgenstein and linguistic philosophy (see Potter, 2001). This is partly a direct influence and partly comes through the important philosophical respecification of psychology developed by Harré (Harré and Gillett, 1994). Finally, it owed a major debt to the sociology of scientific knowledge and in particular Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). This is a potentially confusing mix; discipline was provided by taking as its major focus discourse – talk and texts – and, in particular, the ways in which discourse is oriented to actions within settings, the way representations are constructed and oriented to action, and a general caution about explanations of conduct based in the cognition of individuals.

Although Potter and Wetherell (1987) outlined many of the features later refined in discursive psychology it is worth highlighting two areas of difference as they have major methodological implications. First, a major focus of Potter and Wetherell (1987) was on the identification of the structured discursive resources that underlie and sustain interaction. There are different possibilities for the analysis of resources. While ethnomethodologists have focused on the role of membership categories (e.g. Hester and Eglin, 1997), rhetoricians, and particularly Billig (1996), have focused on rhetorical commonplaces. However, Potter and Wetherell developed the notion of interpretative repertoires from Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) earlier work. Interpretative repertoires are clusters of terms organized around a central metaphor, often used with grammatical regularity. They are flexibly drawn on to perform different actions (see Edley, 2001).

We can illustrate this notion with the example of Wetherell and Potter's (1992) major study of racist discourse in New Zealand and, in particular, its distinct way of addressing the notion of culture. They did not treat culture as a feature of the lifestyle, rituals and world view of Maoris as anthropologists would; nor did they treat it as a mental stereotype organizing the information processing of the Pākehā (White, European

New Zealanders) as social cognition psychologists would. Instead, they identified two interpretative repertoires through which culture was flexibly and locally constructed to perform different activities. On the one hand, the Culture-as-Heritage repertoire was used to build culture as an antiquated inheritance that should be treasured but requires protection from the rigours of the 'modern world'. On the other, the Culture-as-Therapy repertoire constructed culture as a psychological requirement that would stop Maori becoming rootless and mentally unstable. It is not that there is one notion of culture that these repertoires express differently; it is that culture is *constituted* in importantly different ways by these repertoires. Wetherell and Potter (1992) note that these repertoires show a sensitivity to difference organized around social relations rather than genetics, and are thus free of many of the connotations of racism. This is one of those reasons that they can be used (in newspapers, parliamentary debates and everyday talk) to make powerful and hard to rebut attacks on Maori political movements and undercut the legitimacy of Maori claims.

The notion of interpretative repertoires has been drawn on by many studies from across the social sciences. It offered a picture of complex, historically developed organizations of ideas that could be identified through research, and yet were flexible enough to be reworked within the contingencies of different concrete settings. This theorizing of the flexible requirements of practice offers some advantages over some neo-Foucaultian notions of discourse that are more brittle and tectonic (Parker, 1992); and this flexibility was developed in the important reworking of ideology in the domain of practice by Billig and colleagues (1988). Nevertheless, Wooffitt (2005) has suggested that the notion still fails to fully accommodate the complexity of human conduct; and there are major questions as to whether the structuring of repertoires is a consequence of preformed conceptual organizations or a by-product of the pragmatic organization of practices (see Potter, 1996, Chapter 6). Furthermore, the original repertoire notion required a series

of procedures and criteria for the reliable identification of something as a repertoire. Yet, many current studies offer only the vaguest idea of how the repertoires are identified and how they relate to a corpus of data (Potter, 2003a). There are important points of principle here, illustrated in the influential exchange between Schegloff (1997) and Wetherell (1998).

The second area of difference between Potter and Wetherell's (1987) conception of discourse analysis and the later discursive psychology concerns the place of open ended interviews in the generation of analytic materials. Potter and Wetherell draw on some work using naturalistic materials, but much of their discussion, and the majority of the very large body of subsequent studies using interpretative repertoires that this work spawned have used open ended interviews. Discursive psychology is distinct from the earlier tradition of discourse analysis in almost completely abandoning open ended interviews as a research method. This was partly due to profound problems with the production and analysis of open ended interviews (Potter and Hepburn, 2005a).

Despite these major differences there are some important continuities between Potter and Wetherell (1987) and discursive psychology. Both draw heavily on constructionist sociology of scientific knowledge and the revitalized rhetoric of Billig (1996). Both focus on categories and descriptions and the way they are involved in actions. Both offer a respecification of basic psychological notions. Let us illustrate this with the notion of attitudes. Potter and Wetherell (1987) started a wholesale respecification of the notion of attitudes by highlighting two troubling features for traditional work.

First, when materials from outside the very constrained settings of forced choice attitude scales are examined, we see considerable variability. The same speaker seemingly offers different evaluations of the same thing in different contexts. Such variability is an empirical embarrassment for attitude research. Indeed, variability as an empirical discovery from the careful study of discourse

was a key motor to the first wave of discourse research, because variability not only shows up problems with traditional pictures of attitudes as inner dispositions, it also provides a way of identifying the different activities that evaluations are involved with.

Second, although attitude research typically treats attitudes as hypothetical mental entities, they enter into the research process in terms of evaluative descriptions: words such as 'good', 'bad' and more extended descriptions that construct some element of the world in a negative or positive way. In traditional work there is a clear cut separation between the object of the attitude and the attitudinal stance of the person – evaluative language is treated mainly as a medium accessing the mental entities. Potter and Wetherell (1987) highlight the role of descriptions as constituting the attitudinal object in particular ways. For instance, a speaker can produce a highly negative description of a minority group while claiming not to have negative attitudes to that group (Potter and Wetherell, 1988; see also Van Dijk, 1989; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

This early discourse analytic work on attitudes drew on important work from rhetorical psychology. For example, in a series of studies Billig (1988, 1989, 1992) showed that people offer views in specific contexts, typically where there is at least the possibility of argument. Indeed, Billig treats evaluation as inseparable from argument, thus highlighting its socially embedded and practical nature. Most people do not sit over dinner arguing the merits of the force of gravity. Moreover, where people construct arguments for something and provide the justification of their own position they are simultaneously criticizing the counter-position (sometimes explicitly, sometimes not).

One of the central themes developed in *Discursive Psychology* (Edwards and Potter, 1992) was the close inferential relationship between versions of 'reality' (things in 'the world', actions, events, history and so on) and 'mind' (things 'in the head',

attitudes, dispositions, feelings, expectations and so on). People construct versions of both of these things in their talk and their texts, and they do so in the service of action. For discursive psychology this pervasive practical reasoning is a topic of study. For example, research has considered the way callers to a child protection helpline construct their 'attitude' in ways that are appropriate to the act of reporting abuse (Potter and Hepburn, 2003, 2007). There is quite a complex interactional task here. The caller constructs the abuse as serious, potentially damaging or upsetting and, conversely (and relevantly for the context) as not something the caller gets pleasure from or feels good about. However, the negative position must not be of such severity that they show him or herself as remiss in not calling the police. More subtly still, the callers show that the abuse is experienced as personally negative, and yet this is not the prime reason for the call – they are not, for example, trying to cause problems for noisy neighbours (Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005).

Recent developments within DP have drawn more extensively on conversation analytic (CA) principles. For example, CA shows a way of approaching topics that psychologists would regard as attitudes in terms of situated practices of evaluation or assessment. Here, evaluations are structured events in talk; they are sequentially organized within turn-taking and are the products of, rather than the precursors to, an interaction. The work of Pomerantz (1978, 1984, 1986) has been particularly insightful in this area. For instance, assessments and subsequent (or second) assessments are structured so as to minimize stated disagreement and maximize stated agreement between speakers (Pomerantz, 1984). When expressing an assessment, one is therefore performing an action, such as praising, insulting, complaining and so on. This action is itself structured through the sequential organization of the talk. Research on evaluations in DP reflects this emphasis, bringing to the fore the action orientation and sequential organization of evaluative expressions, such as the use of different types of food evaluation to justify

or account for particular courses of action (Wiggins and Potter, 2003).

### THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Discursive psychology builds from three core observations about the nature of discourse (see Potter, 2003b; Potter and Edwards, 2001). First, discourse is both *constructed* and *constructive*. It is constructed in that it is made up of linguistic building blocks: words, categories, idioms, repertoires and so on. These are used in a wide range of ways to present particular versions of the world. For instance, take an utterance as simple as 'let's go to my Dad's house for lunch'. This invokes categories of family members (my Dad, rather than Steve, say; and Dad rather than my Mum), buildings and locations (house, rather than 'over there'), actions ('let's go', invoking other people in this movement) and mealtimes as specific events ('lunch', rather than just 'food'). Discourse is also constructive in that these versions of the world are a product of the talk itself, not something that may putatively exist prior to the talk.

The second main principle is that discourse is action-oriented. That is, in talking and writing we are primarily carrying out actions. This may seem rather obvious, since to 'talk' or 'write' are actions in themselves. But it is more than this. Discourse is the primary medium for social action; in speaking we blame, justify, invite, compliment and so on. Hence to separate talk and action as psychologists commonly do (for example in distinctions such as attitudes vs. behaviour) is to set up a false dichotomy, and to overlook the ways in which talk achieves things in itself.

Third and finally, discourse is situated. It is situated within a specific sequential environment; words are understood according to what precedes and follows them. This is similar to the conversation analytic notion that talk is *occasioned* (see Wooffitt, 2005).

It is situated within a particular institutional setting, such as a telephone helpline, school classroom or family mealtime. Discourse is also situated rhetorically, within a particular argumentative framework. One way of describing something will always be countering – either explicitly or indirectly – alternative ways of describing the same thing (see the earlier discussion of Billig's work). Thus, to understand discourse fully, one must examine it in situ, as it happens, bound up with its situational context.

These principles have most clearly been developed in *Representing Reality* (Potter, 1996) and *Discourse and Cognition* (Edwards, 1997). In the former text, Potter develops a systematic account of the way versions are built as objective, as mere descriptions of actions or events. This addresses the question of how speakers manufacture the credibility of versions, and how this building can be challenged and undermined. Taking the example of attitudes again, this work considers the way in which versions can be produced to generate evaluations as features of the objects and events rather than positions or dispositions of speakers. This is clearly a key task when talk is about delicate or controversial topics, where motives and dispositions may be closely inspected. Thus constructing a version of a minority group that simultaneously produces negative characteristics (e.g. involvement with sexual violence) combined with a display of 'sympathetic' motivation toward that group (perhaps drawing on one of the culture repertoires discussed above) can work to avoid being seen as having racist attitudes (Potter and Wetherell, 1988). Note the way that the relationship between 'mind' and 'the world' is reworked here in the talk.

One of the achievements of DP has been to highlight how crucial this relationship is as a practical feature of interaction. People construct versions of the world that have implications for their own dispositions and thoughts; and they construct versions of that psychological stuff to have implications for actions and events in the world. This practical distinction between subjective and objective notions is further developed in Edwards

(1997; see also Edwards, 2005). Here, the focus is on the ways in which accounts, blamings, justifications and so on are worked up in talk to perform particular activities. For example, how categories of 'mind' or 'body' are constituted through description to reduce one's accountability for an event. Emotions like 'anger', for example, can be worked up as physical, uncontrollable events ('boiling over', 'burning up with rage') to characterize an event as a brief 'lapse' in one's usual demeanour. DP here is developing the constructionist approach to emotion (Harré and Gillett, 1996) in a more specifically analytic and interactional direction.

### MAIN ISSUES AND DEBATES

We now turn to some of the issues within discursive psychology and between discursive psychologists and critics. We will take three examples: the preference for working with naturalistic materials; the alternative to cognitivism; and the respecification of embodied practices.

#### *Naturalistic materials*

The earlier tradition of discourse analysis developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and exemplified, for example, in work by Billig (1992) and others was often dependent on some form of open-ended interview as its principal data generation technique. More recently, the style of critical discourse work that has addressed issues of subjectivity and neo-liberalism using a psychodynamic meta-theory has also been based almost exclusively on open-ended interviews (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; see Chapter 6 of this volume).

Potter and Hepburn (2005) summarize some of the problems with the use of open-ended interviews. They note that they are often used in ways that wipe out many of their interactional features (by focusing on extracts from participants' 'answers' and using forms of transcript which wipe out many of the elements of talk that conversation analysts have shown to be live for participants). Even when

more care is paid to these features interviews present challenging difficulties. It is very hard to disentangle the social science agendas that are imported with the question construction, terminology and the whole set up of the interview. Both interviewer and interviewee move between complex and sometimes indistinct footing positions. For example, participants are often recruited as members of social categories (a schoolteacher, say), but they may position their talk in various complex ways with respect to that category membership. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) highlight a range of difficulties of this kind. There are also complex and hard to analyse issues with respect to the stake or interest that each party may show in what they are saying. There are major challenges here for qualitative researchers in a range of different traditions. For the most part these issues have been avoided rather than faced up to and open ended interviews remain the default data generation techniques for different traditions of qualitative research (for discussion see Potter and Hepburn, 2005a,b; and responses by Hollway, 2005; Mischler, 2005; Smith, 2005).

Instead of working on open-ended interviews DP has focused on naturalistic materials. By naturalistic we mean records of what people actually do, such as in therapy, counselling, helpline interaction, mealtime conversation, everyday phone calls, neighbour mediation and so on (see, for example, the different contributions to Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005, 2007). These materials are *naturalistic* rather than natural to highlight the epistemic troubles that go along with the status of the 'natural' and to show an appreciation of issues of 'reactivity' that arises when recording what people do.

There are a number of virtues of working with naturalistic materials:

- 1 It avoids imposing the researchers' own categories or assumptions onto the data.
- 2 It situates research within the seemingly 'messy' settings of everyday life; people are not separated from the sorts of agentic and accountability issues that arise in social interaction.



- 3 It provides a directly practical way of doing research. Rather than trying to 'apply' findings from one setting (e.g. interviews) to another (e.g. workplaces), it studies peoples' practices in situ.
- 4 It allows the research to be guided by issues that may not have been anticipated by the researcher; this is often how novel and unexpected topics arise.
- 5 It captures life as it happens, in sufficient detail to be able to analyse the complexity of seemingly 'mundane' situations.

Digitized forms of audio and video allow for a more fluid working with these sorts of materials, and are complemented by Jeffersonian transcription, which captures features of talk relevant to action and interaction. The use of advanced digital technology complements this analytic shift from looking at the broad resources for action (categories, rhetorical commonplaces, interpretative repertoires) and how they are used in interview talk to focusing on the organization of practices in settings. It allows the researcher to appreciate information about stress and intonation, overlap and other conversational features with, if appropriate, information about gesture, gaze and so on.

### ***Cognition and cognitivism***

DP has developed an alternative to the cognitivism that is the staple of the modern discipline of psychology. Cognitivism is a general approach that treats human action as a product of cognition. As Edwards (1997: 19) puts it:

Whereas *cognition* is a possible topic for investigation, *cognitivism* is a perspective that reduces all of psychological life, including discourse and social interaction, to the workings of cognitive, or even computational, mental processes ... [C]ognitivism inherited its aim, of specifying mechanical input-output processes, from the stimulus-response behaviourism that it sought to replace with the 'information processing' metaphor of mind. The basic cognitivist position [is] that we start with a given, external world, which is then perceived and processed, and *then put into words*.

In cognitivist approaches discourse is treated as the *expression* of thoughts, intentions

or some other entity from the cognitive thesaurus. At its strongest, action and interaction are treated as *only* explicable in terms of cognitive precursors (for a general overview of cognitive psychology and interaction research see Potter and te Molder, 2005). Different qualitative approaches take different positions on the status of cognitive processes and entities; most hope to reform cognitivism rather than respecify it in its entirety.

DP conceptualizes psychological issues in a non-cognitivist way. Instead of treating discourse as dependent upon, and explicable by way of, cognitive objects and processes, it studies cognition's involvement as a participant's concern. That is, it treats mind, experience, emotion, intention and so on in terms of how they are *constructed* and *oriented to* in interaction. DP includes a range of areas of work that explore this general problematic. Some studies focus on the practices through which psychological implications of talk are managed. They ask how motives are established or memories are discounted as flawed (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992). Other studies consider the practical uses of cognitive language (e.g. Edwards, 1999 on anger and jealousy). Another strand of work is focused on the respecification of central topics in social cognition, cognitive psychology and cognitive science (including scripts and schemata, categories, attitudes and beliefs, emotions; see Edwards and Potter, 2005). Finally, other work has concentrated on studying psychological methods in practice and the way they constitute their objects and produce them as the property of individuals (see Antaki, 2006; Auburn, 2005).

### ***Embodied practices***

Psychological research sometimes claims to study 'embodiment' or embodied practices – so called physical, gestural and bodily objects – as if these were straightforward categories and events. These are often presented as a counter to discourse work, as if the existence of embodiment was, de facto, proof that discourse has its limits. Discursive

psychology starts from a different place. It focuses on the practical, oriented to, interactional displays of embodied practices. Just as cognition is treated as a participants' concern, so is embodiment. Starting in this way allows discursive researchers to ground their claims in a sound theoretical and analytical position; that which is based on the constitutive nature of discourse. We cannot separate off other objects as being somehow beyond or behind discourse, without providing a solid account of how these are 'non-discursive'.

DP work picks up embodiment in different ways. Increasingly it is working with video records that allow issues involving gesture, gaze, physical orientation and so on to be incorporated into the analysis. Note that it is not a matter of simply observing such things as a technical analyst. For DP researchers such things enter into analysis in terms of the formulations and orientations of the participants (that is, such things need to be *shown* to be relevant in the analysis rather than assumed to be relevant by the analyst; see Heath, 2005). This is particularly important given the complex role that 'seeing' has in social practices (e.g. Goodwin, 1994). For an analytic example, see MacMartin and LeBaron's (2006) study of gaze and body orientation as a display of ambivalent participation in a therapy group for sex offenders.

Another way that DP research addresses embodiment is to study the way 'embodied practices' are constituted and reified in discourse. Work on gustatory 'mmms', for example, demonstrates how displays of bodily pleasure (in this case, food) are co-ordinated and finessed around mealtime interaction (Wiggins, 2002). Rather than being treated as simply expressions of a putative gustatory experience, this research examines the sequential and rhetorical positioning of these expressions in the unfolding interaction; they are thus shown to be highly collaborative utterances and attending to other activities in the talk, and resisting any simple dualism between body and talk. This tradition of work is in its early stages. Nevertheless, it offers a coherent program

that considers embodiment as a direct and central part of human practices.

## PRACTICALITIES OF RESEARCH

In this section, we clarify the various steps involved in DP research. These are: devising a research question, gaining access and consent, data collection and building a corpus, transcription, coding, analysis and application. Note that there are no hard and fast rules for discourse research; it is defined by its interest in, and appreciation of, action and interaction as situated, practical and orderly (see Box 5.1). Here, we use examples from our own research to provide concrete illustrations of the research process.

### ***Step 1: Devising a research question***

DP research begins with a research question or set of questions around a topic area. Often this is guided by an interest in a particular form of interaction, such as telephone helpline interaction or marriage guidance counselling, and the processes and practices involved in this setting. For instance, one may be interested in how helpline staff members make sense of the variety of calls received and how they manage the sensitive nature of reports of child abuse. These research questions then become increasingly focused as the research progresses. Questions and possible interpretations about the interaction are tested and refined through repeated examination of the data.

Our interest in mealtimes was with the nature of food – lovely, well made, fattening, for example – and how this is constituted and bound up with activities such as offers, compliments and acceptances. We decided to focus on family mealtimes, where children under the age of 15 years are present, as these are more likely to be settings where regular mealtimes occur. A brief pilot study confirmed this, after also considering groups of students and young professionals sharing mealtimes. So our research question began as a broad interest in these issues, and was

### BOX 5.1 Methodological Features of Discursive Psychology

There are no hard and fast rules for discourse research – it is defined by its interest in, and appreciation of, action and interaction as situated, practical and orderly.

- The central topic is discourse – talk and texts as parts of practices – as this is central to psychology. It recognizes the primacy of the social and relational nature of human life, and therefore starts with that analytically.
- It is interested in the most intimate and personal of psychological phenomena, in feeling and thinking, in a wide range of features of embodiment, and in the way social life is organized institutionally.
- Research questions typically focus on what people do in the settings that they live their lives. They may build on prior work or be stimulated by a collection of materials.
- The materials for study are usually digital audio or video recordings of people in particular locations – family meals, counselling sessions, helplines, or political interviews. Just about anything that is a feature of people's lives can be an object of study.
- Occasionally analysis will work with open-ended interviews – but discursive psychology is generally distinctive amongst qualitative approaches in being a nuanced observational science avoiding the apparatus of open-ended or ethnographic interviews, experiments and questionnaires common elsewhere in psychology.
- The materials for study are transcribed using a system that captures features of interaction such as intonation and overlap that are significant for what is going on.
- Analysis will work with both recording and transcript.
- A typical study will build a collection of some phenomenon that will be the topic of more intensive analysis.
- Analysis will work with this collection. It will focus on both standard patterns and exceptional cases. These will be used to develop and test ideas about what is going on in the material.
- Analysis will work with, and be validated by, the understandings of participants which are displayed in the unfolding interaction.
- The research write up is designed as far as practical to allow the reader to assess the validity of the analytic claims made about the materials.
- Discursive psychological studies may contribute to a cumulative new picture of persons in relation; they may contribute to a range of applied questions and they may address broader critical issues related to ideology and asymmetry.

For more detail see:

Edwards, D. (2004). Discursive psychology. In K. Fitch and R. Sanders (eds), *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction* (pp. 257–273). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hepburn, A. and Potter, J. (2003). Discourse analytic practice. In C. Seale, D. Silverman, J. Gubrium and G. Gobo (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice* (pp. 180–196). London: Sage.

later refined as the extensive use of evaluations during mealtimes became apparent. We were then guided by questions such as, 'how are food evaluations used by speakers in mealtime interaction?' 'What are the different forms of food evaluations and what actions are they involved with?' Different ideas as to what is going on in the data could then be checked out through further analyses.

#### **Step 2: Gaining access and consent**

Once the initial set of research questions have been devised, access to the data source and

gaining ethical permission to record the data are the next steps in the research process. This is often achieved through the use of a contact person (such as a medical practitioner, counsellor or schoolteacher) who can then provide links or access to a particular data source. Sometimes advertising may be necessary, though direct contact – by telephone, letter or in person – is often the most fruitful way of beginning the process of gaining access. This also requires some sensitivity and patience, in order to build up a certain degree of trust between the researcher and the participant(s), particularly where a sensitive data source is

being used. For example, Hepburn and Potter (2003) detail their experiences of gaining access to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) child protection helpline, from the initial introductory letter to writing out an ethics script for the helpline staff to use. This research involved recording a number of calls to the NSPCC on what are highly sensitive and delicate issues: actual or potential cases of child abuse.

In the UK, ethical permission must also be obtained from appropriate bodies, such as when working within the National Health Service, in schools, prisons, or with organizations such as the NSPCC. This can also take some time, though the process provides an opportunity for the researcher to be clear about each step of the research before they begin. Specifically, consent must be gained for using audio and/or video recordings of all participants involved in the interaction and for using verbatim quotes (anonymized, and digitally disguised when using the audio/video data directly) in any written reports or presentations. Ten Have (1999) provides a useful basic consent form that can be reworked for specific research topics.

In our own research, recording family mealtimes required us to gain consent from all family members about the use of audio recording equipment during their mealtimes over a period of 3–4 months. Personal contacts were used to gain access to different families, so each family was recruited separately. This was done either by phone or letter, in person or via the contact person who knew the family. Given that at this stage in the research the particular type of family recruited was less important to us, we did not have to directly see them in person; this also protected their anonymity further. Consent forms were provided for the adults to sign, for themselves and on behalf of children under the age of 16 years (we made sure that all parties were present for the briefing about the work). An information sheet accompanying the consent form provided further details about the research, and

our own contact details. For instance, this explained briefly that we were interested in ‘family interaction during mealtimes’, rather than any particular characteristics of the individuals themselves, and that the aim was to collect a corpus of naturally occurring family mealtime interaction.

### ***Step 3: Data collection and building a corpus***

It is important to have a clear and reliable recording of the interaction being studied. The emergence of digital technology is proving to facilitate DP research in a similar way to the emergence of CA alongside cassette tape technology in the 1970s. Memory stick recorders are ideal, being compact and simple to use. This is particularly important in research where the participants themselves have control over the recording process. They capture several hours of high-quality sound at a time and either have an in-built microphone or can be used with an external flat microphone. Furthermore, files of the digital recordings can be transferred to PC almost instantly. The transportation and management of the data is thus much simpler; files can be saved in various formats and edited using audio programs such as Adobe Audition (or freely available packages such as Audacity; see the discussion of transcription below). Data collection thus begins with selecting the highest quality equipment available, and the accompanying software and hardware needed to manage this data. Short cuts at this stage can lead to poor quality recordings which can cause major problems (and be deeply frustrating) later in the research.

This process also involves building up a corpus of data, upon which interpretations and analyses can be tested and validated. While the principles of DP can be practiced on any small piece of talk or text, DP research requires a thorough examination of a collection of similar instances. A corpus may be built by recording data repeatedly in a particular setting – such as a number of mealtimes with the same family, and across different families – or through collecting together data

from similar settings, such as different kinds of telephone helplines. This process will of course be dependent upon the research question and whether or not this is specific to a particular location or setting.

Our research enabled us to collect mealtime interaction from different families, to ensure we captured as wide a range of discursive practices as possible. Therefore our only criterion for inclusion in the research was that families had at least one child under the age of 15 years, and that they ate together regularly as a matter of course. As far as possible, we did not want our recording their mealtimes to change their usual routine. The recording equipment was supplied to the families themselves so that they could record their mealtimes without any researcher being present; again, the emphasis was on naturalistic interaction. The recording was then usually instigated by one family member who handled the recording equipment at each mealtime. We left the equipment with the families for up to 4 months, depending on their routine, and asked that they record whenever possible, when they had a meal together. This provided a greater range of material, such as family breakfasts, weekday meals and Christmas dinners, over a longer period of time. The result was a corpus of around 80 hours' worth of mealtime talk.

#### **Step 4: Transcription**

In discursive research, the primary data source is always the original recording, whether this is audio or video, in digital or analogue form. For analytical and dissemination purposes, however, it is necessary to have a paper copy of the recorded interaction. The transcription process itself is built up using a word processing package alongside the sound files (whether these be in a digital format, or played on a tape recorder or minidisk recorder); ideally with both windows open on the computer screen for easy management. DP uses the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson for CA. This is relatively easy as it makes use of standard keyboard symbols and common conventions.

Crucially, it represents those features of talk that have been shown by studies of interaction to be treated as relevant by the participants (emphasis, overlap, pause length, intonation and so on). No one should be misled into thinking these are trivial things that can be ignored in research. A large body of research in conversation analysis has shown that these things are fundamental to the sense of talk for the participants. Transcription can be a demanding and time-consuming process; each hour of interaction can take around twenty hours of transcription time, more if the sound is of poor quality or there are a number of speakers talking.<sup>1</sup> For detailed discussion of issues in transcription and overview of the basic system see Jefferson (2004).

With digital data, the transcription process is much easier to manage. Audio programs such as Adobe Audition can be used to copy, search and edit files. It is straightforward to build a collection of sound files that include sequences of the phenomenon of interest (say gustatory mms). Background noise or extremely quiet sounds can be reduced or enhanced to enable a fuller transcription of the data. It is also easy to anonymize proper names or identifying details (e.g. by reversing them, which leaves the intonation and word length intact) or to change the voice quality to disguise the speaker. Video software such as Adobe Premier provides the parallel facility to blur faces to disguise individuals.

Transcribing features of talk that do not correspond to individual lexical items, such as laughter, sighing, crying or expressions of gustatory pleasure, has received significant DP attention. This requires the transcriber to pay particularly close attention to intonation, stress and so on – the reward, however, can be unexpected insight about issues at the core of psychology and interaction. For example, Hepburn's work on the sequential and intonational features of crying within calls to the NSPCC child protection helpline has demonstrated the significance of subtle variations of crying sounds (Hepburn, 2004; see also Hepburn and Potter, 2007). Thus, the presence of a 'wobbly voice' can mark the onset

of a crying episode and helpline staff are tuned to such cues and can be shown to act on them and to provide appropriate receipts and keep the caller on line.

In the future more journal articles will be linked to web-based materials so readers can have access to both transcript and sound and video (e.g. Schegloff, 2002). This is a challenge for journals that have been print based in the past but the internet provides a number of ways of meeting it.

### Step 5: Coding

Analysis in discursive psychology is an iterative process that involves repeated listenings to recordings combined with repeated readings of transcript. The coding stage is the precursor to the analysis and involves sifting through the larger data corpus for instances of a phenomenon. At this stage, the process should be as inclusive as possible. As the analysis continues, the coding may need to be repeated, with further searches and shifting boundaries as to what is included in the phenomenon of interest. Possible instances will drop out of the corpus and new analysis will bring in further examples. As Hepburn and Potter (2004) have noted, the coding and sifting process itself can result in analytical issues developing or vanishing. For example, what may seem to be a rather peripheral instance of a phenomenon may prove to be a deviant case that will later confirm the analysis.

Returning to our example of gustatory ‘mms’, we first coded the material for instances where explicit food or eating talk was included. From this, we then focused on evaluations of food, such as ‘nice’ or ‘like’. As analysis began on these evaluations, we also noticed the frequent use of the gustatory ‘mmm’ expression as an alternative means of assessing the food. This led us to search for all instances of ‘mmm’ within the full data corpus. Many of these were used as continuers (Schegloff, 1982), though a subset were produced by people eating, or in response to descriptions of different types of food. We classified these as

gustatory ‘mms’ – where they were associated with food and were explicitly evaluative in a positive direction – and found approximately 210 in around 80 hours’ worth of mealtime interaction.

### Step 6: Analysis

As with the initial searching and coding of the data (which, as noted above, is an iterative process), the subsequent procedures of DP analysis are not formulaic. Instead, there are a range of activities to be worked through, in no specific order. These are to focus on how the discourse is constructed, and constructive of different versions of events, how it is situated in interaction, and how it is bound up with actions. There are ways to know when you are going along the right lines, and when the analysis is merely description (see Antaki, Billig, Edwards and Potter (2003) for a full discussion on this matter). This allows analytical insights to be developed gradually, rather than being pre-empted by using a more passive step-by-step process.

Let us work through an example from Wiggins (2002) here. The analysis of the gustatory *mmm* highlighted three features of food talk. First, expressing pleasure is organized sequentially within interaction. That is, speakers orient to other turns in talk when performing the *mmm*. This may seem an obvious point – but it has important implications with respect to how such utterances are understood as documents of underlying states or as communicative objects in their own right. Second, gustatory *mms* are often used as stand-alone expressions rather than combined with other words or expressions. When the *mmm* is accompanied by another term, it is typically an evaluation as in the following extract:

Extract 1 (taken from Wiggins, 2002)

1. (0.8)
2. Simon: mm↑mm: (0.2) that’s  
↑lovely
3. (0.6)

These *mmm*-plus-evaluation sequences were common within the data corpus.

The organizational pattern of this sequence highlights three features of the construction of 'pleasure':

- that it is an immediate reaction (one can express the *mmm* with food in the mouth, as if capturing the sensation as it is experienced; a 'sensation receipt');
- that it is spontaneous (it can be expressed at various points throughout a mealtime without needing to preface or announce a topic shift; it is omni-relevant in situations where food or drink is being consumed); and
- that it is vague (there is an ambiguity in the *mmm* that is never fully elaborated upon; speakers rarely go into detail as to what is eliciting this expression).

The third feature of food talk that the gustatory *mmm* highlighted was the way embodiment is constructed in the ongoing interaction in a way that is very hard to separate from that interaction. This can be seen in a number of ways. First, a gustatory *mmm* can be used to provide agreement with another speaker's account, and to offer the basis on which this agreement is made by invoking a physical pleasure. Second, it can be used to add credibility to one's account of food, as well as evidencing the account. Third, its sequential location as prior to more elaborate verbal descriptions works to construct a body-discourse dichotomy, despite the collaboratively produced nature of such constructions. The extract below provides an example of this.

Extract 2

1. Simon: its actually got ↓quite  
a bit of: uhm (0.6)  
>is it<
2. (0.2) ↑brandy or-
3. Anna: mmm
4. Simon: rum >or something<
5. (2.0)
6. Jenny: ↑mm[mm
7. Simon: [mmmm
8. Jenny: >see what you mean<
9. Simon: °by jove [that-°
10. Anna: [was on the box  
↑there's- (0.4) there's a  
few: different
11. ingredients: in ↓it  
(0.6) alcoholic

Validation of DP research is already built into the process of data collection and analysis. By working closely with naturalistic materials the research stays faithful (as far as is possible) to the phenomena being examined. By presenting lengthy analyses alongside the transcribed data, readers can make their own judgements as to the plausibility and coherence of the analysis. This also enables researchers to check the coherence of their analyses against previously published work, providing an extended corpus of material that is publicly available. Validation of analytic claims can also be checked through deviant case analysis, whereby claims about any patterns or specific interpretations can be compared with instances where these patterns seem to be absent. For example, in the analysis there were only a small number of cases where the *mmm* was preceded, rather than followed, by the evaluation – close inspection of these helped us understand the role of *mmms* in displaying a spontaneous 'bodily' response.

### Step 7: Application

The practical element of DP is already built into its methodology, in that it works with naturalistic interaction and people's practices. On one level, DP provides detailed insight into the management of everyday life: such as how food is negotiated at a family mealtime, how helpline staff members deal with a variety of calls, how medical practitioners and patients arrive at a mutual understanding of a particular complaint, and so on. Knowing how these processes work is an important step in any intervention. So on another level, DP can be used to solve particular issues or problems, as the researcher works with specific organizations or individuals.

In the case of our eating research we can help families to understand and change the way they talk about food in front of their children, to encourage them to eat healthier foods or to persuade reluctant adolescents to eat sufficient amounts of food. We can also focus on how obesity treatment is managed;

how patients are encouraged to take responsibility for their eating habits, and how to foster effective long-term strategies for maintaining a healthy weight. Most generally, it is striking to note that despite the importance of food and eating to two major areas of current societal health concern (eating disorders and obesity) there has been virtually no research that has studied eating naturalistically and directly, that has looked at it initially as an activity, that is done socially, and that involves a range of normative expectations and organizations. The full practical implications of such research are not yet clear – but challenges it raises for more traditional models of research are already crystallizing.

### CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Discursive psychology focuses on psychology as something embedded in interaction, and as something that gives interaction sense and coherence. It is almost unique in modern psychology in offering a naturalistic study of what people do in the settings that are relevant to those actions. Ultimately the topic of DP is psychology from the perspectives of participants. This approach is not without its constraints – DP cannot be sensibly used as a ‘toolbox’ method. Indeed, when it is used as such a method to approach questions formulated in the traditional psychological style – what is the effect of X on Y? How does X vary with Y? – it is most likely to result in incoherence. Effective work from this perspective requires a consistent approach to the questions, data management and so on. This means that those researchers who hope for more powerful research coming from supplementing qualitative and quantitative research need to be cautious of generating epistemic confusion.

DP research has also worked primarily with audio data, though the prevalence of video data is coming to the fore as technologies in this field develop. Work within CA and ethnomethodology, such as that by Goodwin (2000) and Heath (2005), on gaze and gesture has been particularly influential

in this move. The inclusion of visual practices in DP analysis, however, is not straightforward; one can treat these in a similar way to the treatment of embodied practices (discussed earlier). So there is no simple add-on way in which video data can be incorporated into DP analysis. Rather, it should be used as a means of explicating practices in more detail, providing clarification on what happens during pauses, for example. Nevertheless, digital video (and audio) technology has enabled researchers to develop different ways of working with naturalistic materials.

### THE FUTURE OF DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

This is an exciting time to be part of discursive psychological research. New developments within theoretical and empirical issues are pushing forward the boundaries of our understanding of psychology as a discipline. The power and sophistication of this research has increased in leaps and bounds in the last few years. Much has already been done to both inform and challenge psychological research. DP is a young approach that has much of its potential in front of it. The following are just some areas of new development in DP work:

- 1 *Psychological methods as topic.* Inspired by path breaking conversation analytic work, DP has been developing studies of social research methods in practice. This work can consider the practical ways in which the research instrument is accomplished. For example, in a series of studies Maynard and colleagues have considered the interactional organization of the standardized survey (e.g. Maynard, Houtkoop-Steenstra, Schaeffer and van der Zouwen, 2002). Although this work is not necessarily critical, it often throws up challenging issues for psychologists – for example, when Schegloff (1999) studied the administration of a test for pragmatic deficit in a stroke patient he was able to highlight the sophisticated pragmatic skills that the patient displayed in the course of failing the test. One of the themes in this work is the way that the interactional procedures are implicated in the production and individuation of particular psychological entities.



For example, Antaki and Rapley (1996) show the way particular question organizations and responses contribute to the production of a particular version of life satisfaction for individuals with learning difficulties and Puchta and Potter (2002) show how various procedures are used in market research focus groups to produce attitudes as individual possessions. This strand of work has important potential – it will be particularly interesting to consider social cognition and social cognitive neuroscience research in this way.

- 2 *Psychology and institutions.* DP has been focused on materials collected from institutional settings. This has provided a rich arena for addressing the way particular psychological (or 'psychological') terms and orientations have institutional roles in particular settings (Edwards and Potter, 2001). It has also offered a different approach to social organization than that offered in most social psychology which has been aimed at the identification of generic social processes that are as far as possible independent of the specifics of institutions of historical settings (Gergen, 1982). One of the aims of DP is to show the way institutions such as therapy, education, focus groups, court cases are characterized by specific 'psychological business'. DP analyses are intended to explicate both the psychological business and the nature of the institution. For example, Stokoe and Hepburn (2005) studied the different ways in which noise was formulated in reports of abuse to the NSPCC and reports of neighbour trouble to a mediation helpline. The specific construction of the reports offered a way of explicating fundamental differences in the practices of the two institutions.
- 3 *Revising cognitivism and subjectivity.* As noted earlier in this chapter, work is already well underway in terms of respecifying cognitive categories and concepts. This has implications for both mainstream cognitive and social cognitive psychology and for newer 'critical' approaches to subjectivity. Some discourse work has engaged with, and reworked psychodynamic notions (Billig, 1999; Wetherell, 2003). Other work has focused on the management of subject-object or mind-world relations, a central theme since the start of DP. For example, Edwards (2007) considers the delicate and subtle procedures through which versions of subjectivity are produced to manage accountability. There is increasing overlap here with conversation analysis and its sophisticated take on how issues of shared knowledge, epistemic asymmetry, understanding and so on

figure in specifics of interaction (e.g. Heritage and Raymond, 2005). In the medium term there are important and consequential debates to be had at a theoretical and analytic level with critical work that nevertheless theorizes subjectivity with a more classical interiority (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2005) and work focused on the notion of identity from either a critical or social cognition perspective (see Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The end point of such debates is not yet clear, but the journey is exciting and important.

## NOTE

1 Given the length of time needed, it is often worth investing in a qualified transcription service to do the words only transcript, which can then be worked on in more detail by the researchers themselves.

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