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Abstract:

Discursive psychologists (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998) have analysed identity work in talk, including the ways in which understandings which prevail in a wider social context are taken up or resisted as speakers position themselves and are positioned by others. In these terms, a narrative is generally understood in two ways. The first is as an established understanding of sequence or consequence, such as a potential life trajectory, which becomes a discursive resource for speakers to draw on (cf. Bruner's 'canonical narratives', 1991). The second is of a narrative as a situated construction, such as the biography produced by a speaker within a particular interaction. In this article, I propose an expanded analytic focus which considers how the versions of a biographical narrative produced in previous tellings become resources for future talk, thus setting constraints on a reflexive speaker's work to construct a coherent identity across separate interactions and contexts (Taylor & Littleton, forthcoming).

Keywords: life narrative, discursive, resources, continuity, rehearsal

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Introduction

Within the broad field of narrative studies, there are, of course, very different understandings of the basic concept (see e.g., Atkinson & Delamont, forthcoming). The approach I present here builds on previous work in social psychology in the areas of social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, 1985), discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and discursive psychology (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001), and narrative analysis (e.g., Bruner, 1990, 1991). I take from these several premises. One is that our understandings of who we are, our identities, are derived from the accumulated ideas, images, associations and so on which make up the wider social and cultural contexts of our lives. In analytic terms, these are the discursive resources available to speakers. Another is that talk is the site and the range of practices in which our identities are constituted, out of the resources made available by those larger contexts. And a third, following the ‘synthetic’ approach proposed by Wetherell (1998), is that identities are in part conferred, through positioning (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990), and in part actively constructed, contested and negotiated by active speakers. In this article, I will discuss narrative as a part of this identity work.

I define a narrative as a construction, in talk, of sequence or consequence. It may be established minimally: for example, sequence is implied by expressions like ‘then’ or ‘next’, consequence by ‘so’. Alternatively, a speaker may present an extended account of experiences which makes explicit reference to sequence, as in the following example, from a speaker describing her life.

I can see it in decades almost really... it's got better each decade actually..

(Reynolds & Taylor, 2005)

It may also refer to causes and consequences as part of the construction.

it started when I was doing my social work course ... moved to London and some friends put me up and they had a house in this area and then I moved away when I bought my first flat in an area which is cheaper and then it was full of crime that area and so I came back into this area and have remained¹

In all of these cases, there is reference to a past or potential ordering: temporality is invoked.

My aim in this article is to present a discursive approach to narrative for the study of identity and discuss some possibilities for expanding it. The approach is ‘synthetic’ in the sense proposed by Wetherell (1998), in that it understands identity work as partly but not wholly determined by larger social meanings; a speaker is active, for example, in taking up and contesting these. I suggest, however, that the analytic focus should be expanded beyond the turn-by-turn focus of Wetherell’s data analysis in order to consider how a speaker’s own constructions, for example, of a life narrative, become resources for future talk, resulting in some continuity of identity work across particular occasions of talk. This addresses a common criticism of discursive approaches, namely, their failure to account for continuity in identity (Crossley, 2000). It also draws attention to the rehearsed nature of identity work, a point which is of particular interest for the study of novices’ talk (Taylor & Littleton, forthcoming).

Talk and identity

Social constructionist psychologists such as Gergen (1985) have proposed that what is described, understood and even seen is not a direct consequence of how the world is but of the meanings it carries within a society. The logical extension of this argument is that the understandings of ourselves and others commonly referred to as ‘identity’ are equally “an artifact of communal interchange” (p.266). Discursive work in psychology follows this emphasis on the social and situated nature of meanings, and identity, and introduces an additional focus on the analysis of language. A central assumption is that talk and language are not directly referential, conveying meanings which are ‘out there’ in the world, but, rather, that these meanings are constituted within talk. In general, then, talk is not considered as a vehicle for information about, say, the events and circumstances of a speaker’s biography, although that kind of analysis is not necessarily rejected entirely, especially in the approach I present.

A discursive approach therefore rejects the conventional assumption of mainstream psychological (and other) research, that talk transparently communicates something in the person which exists prior to its expression, such as an attitude (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987), emotion (Edwards, 1996) or memory (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). It challenges the notion that observable aspects of a person, including talk, are the expression or manifestation of some interior entity, whether that is understood in terms of the kind of functioning mechanisms discussed by cognitive-experimental psychologists or, with a different focus, as a unique intrinsic identity. Instead, discursive psychology proposes a conceptual, and temporal, shift, in the focus of research, from, roughly, what lies beneath talk to what is happening now; in other words, to actions and practices in their social context. The particular point of interest here for identity research is that talk is understood as the site in which identity is instantiated and negotiated, so the 'identity work' of speakers is investigated through the analysis of their talk.

Discursive psychological approaches therefore understand talk as social, but in somewhat different senses. Discursive psychologists whose work builds closely on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992) consider talk as interaction. Their interest is the context of ongoing, turn-by-turn conversation, in which a term like 'I think' is not a description but an action in the unfolding co-construction of meanings. Alternatively, Billig (1987) considers that talk is social in the sense that it takes place within the context of ongoing debates and contests, and is shaped in part by a speaker's awareness of and response to these, as if she or he is addressing anticipated disagreements and counter-arguments.

A third sense in which talk is social is found particularly in the discursive psychological work which is referred to as discourse analysis (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; see also Edley, 2001). The interest here is in how talk is made up from meanings which prevail in a wider social and cultural context of a society and culture. As already discussed, these are the resources for talk. One such discursive resource is an interpretative repertoire. This has been defined, loosely, as "a relatively coherent way...of talking about objects and events in the world" (Edley, 2001, p.198). There is some

overlap here with the Foucauldian concepts of discourse and discursive regime (see Carabine, 2001 for a discussion). This approach also takes from Foucauldian work an interest in how people are positioned in talk. A position, or subject position, can be understood as a temporary identity which is conferred on or taken up by a speaker and which becomes both who she or he is seen to be, by others, and the perspective from which she or he sees the world (Davies & Harré, 1990; see also Edley, 2001).

Discursive approaches to narrative

As this outline indicates, a discursive analysis can approach narrative in two ways, as a resource and as a construction. I have discussed examples of both in a project on the importance of place for identity, for which I analysed women's talk about former, current and potential places of residence (Taylor 2001, 2003, 2005a, 2005c). I suggest that in their talk about places of residence, the participants invoke an idealised connection which would derive from living in the same place where you had been born and grown up, and where generations of your family had lived before you. This 'born-and-bred' narrative overlaps with a narrative of ancestry in which women are positioned as wives, mothers and homemakers (Taylor, 2005c, p.251). It can be understood as a 'canonical narrative' (Bruner, 1991) which the women draw on in their talk about their own lives and relations to place. It can provide a logic for talking about personal circumstances, life stories and decisions. For instance, a reference to family history or memories of childhood can be offered as an explanation for liking a particular place of residence and belonging there; relatedly, women who were unhappy where they currently lived proposed returning to places where they had a family connection or which resembled where they had grown up. The born-and-bred narrative therefore functions as a resource which enables certain identity work in relation to place.

Conversely, identity work can be constrained by an absence of resources, including narratives. A succinct example from a different discipline is one discussed by Heilbrun (1988) in relation to literary biographies and their subjects. She suggests that the available narratives of women's lives emphasise "safety and closure" rather than

“adventure, or experience, or life” (p.20), and marriage and family over work and public life as a source of fulfilment. This therefore limits the identities which can be plausibly constructed for a woman writer, by a biographer or the woman herself. In the terms I am using, she is noting that the resources are not available for different identity work.

Another focus in the project about place and identity was on speakers’ own constructions of life narratives, and specifically, on how references to place and residence enabled speakers to construct continuity between past, present and future, even when their life circumstances and experiences did not obviously correspond to the kind of “continuity of residence and ... long-term personal and family connection” of the canonical narrative (Taylor, 2005c, p.251). This does not, however, explain another aspect of the continuity of identity, the ‘I’ which persists across multiple occasions and interactions. This limitation is, of course, a criticism of discursive approaches which has been made by theorists working in a psychoanalytic tradition, as Wetherell (2003) discusses. I suggest that it can be addressed, at least in part, by expanding the focus of a discursive approach.

An expanded analytic focus

Although Wetherell (1998) proposes a synthetic approach, as already described, the analysis which she presents, like most discursive analyses, focuses on the identity work occurring on the single level and occasion of an unfolding turn-by-turn interaction. However there are several arguments for widening this focus. First, the notion of rhetorical work (Billig, 1987) can be taken to suggest that the speaker is simultaneously orienting to the immediate interaction and to wider social debates. One implication of this might be that the analyst needs to consider the identity work taking place in an expanded context of several different levels, for example by combining an analysis of talk with an ethnographic or documentary study.

A second point relates to resources. I have discussed the assumption of discursive approaches that ideas and meanings which prevail in a social and cultural context become resources for people’s talk and the ways in which they make sense of the world and

themselves within it. But these are not the only possible resources. In constructing a life narrative, a speaker will not be starting anew but presenting a version of what has been said before, albeit one shaped to do work in the particular circumstances of the telling. In terms of a discursive analysis, these versions also become resources for future talk (Taylor, 2005b; Taylor & Littleton, forthcoming). In Davies and Harré's words, they are part of the "cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p.49) which accrue over multiple tellings. Like other resources, they both enable and constrain a speaker's identity work. A life narrative can therefore be considered as a construction which is resourced by previous constructions which aggregate over time. This suggests an analysis of identity work should look beyond a single instance of talk to consider the work done across multiple interactions.

Continuity and trouble

Resources which are carried over in this way are a possible source of continuity in talk, even though they can only be a partial source, given that identity work is also situated. This point is of interest because social constructionist and discursive approaches have been criticised for underplaying the coherence and continuity of the narrative structure of normal human experience and overemphasising "flux, disorderliness and incoherence" (Crossley, 2000, p. 528). One response to this criticism (Taylor, 2003) is that coherence and continuity in a life narrative are not given but constructed. Another source of continuity is suggested by the notion of 'trouble' in identity work (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1998). A troubled identity can be described (in one definition) as "one which is potentially 'hearable' and challengeable by others as implausible or inconsistent with other identities that are claimed" (Taylor, 2005, p.254). Wetherell (1998) suggests that trouble prompts repair. If inconsistency is a source of trouble, this suggests that a speaker will seek to reconcile new identity work with versions carried over from previous occasions as resources, including versions of a life narrative, thus producing some consistency and continuity across occasions of talk.

An additional point for comment here is the nature of the speaker, although this is a complex issue. Harvey Sacks said of the analysis of conversation: “Don’t worry about how fast they’re thinking.don’t worry about whether they’re ‘thinking’. Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you’ll find that they can do these things” (Sacks, 2001, p.118). Following from this, many discursive approaches seem to assume that talk involves a special state of activity which is somewhere between the automatic and the fully aware: the speaker is making decisions, but not in an everyday way which might involve reflection and forward planning. However, the notions of trouble and of rhetorical work in talk both imply more of the ordinary kind of thinking in which a speaker is aware of saying certain things in certain ways, and is consciously making choices (and I would suggest that this is recognisably part of our experience of talking about our lives, at least some of the time). It implies a more reflexive speaker, thinking back and planning forward, including across multiple instances of talk, including in relation to trouble and previous versions of identity work.

This is not to say that the identities people construct for themselves are always coherent and integrated. Some inconsistencies in ‘who I am’ are accepted and even assumed, such as the difference between who I am with different friends, or at home and at work. Others may pass unnoticed, unless attention is drawn to them. In addition, some trouble may be difficult, if not impossible, to repair. This can be briefly illustrated with a further example from the place and identity project, from a woman who had migrated twice, from Britain to New Zealand, at the age of 12, and then back to Britain over twenty years later. She says

I suppose I wouldn't call myself a New Zealander but I say I've lived there for a long time just because it's mainly because of the accent really I mean really I feel I should have (.) a New Zealand accent because you know and everyone always says that they're surprised that I haven't got a New Zealand accent which I am as well but um (.) I can't help it sort of thing (LAUGHTER) (.) You know (.) well I mean when I lived in New Zealand the whole every single day someone would say (.) you know when did you arrive sort of thing and I feel I've been here for twenty-odd years so (LAUGHTER²)

These extracts show trouble in the speaker’s identity work in relation to nationality. Her long-term residence in New Zealand (“twenty-odd years”) might plausibly entitle her to

position herself as someone of the place, but she was constantly positioned by others (“every single day”) as not belonging because of her accent. One cause of the trouble is that the speaker, as an immigrant, does not have the continuity of residence associated with the born-and-bred narrative. A further problem is that she does not have the accent associated with a New Zealand identity. The interest for this article is not how this troubled identity could be repaired (see Taylor, 2005b) but the indication which the extract provides of how trouble is reflected upon. The comment that “everyone always says that they’re surprised” suggests a repeated experience of trouble and attempted repair, in which she was frequently questioned about her accent (“every single day”) and she explained her long residence. This experience is also, I would suggest, something she has talked about before, possibly many times. It is an example of someone presenting a rehearsed account of trouble as part of the ongoing project of her identity work.

The final two points which I will make, extremely briefly, follow from the work of two writers whose work has contributed significantly to the study of discourse and identity, if not specifically to narrative. Stuart Hall (1996), criticising Lacanian theory for its “somewhat sensationalist proposition” (p.8) that the subject is suddenly constituted, in a moment, advocates a “more complex notion of a subject-in-process”(p.8). Although he is referring to a very different theoretical tradition, I would suggest that the discursive approaches I have been discussing require a similar notion of process in an ongoing and open-ended identity project, in this case in terms of the kind of reflexive and rehearsed identity work in talk which I have discussed.

The second point relates to one made by Wetherell (2003). She suggests that the sort of “personal order” which psychoanalytic theorists would explain in terms of psychic constructs can instead be understood as “discursive styles or routines” taken up as a consequence of “the growing child’s various discursive apprenticeships”. This notion of a discursive apprenticeship seems to be similar to the kind of rehearsal and reflection which I have discussed, and both provide a possible answer to the psychosocial critique (e.g., Hollway, 1984) that discursive approaches cannot explain investment in subject positions.

Concluding comments

My aim in this contribution to the special issue has been to provide an overview of discursive work in social psychology. I have also attempted to indicate, very briefly, some directions for further development in relation to narrative. The possible 'interface' between discursive and psychoanalytic theories is a continuing source of debate (e.g., Frosh & Emerson, 2005; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Wetherell, 2003). The expansion of an analysis to include rehearsal and the carrying over of resources between occasions of talk is closer to my own interests because of its potential usefulness for the study of the identity work of novices (Taylor & Littleton, forthcoming). Both indicate the possibilities which a discursive approach to narrative offers for the study of identity through an analysis of talk data.

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¹ This transcript extract is taken from the project on place and identity discussed later in the article.

² The extracts presented in this paper have been transcribed to retain the irregularities of talk but with limited detail. Underlining indicates emphasis, (LAUGHTER) indicates laughter, (.) indicates a short pause and ... indicates that material has been omitted.