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Accounting for success and failure: A discursive psychological approach to sport talk

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4 Accounting for success and failure: A discursive psychological approach to sport talk

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6 Running Head: Accounting for success and failure

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17 Revised Manuscript December 2003

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2 Abstract

3 In recent years, constructionist methodologies such as discursive psychology have
4 begun to be used in sport research (Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Jimmerson, 2001; Locke,
5 2003; McGannon & Mauws, 2000). This paper provides a practical guide to applying
6 a discursive psychological approach to sport data. After an initial discussion of
7 qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, it provides a detailed explanation of
8 the assumptions and principles of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992),
9 outlining the stages of a discursive study from choice of data through transcription and
10 analysis. Finally, the paper demonstrates a discursive psychological analysis on sport
11 data where athletes are discussing success and failure in competition. The analysis
12 examines how the athletes in question manage their accountability for performance
13 and demonstrates that for both there is an apparent dilution of personal agency, to
14 either maintain their modesty in the case of success or to manage blame when talking
15 about failure. It is concluded that discursive psychology has much to offer sport
16 research as it provides a methodology for in-depth studies of interactions in sport.

17

1 Introduction

2 Research Within Sport: Quantitative Versus Qualitative Methodologies

3 Research within the area of sport science has traditionally been a realist
4 enterprise endeavouring to conduct research that will provide *a priori* predictions as to
5 what will enhance sports performance and often utilises quantitative methodologies.
6 Realism is based on the philosophical assumption “that it is possible for us to make
7 accurate assumptions of an objective, unchanging reality” (Marks & Yardley, 2004,
8 p.221). Within the sport science literature, there is a heavy reliance on questionnaires
9 in order to uncover such psychological constructs as emotional states, attitudes,
10 cognitions or thoughts and motivation. Such studies are widespread within the sports
11 literature. For example, the study of anxiety before competition in sport psychology
12 (Jones & Swain, 1995), intrinsic motivation and its relationship to coaching behaviour
13 (Amorose & Horn, 2000) and psychological aspects of good and poor performances
14 (Privette & Bundrick, 1997).

15 Questionnaire research forms the basis of much research and theoretical
16 exploration in the social sciences, including sport science. However, their extensive
17 use is not without issue. As questionnaires tap in an epistemology of positivism and
18 realism, that is they make “the assumption that human beliefs, experiences and
19 behaviours are processes which have the status of entities that are sufficiently stable
20 that they can be accurately reported and measured” (Marks, 2004, p.122).

21 Questionnaires can be criticised on the basis that they are reductionist, that is the topic
22 to be studied is determined at the point of data collection and as a result they often do
23 not allow for the participants to explore in more detail their own perceptions of an

1 issue. Qualitative approaches on the other hand, give the researcher more scope to
2 explore participants' responses in more detail.

3 More recently there have been discussions of what a qualitative perspective
4 can contribute to the discipline (Biddle, Markland, Gisbourne, Chatzisarantis &
5 Sparkes, 2001). However, Culver, Gilbert & Trudel (2003) noted that over a decade
6 (1990-1999) in three prominent sport psychology journals, eighty four of the 485
7 published research articles used a qualitative approach. Thus although qualitative
8 research methodologies may be considered as up-and-coming in sport science
9 research, quantitative research still prevails. Of the qualitative research that is
10 published, many studies use content analysis to analyse the data. For example, Jowett
11 and Meek (2000) used content analysis to study the coach-athlete relationship in
12 married couples. Similarly, Poczwardowski and Conroy (2002) used a content analytic
13 procedure to study coping responses to success and failure in elite athletes.

14 Content analysis is what Kidder and Fine (1987) refer to as a 'little q'
15 qualitative method. They claim that in essence there are two schools of qualitative
16 research. 'Big Q' research is open-ended, inductive research whereby the focus is on
17 the exploration of meanings, and in many cases theory generation. Qualitative
18 methodologies such as Grounded Theory, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
19 and Discursive Psychology are all examples of 'Big Q' research. 'Little q' research on
20 the other hand, refers to using hypothetico-deductive research designs which are still
21 the basis of experimental research design, whereby hypotheses are tested and the topic
22 of investigation is set at the point of data collection, with the aim of either confirming
23 or falsifying a theory's claims. Content analysis, although termed as a qualitative
24 method, is rooted in realism. With the result that language is treated as passive and

1 representational of inner essences, such as attitudes or cognitions, something that has
2 been termed 'representational psychology' (McGannon & Mauws, 2000). Some
3 qualitative theorists go so far as to claim that content analysis is in fact a quantitative
4 method as it performs quantitative analysis on qualitative data (Wood & Kroger,
5 2000). This paper proposes a 'Big Q' research methodology to be used in sport science
6 research, that of the constructionist methodology of discursive psychology.

7

8 Philosophy, Constructionist Methodologies, Discursive Psychology and Sport

9 Constructionism or social constructionism as it is commonly called is a
10 philosophical stance. Social constructionism came into the social sciences mainly in
11 sociology in the 1960s with work by Berger & Luckmann (1966) on 'the social
12 construction of reality' and in the early 1970s into psychology, when what has been
13 termed the 'crisis' in social science took place (Gergen, 1973). It is undeniably
14 difficult to define constructionism and as Potter (1996a) notes to do so would be to
15 make a realist statement that in itself would be anti-constructionist. Social
16 constructionism is an umbrella terms that encompasses much recent work within the
17 social sciences, for example within health psychology, the constructionist stance is
18 called critical health psychology, within social psychology, there are now critical
19 social psychologists and discursive social psychologists. According to Burr (1995,
20 2003) social constructionists adopt a critical stance towards knowledge. That is they
21 challenge assumptions of factors that we take for granted. They consider the historical
22 and cultural differences in knowledge, how meanings of words and concepts have
23 changed over time and differ across cultures. They also consider how we sustain our
24 knowledge by social processes and they claim that knowledge and action go hand in

1 hand. In basic terms this means that the truth is what collectively we all agree to be the
2 truth (Burr, 1995). These four tenets of social constructionism lead us to focus on
3 language as the central topic of study in order to ascertain how we construct our own
4 'reality' through our discourse.

5 In basic terms, these principles translate into a methodology that takes
6 language or discourse as its central concern and looks at what language accomplishes
7 for the speaker both at the local interaction level, that is in the moment that it is said,
8 but also consider the implications of language or dominant ways of speaking /
9 discourses within society. In this sense whereas traditionally language across the social
10 sciences was treated as passive or representational, and in that sense we could access a
11 person's attitudes, beliefs or emotions by simply asking them, within constructionist
12 methodologies, language is regarded as being active. That is, when we talk or use
13 language we are actively doing something with that talk, as Willig (2001) says we are
14 performing a social action. A key aspect of constructionist work is the interest in
15 focusing participant concerns rather than analyst's concerns. That is, what is focused
16 on in analysis is what emerges from the data – what the participants have themselves
17 brought up or constructed as relevant. This is in direct contrast to other approaches
18 such as content analysis whereby the data is coded to pre-set analytical categories.

19 There are a variety of methods that come under the heading of constructionist
20 methodologies, including conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), discourse analysis
21 (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Discursive
22 psychology, the focus of this paper, is an eclectic methodology developed by Edwards
23 and Potter (1992) that draws upon the principles of discourse analysis and the tools of
24 conversation developed from research within conversation analysis. This paper

1 focuses on the applicability of discursive psychology to the study of sport, considering
2 types of data that can be used, principles involved in analysis and worked examples of
3 analysis.

4 Sport science research in general has tended to neglect constructionist methods
5 of data analysis in favour of quantitative realist analysis. One reason for this may be
6 that constructionist approaches offer little in the way of predictions. However, to
7 merely disregard constructionist methodologies as impractical to sport science would
8 be a great disservice. What constructionist methodologies such as discursive
9 psychology do is to offer a varying viewpoint and challenge the assumptions behind
10 theoretical viewpoints held within sport science. Within the area of sport and exercise
11 psychology, some recent work has been proposed within the area of constructionist
12 methodologies such as discursive psychology (McGannon & Mauws, 2000) and
13 conversation analysis (Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Jimmerson, 2001). As a result
14 traditional topics such as exercise adherence (McGannon & Mauws, 2000), attribution
15 theory (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003) and emotion (Locke, 2003) have been challenged by
16 a discursive slant. Locke (2003) looked at how emotion words were used by athletes in
17 accounts of successful and poor performance. She found that athletes cited anxiety or
18 nervousness as routine emotions to experience before a good performance, yet in a
19 poor performance, they claimed to not experience such emotion states. Locke's (2003)
20 findings illustrated the rich interactional currency of emotion words in accounts, in
21 line with previous literature from social psychology (Buttny, 1993; Edwards, 1997).

22

23

Discursive Psychology

24

Discursive psychology according to Edwards & Potter (1992) focuses on:

1 [T]he action orientation of talk and writing. For both participants and analysts,
2 the primary issue is the social actions, or interactional work, being done in the
3 discourse..... And rather than seeing such discursive constructions as expressions of
4 speakers' underlying cognitive states, they are examined in the context of their
5 occurrence as situated occasioned constructions whose precise nature makes sense, to
6 participants and analysts alike, in terms of the actions those descriptions accomplish.
7 (p. 2)

8 Discursive psychology has three central tenets – action, fact and interest and
9 accountability that form the basis of the Discourse Action Model (DAM) (Edwards &
10 Potter, 1992). Each of these will be considered in turn. Action refers to the focus on
11 language or discourse as doing something. This is in contrast to other research
12 methodologies, whereby the focus is on cognition or uncovering mental states such as
13 attitudes, perceptions, motives or emotions. According to discursive psychology, talk
14 is indexical, that means that a statement that is said has to be considered in its context.
15 Practically this means that when looking at an interview interaction, the answer to a
16 question is dependent on the question that is asked. This may seem obvious but when
17 conducting a content analysis on an interview, typically only the interviewee's
18 responses are coded, and the interviewer's question that set up the response is ignored.
19 For discursive theorists, in an interview interaction both interviewer and interviewee
20 are counted as participants and all of the discourse is open to analysis.

21 A second key principle of discursive psychology is fact and interest, this is a
22 concern for how involved speakers manage dilemmas of stake or interest. According
23 to the model, whenever we say something, it is not a neutral, objective utterance but
24 rather we are involved in what we say and construct our claims accordingly. That is

1 we are constructing our version of events. We manage our stake and interest in a
2 variety of ways such as convincingly allocating and avoiding blame whilst at the same
3 time avoiding the risk of being treated as a biased party predictably blaming the other
4 (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 1996b).

5 Of particular interest for discursive psychology is how participants in an
6 interaction manage pervasive issues of blame, agency and responsibility (Antaki,
7 1994; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996b; Potter, Edwards & Wetherell, 1993).
8 This is the third tenet of discursive psychology, that of accountability. Edwards (1997)
9 notes that “[w]hen people describe events, they *attend* to accountability. That is to say,
10 they attend to events in terms of what is normal, expectable, and proper; they attend to
11 their own responsibility in events and in the reporting of events” (Edwards, 1997, pg.
12 7; original emphasis). Accountability is where the speaker manages their agency
13 within the interaction and can excuse or justify their behaviour, or allocate blame to
14 others. Such interactional concerns of personal agency and blame allocation can be
15 managed by the speaker in the re-telling of events in such a way as to justify or defend
16 their position (Buttny, 1993). This is particularly poignant when we consider the use
17 of interviews, often retrospective, within the research process whereby the speakers’
18 are retelling their version of events.

19 A discursive psychological analysis of sport data stands in direct contrast to the
20 more traditional work in the area of sport science. In much sport research the interview
21 interactions would initially have been treated as participants reporting some reality
22 regarding their descriptions of events, thoughts and feelings about a particular issue
23 and the context of the talk may have been ignored. From a discursive perspective,
24 accounts for good and poor performances can be analysed in order to investigate how

1 participants manage their accountability. Such an approach offers the researcher a
2 method for understanding interactions across a diverse range of settings in sport
3 research, for example, analysing discourse from coaching sessions, recording team
4 sport interactions or asking athletes to talk about their performances.

5

6 What Kinds Of Data Do Discursive Psychologists Use?

7 Discursive psychologists are interested in studying discourse. In practice this
8 means that they can use media data including television programmes and newspaper
9 reports, interview data, focus groups and naturally occurring conversation. Through all
10 of these data sources the principles of discursive psychology can be examined. When
11 using interview data, discursive psychologists have a preference for semi-structured or
12 unstructured interview formats. Structured interviews that have a rigid schedule of
13 questions are not used within discursive research as they are considered too
14 reductionist. Such schedules are often utilised in content analytic studies. Such
15 structured techniques have been criticised by those in the discursive field as being
16 'living questionnaires' (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Semi-structured interviews allow
17 for topics and issues to be raised by the interviewee that were not considered in the
18 schedule and typically the schedule of questions is used as a guide for the interview
19 with much room for deviation from it (Smith, 1995). Unstructured interviews enable
20 the interviewee to guide the interview and allow for what issues they regard as
21 important to be raised. Whether interviews or focus groups consisting of a few
22 participants are used, the interaction should aim to be conversational in style. As
23 Potter & Wetherell (1987) state:

1 It is important to stress that since the interview is no longer considered a
2 research instrument for accurately revealing an unbiased set of opinions, but seen as a
3 conversational encounter, the researcher's questions become just as much a topic of
4 analysis as the interviewee's answers. These questions set some of the functional
5 context for the answers and they must be included. (p.165).

6

7 Transcribing Data

8 Once the data has been collected, a written version or transcript needs to be
9 produced for analysis. A transcript provides a permanent and accessible record of
10 speech data that can be used alone for analysis or if desired in conjunction with the
11 original tape. In discursive psychology most data is transcribed using a special system
12 developed for conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) which adds full
13 intonation, such as pauses, emphasis, overlaps in speech and so on, to the transcript.
14 The transcription notation is summarised in the Appendix.

15

16 Analysing Discourse

17 In this section, ways of analysing discourse will be discussed. However, it is
18 not a simple process to explain, as Gill (1996) notes:

19

20 ‘‘It is much easier to explicate the central tenets of discourse analysis than it is
21 to explain how actually to go about analysing discourse. In attempting to specify the
22 practice of discourse analysis, one walks a tightrope between, on the one hand, what
23 one might call the ‘recipe book’ approach to doing research, which involves laying out
24 procedures step by step, and, on the other hand, the complete mystification of the

1 process. Neither of these is satisfactory. While the attraction of the methodological
2 recipe is easy to understand, somewhere between ‘transcription’ and ‘writing up’, the
3 essence of doing discourse analysis seems to slip away; ever elusive, it is never quite
4 captured by descriptions of coding schemes, hypotheses and analytical schemas”. (p.
5 143).

6 Gill’s quote demonstrates the complexities of defining analysis. There is not a
7 prescribed method but rather it is “like riding a bike” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987,
8 p.168). There are however a number of general steps that are followed when
9 conducting a discursive analysis. Firstly, it requires a thorough reading and familiarity
10 with the data. Once the data has been transcribed, the researcher needs to immerse
11 themselves within the data. Discursive analysis is as previously noted, participant led
12 rather than analyst led. As a result, the analyst analyses what emerges from the data,
13 that is what the participants make relevant. This process has been termed ‘unmotivated
14 looking’ (Psathas, 1995). In the case of an interview interaction, both interviewer and
15 interviewee are treated as participants as both have had a role in the interaction and
16 construction of what has been said and the analysis is performed at the micro-level of
17 talk.

18 The analysis proceeds as the analyst identifies the prevalent themes or ways of
19 talking in the discourse. There is no set number of analysts working on a transcript. It
20 can be an individual pursuit or there may be a number of analysts working with the
21 same data. Once themes have been identified, the analyst begins coding each instance
22 where the theme has occurred and looks at what the invocation of theme is
23 accomplishing in the context of the interaction. In addition, conversational analytic
24 concerns such as the way the talk is put together in terms of emphasis and turn taking

1 are also considered. Similarities and differences in themes are searched for and a key
2 aspect of this is deviant case analysis. A deviant case is one that may seem initially not
3 to fit with the rest of the data. Such cases are investigated and their use in the context
4 of the interaction. By doing deviant case analysis, often it uncovers more about the
5 ways in which the themes are working for the participants. Grounded theory, another
6 qualitative method, does something similar to this with their negative case analysis.
7 However, other methods such as content analysis may not classify such responses and
8 term them as irrelevant. Examples of such discursive themes will be shown later in the
9 paper when analysis is presented to demonstrate how athletes talk about good and poor
10 performances in competition.

11

12 Issues Of Generalising Claims, Reliability And Validity

13 Qualitative research often uses small samples and hence a common criticism
14 from quantitative researchers concerns making generalisations from the data.
15 Discursive work does not attempt to generalise its findings beyond the data. This is
16 linked to one of the key principles of discursive psychology, that any utterance or talk
17 is not separable from its context. Hence, in the case of interviews looking at success or
18 failure, it is acknowledged that the discourse was specifically produced to manage that
19 particular interaction. However, this is not to say that comparisons between data sets
20 can not be made. Work within the areas of discursive psychology and conversation
21 analysis uncover mundane ways of talking and conversational rules that can be seen
22 across many different interactions and topic areas. For example, different athletes
23 managing agency for success in interview interactions may use similar ways of
24 talking, such as ‘doing modesty’ (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2001).

1 Maintaining reliability and validity are another key concern for quantitative
2 researchers. Qualitative research if it is to be taken seriously as scientific work needs
3 to consider reliability and validity. However, concerns of reliability and validity as
4 they are often conceived are linked to an epistemology of empiricism (Buttny, 1993),
5 typically the realm of quantitative research. As there are many different qualitative
6 methods, analysts argue that depending on the research methodology utilised, there is
7 a need to evaluate the research in its own terms (Reicher, 2000). With reference to
8 discursive work, the criteria for evaluation should be trustworthiness and soundness
9 (Silverman, 1993). There are some general research practices that should be followed
10 to establish validity and reliability. For example, the analyst should avoid making
11 anecdotal claims but rather deal with the prevalent participant concerns emerging from
12 the data and thoroughly interrogate deviant cases (Potter, 1996a; Silverman, 1993). A
13 discursive psychological approach that draws on the tools of conversation analysis
14 (Sacks, 1992) has within its methodological procedures, ways of addressing reliability.
15 As Peräkylä (1997, p. 206) notes reliability in conversation analytic studies is achieved
16 through selecting what to record, getting good quality recordings and producing
17 detailed transcripts.

18 Thus far in the paper philosophical assumptions of qualitative and
19 constructionist research have been considered and the principles and practicalities of a
20 discursive approach to sport data have been discussed. The final section of the paper
21 considers a working example of a discursive psychological analysis on sport data.

22
23

An Example Of Discursive Psychology In Sport Research

24 The section focuses on demonstrating how a discursive analysis would treat
25 interview data from sports performers. The data is comparative and concerns athletes'

1 talking about a good and poor performance at international level. This section
2 discusses how success and failure have typically been addressed in the sport literature,
3 most notably by attribution theory, before moving on to presenting two athletes
4 accounting for their performances.

5

6 Accounting For Success And Failure

7 Accountability is a central concern of discursive psychology and refers to how
8 participants attend to their agency, responsibility and justifications when giving their
9 versions of events. In the case of the interviews, a discursive psychological analysis
10 focuses on how athletes attend to issues such as their personal agency and
11 responsibility for the result, and how they manage issues of blame for a poor result.
12 Success and failure have been studied in the sports literature as tied to attribution
13 theory (e.g. Biddle, 1993; Weiner, 1986) and its effect on internal factors, such as self-
14 efficacy, have been considered (Gernigon & Delloye, 2003). Attribution theory
15 (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967, 1973) is concerned with how people make causal
16 explanation and it regards individuals as “naïve scientists” who are constantly trying to
17 make sense of their own behaviour. It describes the processes of explaining events and
18 the behavioural and emotional consequences of those explanations and claims that
19 people act on the basis of their beliefs. Attribution theory has been challenged from a
20 discursive psychological perspective by Edwards & Potter (1992) who argue that
21 attributions can be studied as situated discourse. They critique traditional attribution
22 studies by saying that:

23 [a]ttribution workers have concentrated on people’s identification of blame and
24 responsibility without considering the way that such identifications when displayed in

1 talk are themselves related to issues of blame and responsibility. Put simply, what is
2 absent is an understanding of the attributional work done by attribution talk.

3 (p. 126)

4 More recently attribution theory has been challenged in the sport literature
5 (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003). Sellars (2003) claims that due to problems with research
6 methodology, attributions should be studied using natural discourse in order to
7 identify the speaker's causal beliefs. Finlay & Faulkner (2003) applied a
8 conversational analytic procedure to sport data and argued that attributions should be
9 studied as a strategy for managing conversation (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This is
10 where a discursive psychological perspective to sport science, in particular sport
11 psychology, becomes relevant as it enables us to study at a micro-level, the elaborate
12 accounts that are produced by athletes for performance. Analysing data in this way
13 enables the analyst to disassemble how the accounts are constructed and uncover the
14 strategies that athletes' use to manage their accountability or responsibility for the
15 outcome of the performance.

16 From a constructionist and discursive perspective little work has been
17 conducted regarding how athletes account for success and failure, particularly within
18 the sport psychology literature. However, within the sociology literature Emmison
19 (1987, 1988) looked at the organisation of ceremonial discourse in accounting for
20 success and failure. From a conversation analytic perspective, he analysed the social
21 organization of speeches that are given after sporting performances and discussed their
22 links with previous studies on ceremonial discourse (e.g. Mulkay, 1984). Emmison's
23 analysis demonstrated that in such discourse, winners downgraded the praise they
24 received for their success, whilst losers tended to be commiserated for their

1 performance rather than being condemned. He noted that victories and defeats are
2 “seldom seen in isolation”, but rather the victor’s response alluded to “chance and
3 circumstance” (Emmison, 1987, p.98). Such responses link in with more recent work
4 considering accounting for success in sport, in particular displaying modesty (Finlay &
5 Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2001).

6

7 The Data Set

8 The interviews were semi-structured and asked athletes to narrate their
9 experiences of competition, with specific reference to the emotions that they
10 experienced across the time frames of pre-, during- and post a good performance and a
11 poor performance. After an initial pilot interview, fourteen interviews were conducted
12 with *high-level* athletes, who were selected on the basis that they had competed for
13 their country at either junior or senior level in their chosen sport. The main focus of
14 the interview schedule was to ascertain emotional experience across competition.
15 However, the interviews became more conversational in style and the athletes
16 provided full accounts of their good and poor performances. The majority of the
17 sample due to age, were coming to the end of their junior careers and beginning to
18 compete at senior level. The majority of participants were collegiate athletes and the
19 others were recruited through contacts within sporting societies. The pilot interview
20 was not audio taped but was an opportunity to check whether the interview questions
21 were satisfactory. The interviews took place in the interviewer’s residence over a
22 period of one month. The data collection procedure operated on informed consent,
23 whereby the participants were informed of the purposes of the study and their rights
24 within the research process. They were promised anonymity and all names and other

1 identifying features such as places, names of competitions were changed to
2 pseudonyms.

3 The resulting tapes were transcribed according to conventions established for
4 conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The transcripts were read
5 repeatedly and sections were identified and coded related to how athletes talked about
6 a good and poor performance. Several themes emerged from the data. When
7 accounting for success, themes prevalent in the data included ‘doing being an
8 international’, ‘the use of heroic narratives’ and ‘softeners, modesty and luck’. It is
9 this final theme that will be considered in this paper. When accounting for poor
10 performance, the athletes tended to structure their accounts in narrative or storied
11 form. Themes included ‘accounting for being there’, ‘accounting for lack of
12 preparation’, and lastly, ‘managing agency and blame’ (Locke, 2001).

13

14 Accounting For Success: ‘Softeners, Modesty And Luck’

15 This theme focuses on accounts of successful performances and examines how
16 athletes may soften their accounts with claims of ‘luck’ and other factors to dilute their
17 agency for the performance and ‘do modesty’. Modesty in this sense refers to playing
18 down one’s achievements and the extracts demonstrate how athletes may construct
19 their talk to ‘do modesty’ or to avoid being seen as immodest when talking about their
20 success. The extracts used to illustrate this dilution of agency come from an account
21 from Barry who is discussing his win over a much higher ranked opponent in an
22 international golf tournament between two countries.

1

2 **Extract 1: Barry: 6–7**

3 1 Int: °so what was the final (0.2) (result)°
 4 2 Barry: and uh (0.4) I won by a hole in the final
 5 3 Int: right (0.4) excellent
 6 4 Barry: but u:m (0.4) and then I lost >my second match< heh
 7 5 heh
 8 6 Int: oh (.) that's okay (0.6) so um (0.6) on the first
 9 7 six holes when you were leading
 10 8 Barry: [yeah,
 11 9 Int: [and you felt good (0.2) what emotions were you
 12 10 actually
 13 11 Barry: I was u:m (0.6) excited I was feeling "yeah (0.2)
 14 12 this is good"
 15 13 Int: °ye[ah°]
 16 14 Barry: [goo]d day (0.4) I was lucky, I was feeling
 17 15 lucky that day as well

18

19 Barry gives the interviewer the result of the match in line 2 that he won by a
 20 hole. The interviewer in line 3 comes in with a typical interview response with “right”
 21 acknowledging her receipt of the information, followed by an appropriate evaluation
 22 of what he has just said, “excellent”. In Barry’s next turn is what could be termed as
 23 “performing modesty” or a softening of his telling about winning the match, in that he
 24 predicates this turn with a contrastive or modifying “but” before saying that he “lost
 25 his second match” (line 4), followed by laughter. By claiming that he lost the next
 26 match, it dilutes his huge achievement in this match. In line 6 the interviewer displays
 27 some evaluative delicacy (or receiving of a repair of what might otherwise be an
 28 unvarnished “excellent”) to what Barry has said with her “oh that’s okay” before

1 moving back to the interview schedule and asking Barry when he was leading on the
 2 first six holes, what emotions was he experiencing (lines 9-10). Barry replies that he
 3 was “excited” (line 11) before moving on to active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) of his
 4 feelings and thoughts at this point in the match, that he was feeling “yeah this is good”
 5 (lines 11-12). He continues that he was having a “good day” (line 14) and then comes
 6 in with the counter to any notion that he might be boasting or bragging about himself,
 7 that he was “lucky” (line 14) and “feeling lucky” (lines 14-15) that day.

8 In this extract, Barry has narrated the events of the match and managed his
 9 agency for the result. He has done this in two main ways. The first is after he has
 10 explained that he won the match, he immediately tells the interviewer that he lost the
 11 next match and thus plays down his achievement. The second way is through his use
 12 of “softeners”, that he was “lucky” that day, rather than stating that he won because he
 13 was better than his opponent. Such claims enable Barry to talk about his success
 14 without appearing as being immodest about his achievements.

15 The second extract happens shortly after the first and as the result is given in
 16 the first extract that he won on the last hole, Extract 2 concerns Barry telling the
 17 interviewer his version of events at the end of the game.

18

19 **Extract 2: Barry 8**

20 1 Barry: =basically, (0.4) what came into- (0.6)
 21 2 the last hole was (.) (by) experience and
 22 3 (0.2) I cou- (.) I couldn't- (0.6) I tried as
 23 4 much to control it but I couldn't control it-
 24 5 (.) it- it just came (0.4) >I wasn't, I
 25 6 wasn't< thinking about it (0.2) I tried as
 26 7 hard- (0.4) tried to think about it

1 8 Int: mmm
 2 9 Barry: but- (0.4) it just came-
 3 10 Int: >what just came<
 4 11 Barry: the (je-) (.) like uhm (.) my swing and
 5 12 (0.4) luck (.) >I dunno it just< (0.4)
 6 13 everything just (0.2) fell into place (0.6)
 7 14 and uhm: (0.4) and- (.) but I couldn't
 8 15 control it (0.4) whatever came I couldn't-
 9 16 (0.2) I didn't (0.2) like: uhm (0.2) demand
 10 17 it to happen

11
 12

13 He begins that what happened on the last hole was questionably due to
 14 “experience” (line 2) before moving on to discussing how he tried but was unable to
 15 “control it” (line 4). It is unclear what the “it” is here but his following account
 16 positions whatever the result of “it” was, that “it just came” (line 9), and that he tried
 17 but could not think about “it”. This account is vague and the interviewer asks Barry to
 18 specify “>what just came<” (line 10), i.e. what is the “it” he is referring to. Barry
 19 specifies that it was a mixture of his “swing” (line 11) and “luck”(line 12), and for him
 20 at that moment “everything just (0.2) fell into place” (line 13). The use of “everything”
 21 here as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) helps mark the situation he is
 22 describing as special or out of the ordinary. He continues that he could not control it
 23 and that he did not “demand it to happen” (lines 16-17). In this extract Barry manages
 24 his version of events by diluting his agency for the performance. He does this through
 25 saying that something happened to him that was out of his control. Such talk may link
 26 into work within sport science on ‘the zone’ whereby an athlete can achieve
 27 exceptional performance whilst acting almost on autopilot. Through such

1 constructions of lack of control and luck, Barry softens his agency for the performance
2 and manages his modesty.

3

4 Accounting For A Poor Performance: 'Managing Blame And Accountability'

5 This theme focuses on athletes' accounting for a poor performance and
6 examines how athletes when constructing their versions of events attend to managing
7 their accountability for the result and ascribe blame to others. The extracts that follow
8 are taken from an interview with Tim, an international rower who is discussing a
9 competition where the crew failed. He has previously said that he was 'subbing in' to
10 the crew due to an injury with a crew member but did not know whether he would be
11 compete in the competition. Extract 3 begins with the interviewer asking Tim when he
12 knew he had been selected to compete.

13

14 **Extract 3: Tim: 12**

15 1 Int: >so when did you know you're actually gonna be in
16 2 the race<

17 3 Tim: u::m (.) >about< two weeks bef[↑]ore

18 4 Int: and (.) any (0.2) initial emotions °there°

19 5 (0.6)

20 6 Tim: U:m (.) WEll (0.6) >it'd been quite funny< I'd (.)

21 7 >just done the junior world championships<

22 8 Int: [yep]

23 9 Tim: [about] (0.2) three and a half weeks before and I'd

24 10 be- and then I went straight out to their training

25 11 camp

26 12 Int: uh huh

27 13 Tim: and u:m (1.0) I was just >sort of< (1.0) winding

1 14 down from (.) the high at being at (.) >a world
 2 15 championships< and I (0.2) never felt I really
 3 16 (2.0) wanted t- I didn't I thought "oh yeah it'll
 4 17 be great" but (0.6) dunno I'd had an inkling from
 5 18 the word go that it wasn't a particularly quick
 6 19 crew >in fact I thought my junior crew were< (0.4)
 7 20 almost (0.2) s:imilar s:peed (0.2) y'know I didn't
 8 21 get in and think "Shit this boats really moving
 9 22 this is going to be great" (0.2)

10

11 The interviewer's question in lines 1-2 is asks when Tim knew he was
 12 "actually gonna be in the race", rather than 'subbing in'. Before producing the time
 13 frame of ">about< two weeks bef[↑]ore" (line 3), there is an orientation to delicacy by
 14 Tim's with his "u::m" (line 3). In order to bolster his claim that this time was
 15 insufficient, he provides an account of what he had been doing before he was selected.

16 He begins with "WELL (0.6) >it'd been quite funny" and he had ">just done"
 17 the junior world championships (lines 6-7). His use of "quite funny" marks his
 18 selection as potentially problematic because he had "just" finished a major
 19 competition. Having just finished one major competition and moving on to another
 20 one unexpectedly may in itself be a justification for a following poor performance.
 21 Tim however does not leave this notion to be inferred by the interviewer and explicitly
 22 through the extract explains why this scenario was difficult. There is an orientation to
 23 this senior event coming too soon for Tim, particularly in the light of his former
 24 constructions of "winding down" from the junior event. He uses language such as
 25 "just done" (line 7) and "straight out there" (line 10) to express how insufficient the
 26 preparation period was. He produces the notion that he was "winding down from the

1 high” (lines 14-15) of being at the junior world championships and of course if he has
2 been on a high then this implies that he performed well at the junior world
3 championships.

4 When discussing his initial feelings about being selected for the senior
5 championships, he says that “I (0.2) never felt I really (2.0) wanted” (line 15) to
6 demonstrate that on some levels he was not bothered about being selected for the
7 competition. The extreme statement of “never” is subsequently softened by him to “I
8 didn’t” and then he repairs it to “I thought “oh yeah it’ll be great” (line 16). Tim’s
9 orientation to his thoughts on being selected (line 16) display the potential problems of
10 the event. Tim’s initial extreme statement about not wanting to be there is softened
11 and repaired perhaps to manage the implication that as a talented junior rower being
12 selected to compete in the senior world championships is something to be pleased with
13 and he deals with this in line 16 where he says “oh yeah it’d be great”. This statement
14 is immediately followed with a contrastive “but” (Schiffrin, 1987) which signals that
15 Tim suspected that the upcoming race situation may be problematic.

16 He sets out what the problem was that “I’d had an inkling from the word go”
17 (lines 17-18), that the crew was not particularly fast. The use of “from the word go” is
18 a good formulation for Tim. He did not perform badly and then blame the team, he
19 knew it from the start. The use of “inkling” (line 17) is poignant and crucial in
20 managing Tim’s stake in this account, as “inkling” suggests an inference or a gut,
21 almost instinctual feeling, and is a softened version of what he could have said. He
22 goes further to bolster his credibility in terms of the account and in terms of his
23 sporting ability by comparing the speed of the crew to his junior team, who he has
24 previously assessed as being very competent rowers and were “almost (0.2) similar

1 s:peed” (line 20). This claim places Tim as a good rower, being that he was a junior,
 2 and thus moves the blame for the poor performance away from him, that at this young
 3 age he was as good as the seniors with potential room for improvement. This rests on
 4 the notion that seniors in any sport should perform at a higher level than their junior
 5 counterparts.

6 In direct contrast to his previously reported thoughts in lines 16-17 that “it’ll be
 7 great” that he was selected, he constructs a reactive extreme quote of “y’know I didn’t
 8 get in and think “Shit this boat’s really moving this is going to be great” (lines 20-22).
 9 His use of “Shit” (line 21) is similar to his use of “oh” (line 16) in that it is constructed
 10 as a formulation of what he was not thinking, but might normatively be expected to be
 11 thinking.

12 In extract 3, Tim has managed his accountability for his performance in a
 13 number of ways. He has told the interviewer that he had insufficient preparation time
 14 to compete to the best of his ability. This lack of preparation is coupled with his prior
 15 successful performance at the junior championships immediately before this event.
 16 Lastly, he allocates blame to his present crew-mates by inferring that as seniors they
 17 were not particularly gifted at their chosen sport.

18 In the next extract from Tim, extract 4, he is asked explicitly to manage his
 19 accountability for the poor performance.

20

21 **Extract 4: Tim: 19**

22 1 Int: um (.) how accountable did you personally
 23 2 feel for the result in the race
 24 3 Tim: U:m (1.2) I was made to feel as though >it was um<
 25 4 (1.8) as though I was quite accountable but u-

1 5 (0.2) no: I don't think >I was< (1.0) I think us
 2 6 ones (0.2) >y'know are just< (0.8) being that age I
 3 7 can't (1.0) compete in- in that (1.0) arena (0.8)
 4 8 as well as I'd be able to in a few years time but
 5 9 (1.6)
 6 10 it wasn't down to me (1.2) °that we didn't do so
 7 11 well (.) but°

8

9 The management of blame is called for directly by the interviewer in line 1.
 10 She begins with asking Tim how accountable he “personally” felt (line 1) for the
 11 result. This category of personally feeling is subjective and the problematic nature of it
 12 is picked up in Tim’s response in his next turn, signified by the “U:m” and long pause.
 13 He constructs his answer that he was “made” (line 3) to feel “quite accountable” (line
 14 4) by inferred others of the coach and the team, but then continues with his previously
 15 constructed category of being a junior competitor and inexperienced. He formulates
 16 this in generalised terms that he is a member of this category through his use of “us
 17 ones” (lines 5-6) who are “that age” (line 6) who do not have the skills to compete in
 18 that “arena” (line 7). He continues that he was not able to compete as well as he could
 19 have done “in a few years time” (line 8) before explicitly stating with strong vocal
 20 emphasis, that it “wasn't down to me” (line 10) that they did not perform “°so well (.)
 21 but°” (lines 10-11). The “so well” is produced quietly and is a vast minimisation and
 22 understatement of the events he has previously described and his use of “but” signifies
 23 the already given in the narrative, rival accounts that could be made of his own
 24 accountability.

1 Through the construction of Tim’s account he avoids being accountable for the
2 crew’s failure by claiming that he had the accountability thrust upon him by inferred
3 others of the coach and crew. These others have y been constructed by Tim as not
4 particularly talented and as result he has implicitly shifted blame towards them.

5

6 Implications Of A Discursive Approach To Sport

7 This paper has demonstrated through using a discursive psychological
8 perspective how success and failure in sport can be analysed as discursive phenomena.
9 Drawing on the principles of the Discourse Action Model (Edwards & Potter, 1992),
10 interview accounts from high-level athletes were analysed to uncover how the talk was
11 organised to attend to action, fact and interest, and accountability. Accounting for
12 sport performance is a complex and delicate matter. In both accounts of success and
13 failure, the athletes’ accounts were constructed to dilute or remove agency for
14 performances. When accounting for success, it was argued that by softening agency, it
15 enables the athlete to discuss his great achievement without appearing as immodest.
16 At the micro-level of analysis that discursive psychology utilises, such ‘softeners’
17 included claiming luck, mentioning other poor performances and not being able to
18 control what happened.

19 When accounting for a poor performance, Tim’s management of his agency
20 was in order to remove any blame for the crew’s failure from him. He did much
21 interactional work to distance himself and his abilities from the rest of the crew. He
22 did this by talking about his success as a junior and by comparing his ability with that
23 of his senior colleagues. Finally, when asked to discuss his own accountability

1 directly, he infers that others tried to make him responsible but due to his age and the
2 events of the race, he was not.

3 Typically, a sport psychologist adopting a realist, quantitative research slant
4 would document both Barry's and Tim's responses through an attributional framework
5 (e.g. Weiner, 1986). If this had been analysed through traditional attribution theory
6 means, a set of attributions would have been identified which would be regarded as
7 being related to the athlete's perceptions of what had taken place. As discussed in this
8 paper, discursive psychologists (Antaki, 1994; Edwards & Potter, 1992) have long
9 argued that attributions are things that we *do* in talk that are built into our
10 accountability practices, rather than as our thoughts or perceived causes for events.
11 The accounts have demonstrated how what have been traditionally termed as
12 'attributions', are available as a discursive resource in order to build accounts of
13 performance. In the case of this paper, the athletes were asked to talk about good and
14 poor performances. As a result, they were drawn into managing personal agency for
15 the results and negotiating blame and accountability. By using a discursive
16 psychological approach, we are able to provide an in-depth analysis of how athletes
17 can construct accounts for performance, focusing on the function and contextual
18 nature of the talk. That is, what they are managing in the re-telling of the event
19 (Buttny, 1993).

20 Finally, constructionist methodologies are beginning to be used within sport
21 science and this is a positive step but their use is still relatively rare. As noted in the
22 introduction, sport science may not be particularly open to such methodologies as it is
23 not in the nature of constructionist work to be able to provide predictions. However,
24 applying constructionist methodologies to sport research will provide a new way of

1 interpreting data and as a methodology, discursive psychology is readily applicable to
2 any spoken data or discourse. As a result it could be utilised in a variety of settings.
3 For example, to study communication in coaching sessions, the ways in which team-
4 mates interact with one another, and as demonstrated in this paper, the ways in which
5 athletes talk about their performances. Hence, discursive psychology with its focus on
6 micro-levels analysis of talk has a strong practical application to sport. In addition, as
7 demonstrated by recent studies in sport and exercise psychology (Finlay & Faulkner,
8 2003; Locke, 2003), discursive approaches can also work to challenge theoretical
9 assumptions within the discipline and consider how such assumptions drive research
10 practices. Overall discursive psychology has much to offer sport research both as a
11 methodological practice and as a way of evaluating theory.

12

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Appendix

1
2 Transcription Symbols

3 These are derived from the system developed for conversation analysis
4 (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

5

6 [] Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech,
7 aligned with the talk immediately above or below.

8 ↑↓ Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement.

9 Underlining Emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words
10 locates emphasis, but also indicates how heavy it is.

11 CAPITALS Speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech.

12 °↑I know it,° Raised circles ('degree' signs) enclose obviously quieter speech.

13 (0.4) Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds; in this
14 case, 4 tenths of a second.

15 (.) A micropause, hearable but too short to measure.

16 he wa::nted Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more
17 colons the more elongation, roughly one colon per syllable
18 length.

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

20 .hhh Inspiration (in-breaths).

21 Yeh, Commas mark weak rising or continuing intonation, as used
22 sometimes in enunciating lists, or in signalling that the speaker
23 may have more to say.

1	y'know?	Question marks signal stronger, 'questioning' intonation,
2		irrespective of grammar.
3	Yeh.	Periods (stops) mark falling, stopping intonation, irrespective of
4		grammar, and of whether the speaker actually stops talking.
5	bu-u-	hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound.
6	>he said<	'greater than' and 'lesser than' signs enclose speeded-up talk.
7	solid.= We had	'Equals' signs mark the immediate 'latching' of successive talk,
8		whether of one or more speakers, with no interval.
9	(...)	This shows where some talk has been omitted from a data
10		extract or from within a turn at speaking.
11	(you)	Round brackets containing words are used when the talk is
12		unclear. The words in brackets are the transcriber's 'best guess'
13		at what was said.
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