

The Discursive Self



Discourse and construction

- ❑ **Constructivism:** Strong emphasis on constructions as something mental (images) produced through interaction with objects or some features of the external world (e.g. Piaget – ‘little scientist’, Kelly)
- ❑ **Social constructivism:** constructions are something mental, but are generated as much through social relations and conversation as through interactions with objects (e.g. Vygotsky, Bruner)
- ❑ **Social constructionism:** emphasises discourse as central to the construction of self and the world (e.g. Harrē, Shotter, Gergen)

Social constructionism

□ Gergen (1994):

1. “The terms we use to describe ourselves and our worlds are not dictated by their objects
2. The terms through which we understand the world and ourselves are social artefacts, produced over historical time through exchanges between people within cultures
3. Any account of the world or self is sustained not by its objective validity but by social processes
4. Language derives its significance in human affairs from the way it functions within relationships”

(Hepburn, 2003, p.175)

Social constructionism

- ❑ “Social constructionism regards psychological knowledge as socially constructed via **negotiated socio-cultural meanings**, which are **historically prevalent**.”

(Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2006, p.49, emphasis added)

- ❑ Critical of psychology theories, models and practices
 - asocial, decontextualized and dehumanizing models of the person
 - maintenance, reproduction and legitimation of oppressive relations and practices

e.g. Androcentric bias implicit in much of psychology

Justifies and re-produces patriarchal forms of oppression within psychology and society in general

(Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1998)

Discursive Psychology

- ❑ Distinct tradition of psychological research
- ❑ But – not one unified approach – different ‘schools’ of thought
- ❑ Potter and Wetherell (1987) *‘Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour’*
 - Social constructionist
 - Non-cognitivist
 - Re-works topics including self and identity, attitudes, prejudice...
- ❑ But – not one unified approach – different ‘schools’ of thought

Construction in discursive psychology

- ❑ Potter (1996a)
- ❑ Constructionism – a practical position
- ❑ Discourse does not reflect the world – it **constructs** the world
- ❑ Construction – emphasis on activity, not passivity
- ❑ Descriptions, practices, history, conflict, place – inextricably linked

Construction in discursive psychology

□ Two levels of construction:

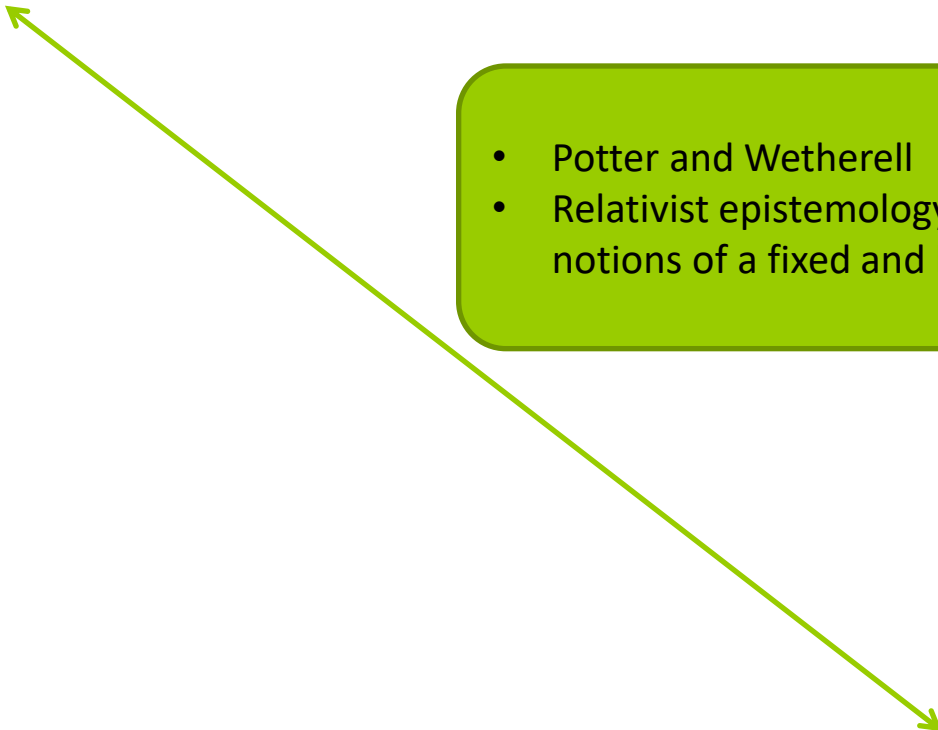
1. **Discourse itself is constructed** – how are words, metaphors, accounts, stories etc. put together to achieve something in the course of an interaction?
People are excellent ‘describers’
2. **Versions of the world are constructed in discourse** - we construct versions of our inner life, characteristics of specific groups, an event - through language/discourse

Different schools along a continuum, include...

- Potter and Edwards (e.g. 1992)
- Local, interactional, sequential of everyday talk in natural settings
- Influenced by Conversational Analysis

- Potter and Wetherell
- Relativist epistemology – questions the notions of a fixed and knowable reality

- Parker (2002)
- Critical Discursive Psychology
- Explicit political agenda
- Realist epistemology – veridical version, cuts through ideology



Core principles in Discursive Psychology

1. Discourse is constitutive

- How people use language to understand and make sense of everyday life
- Discourse – reflexive and contextual – constructs the nature of objects and events as they are talked about
- *Differs from Social Identity Theory and Social Representations Theory, which are argued to accept 'reality' as a given (Edwards, 1997)*



- Discursive psychology:



Core principles in Discursive Psychology

2. Discourse is functional

- Talk is a social practice
- Specific context and the function needed influences what we say
- Context is continually shifting – meanings are constructed, challenged, supported and negotiated
 - We are negotiating 'reality'

So...

- *Traditional psychology: seeks to identify stability in cognitions and behaviour*
- Discursive psychology: emphasises the inherent variability reflecting contextual changes and functions
 - How is the discourse organised and what is it doing?

Core principles in Discursive Psychology

3. Discursive resources and practices

- How text and talk put together to constitute 'reality' – shaped by social, cultural and historical processes (Wetherell, 2001)
- DP replaces cognitive constructs (attitudes, beliefs, opinions...). Instead – emphasis is upon identification of resources and practices drawn upon for everyday talk – how DO we discuss, debate, argue, ask...?
- Interpretative repertoires (set of metaphors, arguments, terms) used recurrently in people's discourse to describe events and actions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987)
 - E.g. Potter (1996): To strengthen an argument, a common device is to claim a consensus exists – 'Everyone knows this is the case.' (Consensus Warrant)
 - E.g. Drew and Holt (1989): Use of idiomatic expressions (cliché, proverbs) as these can be difficult to argue against

Core principles in Discursive Psychology

4. Discourse and Identity

- If discourse constructs versions of the world then it also construct identities of speakers within the world
 - *Traditional psychology: Identity is an inner psychological essence that we possess*
 - Discursive psychology: Identities/'subject positions' are brought into being through discourse
 - Different ways of talking construct/invoke different identities
e.g. student, daughter, mother, friend...

-
- ❑ Interpretative repertoires for identities
e.g. 'daughter' - through use of culturally recognized narratives in talk regarding daughters' rights, responsibilities, obligations etc.
 - ❑ *Traditional Psychology: stable, cognitive self*
 - ❑ Discursive Psychology: shifting and multiple identities actively constructed in talk to accomplish a range of interactional goals
 - ❑ People can be positioned by ways of talking
 - ❑ But – can also make choices – which identity will you mobilize in a particular setting
 - ❑ 'People are constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate' (Davis and Harré, 1990, p. 263)

Discursive approaches - common themes

- The term 'discursive psychology' is a simplification
 - different types of discursive psychology; different ways of working with discourse

But common to all...

- Words are performing acts
- Considering what were traditionally seen as inner, personal, cognitive notions in terms of their location in broader social practices
- Hepburn (2003) examples:
 - Understanding 'memory' as part of a legal performance of a defence in court
 - Understanding 'attitudes' in terms of their position in broad debates about a controversial topic

Memory

□ Hepburn (2003)

1. Remembering and non-remembering are practices done in discourse – the practice of remembering and forgetting is a public and social one
2. Remembering is not evaluated through comparing input with output (cognitive psych experiments) – but through normative criteria...
 - Brought into play locally
 - Managed rhetorically
 - Open to contest
3. There is no simple objective record against which remembering can be compared – there are only versions that can be more or less telling or open to doubt

(Edwards and Potter, 1992, in Hepburn, 2003)

Emotion

- Edwards (1997)
- Mainstream psychology ethnocentric
- Argues that 'emotion' is conceptualised in terms of English categories
 - These are what researchers look for/study
- “As a historically modern concept (at least in English), the word ‘emotion’ should be considered a dubious category under which to group all the ways that other cultures (including our own, in other times) talk about feelings, reactions, attitudinal judgements (if we can use all these terms, and related matters”

(Edwards, 1997, p196, in Hepburn, 2003)

Use of categories of emotion

- Edwards – categories, words etc. are there for what we do with them
- Example – how emotion categories can be used to manage a situation and its consequences

e.g. Mary on telling Jeff about her affair...

Mary: (...) so that's when I decided to (.) you know to tell him (1.0) u::m
and then::, (.) obviously you went through you're a:ngry stage,
didn't you?
(.)
Ve:ry upset obviously, .hh an:d uh we started ar:guing a lot an:d
(0.6) just drifted away

Use of categories of emotion

- What has Mary done in her talk?
 - Deflected the blame (abstract moral matter)
 - Identified who needs counselling; who needs to change (consequential, practical matter)
- Emotions (and cognitions) not just inside Jeff's head and actions – not 'facts' waiting to be reported.
- 'Anger', 'upset' = descriptive categories that can be used to construct Jeff's reactions as *emotional* ones, rather than as rational disapproval of Mary's behaviour

BREAK



10 MINUTES!

So...Discourse approaches

1. All oppose the assumptions of cognitivism

- Edwards (1997, p.19): cognitivism as “a perspective that reduces all of psychological life, including discourse and social interaction, to the workings of cognitive, or even computational, mental processes”
 - Discursive psychology - a theoretical and methodological shift from the internal to the external
 - Study of inner experiences – actual examination of further discourse that should be analysed discursively (Edwards, 1997).

2. Focus on attending to discourse and talk in interactional contexts and texts

- ❑ Close study of language – Discourse Analysis
- ❑ Regardless of particular form, DA interrogates the nature of social action by dealing with how actions and/or meanings are constructed in and through text and talk
- ❑ Does not mean that thinking is so deeply hidden that it cannot be studied directly. Thinking need not be considered just as a solitary, hidden process
- ❑ Within conversations thinking occurs socially. The turns of conversation are too quick for spoken utterances merely to be the outer form of a prior cognitive act

-
- Institutional culture (e.g. university, government, hospital), attitudes, emotions, identity etc.) is 'talked into being' (Nikander, 2006)
 - Intersubjective understanding, social life and institutional practices are accomplished, constructed and reproduced in the process
 - How do people make sense of their own identity?
 - How are groups – 'us' and 'them' - formed discursively?
 - How are psychological categories constructed?
 - How do people use (refer to) emotions and memories in interaction?
 - What are the social functions of psychological categories in interaction?

3. Consideration of everyday language for its occasioned and situated functions

- Action orientation – doing things with words (Austin, 1962)
 - Use cultural categories, blame, excuse, construct facts, explain etc.....
 - Take the interpretive context into account
- Patterns in language use – not the internal psychological entity that lies behind it
- Practices – categorisation, explanation, accounting...

Example – rape trial... (Drew, 1992, p489)

Attorney: It's where uh (.) gi:rls and fella:s meet isn't it?

Witness: People go there

Different motives, scenarios and interpretations of the night in question

Discourse vs. 'Scientific' language

1. Nominalization or the turning of verbs into nominals
2. Use of passives

(Fowler et al, 1979; Fowler, 1979; Fairclough, 1992 and 2003)

- Nominal form e.g. Attack on protestors' (*an attack = noun*)
- Passive form e.g. 'Protestors attacked' (*people were attacked*)

Neither specify the agents of the event – avoids the issue of agency

Would require use of an active verb e.g.

- 'Government troops attack protestors' (*somebody is actively attacking*)

Agency

- ❑ Traditionally, psychology has sought to find the causes of people's thoughts and behaviours.
- ❑ Depicts people in ways that deny agency
 - Not the person who is the agent of their actions but the causal variables - biological, personality or cognitive variables.
- ❑ Discursive psychologists present features of discourse as if they are the determinants of action – not hidden causes
 - Complex patterns of interaction
 - Rhetorical temptation of writing in ways that attribute action to technical entities rather than people.
 - To depict people as agents of their own actions – DPs write in ways that emphasise human action.

Agency

Purpose of interactions

- Discursive psychologists isolate what particular interactional moves do or do not accomplish (practical goal, identity work...)

Example:

- Schegloff (2000) *Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation*
 - Painstaking detail
 - Subtle moves, signs and reactions during the interaction
 - But does not go further to search for the causal variable (e.g. gender, power, personality etc.)
 - Constructing/reconstructing during the social interaction

Dilemma of stake

- ▣ Descriptions important in interaction because speakers/writers are caught in a dilemma of stake
- ▣ Different possibilities when making a statement
e.g. (Hepburn, 2003)

“It’s raining outside”

Focus on *thing that is described* – ‘wonderful British weather’

Or on *speaker* – ‘do you want me to get the washing in?’

Pervasive – we inspect what other people say for how it may be related to what is being said

‘Was that just to flatter?’ ‘Does he need help with an assignment?’ ‘Is she trying to change my opinion?’

Managing dilemmas of stake

- We don't always have to consciously do this – some statements are merely descriptions
- We can also manage the dilemma – not passive
 - e.g. we can disguise or counter our own interests to make the description/talk seem separate from us

One example of management: making the extraordinary real

- Root it in ordinary activity/thinking. The mundane works against the idea that the speaker is a 'crank'.... (*identity issue*)

I was just walking down the sports track listening to my Walkman...in the school there was a big hall and on top of that was a big clock tower [...] and then something caught my eye and I looked up and saw something floating in the air...it's what I believed to be a UFO

Identity

Discursive psychology examples:

- ▣ Place identities (*Dixon and Durrheim, 2000*)
- ▣ Illness identities (*Horton-Salway, 2001*)
- ▣ Professional identities (*Sachs, 2001*)
- ▣ Gender identities (*Wetherell and Edley, 2014*)
- ▣ Drug user identities (*Rødner, 2005*)

Gender Identities (Wetherell and Edley, 2014)

- ▣ Masculinities should be understood to be *practical accomplishments*
- ▣ Not mere playing-out of prescribed social roles
- ▣ Masculinities...

“...sets of variable practices that are actively developed and negotiated in relation to other forms of identity in particular cultural contexts.”

(p.355)

Discursive patterns that lie at the foundation of everyday practices e.g. achieving/maintaining physique, clothing choice, leisure pursuits

Gender Identities (Wetherell and Edley, 2014)

- Hegemonic masculinity (dominant) (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985)
- Masculinities are plural
- Different kinds of masculinities constructed in relation to, and through, struggles with each other
- e.g. single sex school...
- Rugby players – distinctive blazers, positions of authority
 - School approval for a particular way of being ('macho' masculinity)

Gender Identities (Wetherell and Edley, 2014, p.356)

- Other boys' identities – not only who they are, but who they are not

Aaron:

“[...] the rugby group [...] it's all very chauvinistic and male....”

Hegemony in action – naturalization of macho masculinity

Neil:

“[...] whereas they'd probably see themselves as men and I'd probably see themselves as a person rather than a man (.) well I am a man (.) I don't know.

To distinguish from rugby players, locating self outside of hegemonic maleness

Gender Identities (Wetherell and Edley, 2014)

But negotiating...justifying...positioning...

Neil:

“I mean you could probably draw a list up (.) of what the qualities that make you eligible for [the rugby group] I mean (.) you’ve probably got to be attractive (.) handsome (.) good at sport (.) physically strong and I’d probably say mentally *weak* to go along with them [laughter] but I mean you’ve got to be (.) probably pretty sheepish follow the herd to do that whereas I doubt if one of them would stand out and say something against their whole group whereas one of us lot wouldn’t think twice about it”

(p.357)

Gender Identities (Wetherell and Edley, 2014)

- ❑ Discursive psychology and quantitative gender role models share...
 - Multiple ways of 'being a man'
 - Not all equal – power, normativity, dominance
 - Political activity – ideology
 - Masculinity is embodied (but genetic/biological not rigid template)
- ❑ Humanistic approaches with gender role models...
 - Harm of traditional masculinities – physical and mental wellbeing
- ❑ Discursive psychology and quantitative gender role models differ...
 - Methodology
 - ❑ DP takes a qualitative view of what happens outside of the laboratory
 - ❑ Focuses on inconsistencies and variability that constitute social life
 - ❑ How these are managed within specific social contexts

Drug user identities

- ▣ Rødner (2005)
- ▣ Swedish dominant discourse:
 - Illicit drugs – social evils – helpless victims – addiction and abuse
 - Constructs the ‘other’ – drug addict/drug ‘abuser’
- ▣ 16 women/28 men 18-30 years
 - Discursive work to avoid presenting self as ‘other’

- Identity as **drug user**, not abuser
-

- Rational, informed choice – personal **responsibility** discourse

That is why I think it should be up to each and every one to decide...One has to place it on the individual's responsibility...We are individuals and should be treated as such

Also serves to maintain a personal **right** to decide – positioning critics

- 'Drug-wise' – self-reflexiveness, self-awareness:

Interviewer: Have you ever thought why you have not become hooked on drugs?

Participant: I think it's because I have a stable ground to stand on...Additionally, I reflect a lot about myself the whole time,...so when it gets too much I back off...

Emphasises personal **control**

❑ Drug abusers are 'other'

- Emphasis of participants' own 'good' properties/de-emphasis of 'bad' behaviour
- Sameness between 'us' and 'them' (narcomaniacs) de-emphasised

❑ Control

Participant: Well, I use, I don't abuse.

Interviewer: And how do you distinguish between use and abuse?

Participant: An abuse is when a person really has to have the drugs every day, or lives and hides his feelings and unhappiness and blames it on the drugs. Use is when a person can take the drugs and still have a full social life and work and take care of himself and knows what he is feeling...

❑ Psychological factors

Interviewer: Why do you think this person got hooked?

Participant: Lost control, and he didn't have real...well he had a too weak psyche to begin with; he should never have started in the first place...

Reading

(PLUS YOUR OWN LITERATURE SEARCH)

- Augoustinos, M, Walker, I. and Donaghue, N. (2009). *Social Cognition: an integrated introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Hepburn, A. 2003). *An Introduction to Critical Social Psychology*. London: Sage. [Chapter 7].
- Hepburn, A., Jackson, C. (2009). Rethinking Subjectivity: A Discursive Psychological Approach to Cognition and Emotion. In, D. Fox, I. Prilleltensky and S. Austin (Eds.) *Critical Psychology: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.).
- Sachs, J (2001). Teacher professional identity: Competing discourses, competing outcomes. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16 (2), 149-161.
- Schegloff, E.A. (2000). Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language in Society*, 29, 1-63.
- Wetherell, M., Edley, N. (2014). A Discursive Psychological Framework for Analyzing Men and Masculinities. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 15 (4), 355-364.