

Discursive and Rhetorical Psychology

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Discursive psychology is a comparatively recent approach which seeks to recast the traditional questions and methods of psychology through the analysis of discourse and conversational interaction. Rhetorical psychology is a form of discursive psychology and it examines thinking through the analysis of rhetoric and argumentation.

According to Augoustinos and Tileagá (2012), discursive and rhetorical psychology began in 1987 when Potter and Wetherell's *Discourse and Social Psychology* and Billig's *Arguing and Thinking* were published. Both books criticized conventional ways of doing social psychology, particularly the traditional concept of attitude. According to these authors, it is a mistake to see attitudes as internal, cognitive structures which strictly determine what people say about the social world. Instead, both books suggested that people are more flexible than most attitude theories recognize because people are influenced by the discursive and rhetorical contexts in which they find themselves.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) argued that people possess various *interpretative repertoires* and use different repertoires in different contexts. In the same vein, Billig (1987) suggested that the rhetorical meaning of people's views might be related to the views that they were arguing against, just as much as the positions that they were arguing for – and, thus, people might shift what they say depending on what views they were qualifying or countering (Billig 1987). In this

respect, both books suggested that people's expressed views need to be understood in relation to the discursive context. There is a further implication. Because the same people hold contrary interpretative repertoires or opposing rhetorical *topoi*, then the cultures in which they live or the ideologies that they share will be marked by opposing themes and values. The result is that people are capable of expressing more discursive complexity and less consistent views than social psychologists usually expect.

Discursive psychologists argued that this complexity was not to be studied through attitude questionnaires but by examining in detail exactly how people talk and argue *in situ*. However, discursive psychology is much more than a critique of the concept of "attitude" or a methodological switch to qualitative methods, for it encapsulates a different conception of the mind (Edwards and Potter 1993). Primarily, it represents a reaction against cognitive psychology, which has been the most widespread position within experimental psychology for over 50 years. Cognitive psychologists have sought to identify the mental processes involved in thinking and have taken for granted the existence of internal mental entities, such as mental representations, schemata, and memory traces. Discursive psychologists, however, challenge this assumption and they advocate that psychologists should move from trying to study unobservable, inner mental processes to focusing upon outward language behavior.

In outlining their position, discursive psychologists draw upon the sort of ideas that Wittgenstein outlined in his later philosophy of language. Discursive psychologists take two important assumptions from Wittgenstein (1953). First, discursive psychologists

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assume that speakers perform actions with speech, such as promising or marrying. In a literal sense words can be deeds. If one wishes to understand what someone has said, then one must analyze what the speaker is doing with their talk especially in relation to those to whom they are speaking. Second, and following from the first assumption, analysts should not be trying to understand the meaning of utterances in terms of the prior mental state of speakers. This is especially important in relation to psychological language. As Wittgenstein argued, statements with psychological phrases such as “I think” or “I believe” or “I expect” are not typically reports of inner mental events. For example, if a person says “I believe it is going to rain” they are not reporting an internal mental state to which only that speaker has access. Instead the speaker is engaging in public discourse, using terms like “I think” or “I believe” to express less than absolute certainty in a conventional and socially understood way.

This second assumption was particularly important for the development of discursive psychology. Whereas Wittgenstein and later analytic philosophers examined hypothetical examples of utterances, discursive psychologists have been committed to recording and analyzing actual examples of speech in their context. Edwards and Potter (1993) suggested that a prime project for discursive psychologists was to explore how speakers use psychological language either in ordinary, everyday informal conversations or in the special, formal interactions of institutions, such as courts, parliaments, and governmental inquiries. For example, discursive psychologists have examined the use of memory language, analyzing how claims about “memories” can be jointly produced in family discussions about the past. Also, they have looked at formal situations, demonstrating how negative statements such as “I don’t remember” can be used as a means of

refusing to engage in memory talk, rather than being the report of an internal state, in which a memory trace cannot be accessed.

Increasingly, discursive psychologists have turned away from using interviews as a means of ascertaining what participants think about issues and toward analyzing talk in naturally occurring interactions. They have also tended to turn from the concept of interpretative repertoires and now prefer to use the analytic terminology of conversation analysis. Those using rhetorical ideas have followed a less structured program; they have suggested that internal thinking is modeled on the rhetoric of outward argumentation and have even argued that Freudian mechanisms of repression are rhetorical, for they are derived from conversational moves to change the topic (Billig 1999). Whatever the developments of discursive psychology, most mainstream experimental psychologists have nevertheless held fast in continuing to overlook or dismiss its accomplishments.

SEE ALSO: Attitudes; Conversation Analysis; Discourse Analysis

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