

Discursive Psychology

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Discursive psychology (DP) is the study of psychological issues from a participant's perspective. It investigates how people practically manage psychological themes and concepts such as emotion, intent, or agency within talk and text, and to what ends. Rather than revealing psychological phenomena in the laboratory, it looks at how psychology is put to use in everyday lives by people themselves. Crucially, talk is not understood as a neutral route into people's minds or the "outside" world but as a tool for action. Discursive psychologists are interested in the practical achievements in and for the interaction when speakers suggest or formulate a particular psychological state. They have shown how—often parenthetical—displays of ignorance ("I don't know") can be drawn upon to play down the speaker's stake in a particular description (Potter, 1996). Likewise, they have demonstrated that utterances of ostensibly individual gustatory pleasure ("mmm") are strongly intertwined with social activities such as aligning with other meal participants or giving compliments to the cook (Wiggins, 2002).

In studying how talk performs actions rather than simply mirrors mind and world, DP radically departs from cognitive psychological approaches in which mental states are taken to be the cause or source of what is being said (Edwards, 1997). More generally, it departs from approaches, including interpretative perspectives, that consider talk as merely providing the analyst with a way into underlying states of mind: people's attitudes, beliefs, motives, or intentions.

A short history: Roots and influences

The start of discursive psychology can be traced back to the end of the 1980s. In 1987 Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell published *Discourse and Social Psychology*, which is the first book to describe discourse analysis, or the fine-grained study of everyday talk-in-use, as an integral part of doing psychology. In the same year, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* was published. With this book Michael Billig highlighted the argumentative and rhetorical nature of talk, by analyzing how utterances always and necessarily undermine their opposite or alternative version—not in the abstract but in real life settings. Both the focus on close readings of recorded talk and on the rhetorical features of talk are visible in *Discursive Psychology* (Edwards & Potter, 1992), the book that coined the term under which this branch of interaction analysis has become widely known.

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Discursive psychology is a truly interdisciplinary enterprise in that it has roots in a number of social scientific disciplines and approaches. Discourse and social psychology recognizes the influence of the late Wittgenstein and poststructuralism, as well as of social studies of science, conversation analysis, and ethnomethodology. Later work shows a declining influence of poststructuralist notions while the ties with conversation analysis have been strengthened.

The influence of Wittgenstein can be seen in the starting point of DP according to which references to inner or outer reality are by definition various and open-ended, and can therefore only be understood through their practical management or everyday use. The idea of language as doing more than description—namely, performing actions—was elaborated by the speech act theorists Austin and Searle. Describing was identified as “just” one out of many other possible speech acts. This is quite a remarkable thing to point out when taking into account that until then philosophers had merely focused on matters of truth and representation.

Wittgenstein’s influence is also reflected in the profound interest of discursive psychologists in redefining cognition (Edwards, 1997; te Molder & Potter, 2005). Of key importance is his notion that the mind is not a private space but a phenomenon that is made publicly accountable through language. As language is our only common ground when trying to understand the world, a neat distinction between word and world— or meaning and mind—is unthinkable.

Influences from poststructuralism and social studies of science are visible in the focus of discursive psychologists on facts not as “states of affairs” but as constructions put together for particular purposes. Like poststructuralists, discursive psychologists are interested in how reality and truth are produced through text and talk, that is, how representations take on a life of their own and become solid and robust. Semiotologists’ concept that language works through a system of oppositions is reflected in the attention that discursive psychologists pay to the “could-have-been-otherwise” quality of descriptions (Edwards, 1997). Versions of reality are produced to counter rhetorical alternatives, in that they routinely resist or deny actual or potential alternative versions of what is being said. Inspecting stretches of discourse for these alternative versions helps the analyst to make sense of the actions performed.

Like many sociologists of science, discursive psychologists start from a symmetrical treatment of accounts when looking in detail at how these versions of reality are constructed (Potter, 1996). Symmetry here means that the analyst does not start from a preconceived idea of the truth or falsity of the different descriptions. Rather, the interest lies in how these constructions are brought off as truthful or a result of error, for that matter. The emphasis on construction as a set of building blocks put together for particular purposes is especially noticeable in the early days of DP. The notion of interpretative repertoire was adapted from the work of the sociologists of science Gilbert and Mulkey to capture the ostensible inconsistencies in people’s accounts that were not explained by the classical social psychological attitude concept (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Other than poststructuralists and sociologists of science, however, discursive psychologists examine the performative qualities of descriptions as part of action sequences in real life talk. This interest can be traced back directly to the influence of conversation analysts. Conversation-analytic studies demonstrate that what people do with

language, such as building expertise or assigning responsibility, is not brought about on the basis of a single turn in the conversation but involves a whole series of turns. The meaning of an utterance can never be assessed without taking its interactional context into consideration. This may be a commonplace but few disciplines take it as seriously as conversation analysis. Furthermore, conversation analysts criticize the sharp distinction that speech act theorists make between action and uptake: It is only through participants' treatment of utterances that the analyst can come to understand what the action is (see also Action rather than cognition).

Major dimensions

Naturalistic rather than contrived

Discursive psychology provides a rigorous empirical approach to analyzing talk in interaction. Discursive psychologists prefer to work with detailed transcripts of naturalistic conversations, in other words, conversations that are not brought about through the intervention of the researcher. These materials may vary from phone calls between peers to institutional conversations between doctor and patients or counselor and clients.

Discursive psychology in principle examines all talk as natural, namely by approaching it as oriented to action. It thereby does not confine itself to the study of conversations with an "obvious" societal interest such as political talk. Also talk derived from research interviews can be examined as natural talk, although discursive psychologists are critical of the analytical merits of interviews in comparison to "untamed" materials. Crucially, interview talk should be analyzed as conversation and with due consideration of the practical and consequential role of the cognitive language that is drawn upon by both interviewer and interviewee.

The term "natural data" should not be understood as referring to a domain with a distinct ontological status—hence the expression naturalistic—as there is no such thing as completely untouched data. Instead the focus on naturalistic data should first and foremost be looked upon as an opportunity to study a different and generally neglected aspect of human conduct, namely, the way in which talk is interactionally organized.

Action rather than cognition

Discursive psychologists are focused on psychology as a participant's preoccupation. So rather than being interested in people's intentions, motives, and perceptions per se, they examine how these mental states figure as a practical concern for participants in the interaction. For example, a detailed description of an event—suggesting that the speaker "merely" witnessed the scene—may easily lend itself to separating intentional behavior from unintended consequences (Edwards, 2008). Rather than assessing whether the speaker has justly escaped an explanation in terms of willful behavior or not, discursive psychologists retain an agnostic stance regarding the cognitive state that is at stake. This stance is grounded in the understanding that language is necessarily selective, and its consequence that analysts should first and foremost be interested in what a particular selection is designed to do, rather than focus on ontological matters.

And most importantly, it is only through the appreciation of how participants treat each other's talk that one can learn to understand the course of the interaction.

Like conversation analysts, discursive psychologists base their analysis on participants' own understandings of the talk. People use the turn-by-turn development of a conversation as a resource to make sense of it. They may treat displays of anger as a request to leave the room, claimed losses of memory as reluctance to answer a question, or deal with a description of their behavior as implicating blame. These continuously updated understandings of what is said and done constitute an important "proof procedure" for the analyst, that is, these displays are used to examine how participants are understanding each other in terms of the actions being performed. Whether something is an accusation or a compliment is thus analyzed as a participant's rather than as an analyst's concern.

Normative rather than causal

Discursive psychology, like ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, deploys a basic conception of human behavior that is radically different from most social scientific approaches. Rather than in a causal organization of human behavior, it is interested in laying bare a normative organization of what makes social actions orderly and intelligible. For ethnomethodologists, "moral talk" is a pleonasm as talk is always and necessarily moral. Talk is live morality, or, morality-in-action. This insight has crystallized into the conversation-analytic principle of the sequential organization of talk, which is also a central starting point for discursive psychologists. If, for example, a question is not followed by an answer or a greeting by a countergreeting, the situation is given meaning by treating it as a departure from a certain rule or expectation. Conversation partners determine the status of an action—deciding whether, for example, it is an accusation or behavior that is free from hostile intent—by reference to a given norm. Norms are thus reflexively constitutive for actions rather than standards that behavior simply has to comply with. People continuously order reality so as to make it rational and legitimate, or accountable.

This ordering is not some kind of random side line but constitutive for each interaction. In the words of Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology, the normative order is "seen but unnoticed" (1967): ever-present but not necessarily observed as such. Even an ostensibly simple identity as "being ordinary" requires work. In a seminal study, Harvey Sacks (1984), who stood at the basis of conversation analysis, analyzed it as an achievement—"doing being ordinary"—rather than a fixed state or category. Depending on the context, ordinariness may get a different emphasis. Reporting a paranormal event requires of a speaker that he or she presents his or her encounter with the paranormal as the kind of experience that any ordinary human being could or would have. In an online vegan forum, however, participants may build themselves as "ordinary" so as to resist the notion that vegan diets—and vegans more generally—are complicated.

Current emphases in discursive psychology

While DP first came to be known through a critical appreciation of core (social) psychological concepts such as attitude, memory, and attribution (Edwards & Potter, 1992), it

now largely functions as a stand-alone approach. Of the different roots and influences, the one that is most apparent is that of conversation analysis (CA). Many scholars who are discursive psychologists by training, present (part of) their work as conversation-analytic or a combination of both approaches. At the same time, differences in emphasis remain. As the collection of chapters in *Conversation and Cognition* (te Molder & Potter, 2005) makes clear, discursive psychologists and conversation analysts tend to have a different theoretical outlook on the status of cognition in interaction. Whereas some conversation analysts distinguish between cognitive and interactional features of talk, discursive psychologists systematically analyze “cognition” as part of participants’ interactional apparatus. They bracket off the “realness” of cognition and instead focus on how it is put to action. A second difference concerns the focus on actions in a particular domain rather than turn-taking and sequential organization per se. While the difference is far from black and white, discursive psychologists usually start with an interest in a particular social field—for example, family mealtimes or counseling sessions—and analyze talk’s interactional business from there. The goal is to create an interaction-based pathway into a relevant domain. A conversation-analytic perspective highlights structural features of talk such as conversational repair and preference organization; the goal is to lay bare the social organization of talk such that it transcends a particular content domain. Nevertheless, and especially in the area of institutional talk (see below), the differences are often negligible.

Discursive psychology started out as a form of discourse analysis that identified so-called interpretative repertoires: stretches of talk that cohere in terms of content and action orientation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). From there it developed into a respecification of traditional psychological concepts (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The focus has now shifted toward a detailed analysis of psychological phenomena in talk, looked upon through the eyes of participants themselves.

Managing mind–world relationships

A core theoretical theme in discursive psychology is what Derek Edwards (2007) describes as the mind–world relationship. Rather than viewing that relation from a (traditional) analyst’s perspective, namely as one between two separate, clear-cut domains—an objective world and a subjective mind—discursive psychologists understand it as the key issue for participants to be managed in talk. Early discursive psychology studied how things and events come to be established as factual and objective. Bound up with this interest, there was a focus on how stake and interest are managed by speakers—confessed, countered, or treated as irrelevant—so as to protect the factuality of their descriptions, or, conversely, how speakers attribute them to others in order to undermine an account’s objectivity (Potter, 1996). Crucially, stake and interest are studied as participants’ concerns. They are understood as phenomena that speakers may treat as a threat to the truthfulness of what they (or others) say, regardless of whether the analyst or participants themselves consider these stakes solid and real. More recently, the idea of stake management has been extended so as to cover the idea of managing one’s “subjective side” more broadly (Edwards, 2007). Subjectivity management may refer to warding off stake or prejudice but also

to resisting the idea that speakers exaggerate what they see or that they are disposed to be negative. Furthermore, the “subjective side” is not by definition a threat to objectivity—interactants may for example present themselves as honest or as someone with an inclination to speak plainly and thereby enhance their objectivity.

Wiggins (2002) shows how speakers may work up their subjective stance even in the case of embodied experiences. These experiences are generally regarded as spontaneous and not under the speaker’s control. The following extract is taken from Wiggins’ study on “gustatory mmms” in family mealtime conversation. The food is just being passed around the table:

(1) SKW/D2b-M4 (132–142) (Wiggins, 2002, p. 319)

1 (6.0)
2 ANNA: a sausag:e ↑Simon
3 SIMON: → mm↑m:: (0.4) >no thank you<
4 MICHAEL: uh- (.) uh::
5 [>(anybody else want) cranberry ↓sauce<
6 JENNY: [°yeah (0.4) I’ll get-°
7 SIMON: → mm↑m[m
8 JENNY: [I’ll have a ↑little bit of cranberry
9 sauce (.) °please- >thank you<°
10 MICHAEL: >°there you ↑go°<
11 SIMON: → mm↑mm: (0.6) nice
12 (2.8)

The fragment illustrates Wiggins’ point that gustatory mmms are at least as much interactional as physiological phenomena. The positioning of Simon’s mmm at so-called transition relevance points (lines 3, 7, and 11) suggests that these expressions function, and are treated as, full utterances. Rather than just being spontaneous utterances of pleasure, they appear coordinated with other turns in the talk. Interestingly, speakers draw on them precisely for their “uncontrollable” nature. The stretched and emphasized mmms signal that Simon’s experience with the food is of such an overriding nature (see also the speeded up “no thank you” in line 3) that he cannot fully focus on the conversation, with which he evidences the bodily character of his evaluation. By working up an immediate and spontaneous (taste) experience as being exactly that, speakers may also cherish their subjective side.

In his study of practices of complaining, Edwards (2005) provides further examples of how speakers manage the subject-side basis of what they say to its best effect rather than mitigate or delete it. One way to demonstrate entitlement to complain is by objecting to an apparent side effect of what would be expected to be the main problem. The following fragment begins at a point in the story where the speaker’s husband has discovered evidence of a burglary:

(2) Holt:X(C)2:1:9:3 (Edwards, 2005, pp. 16–17)

1 LES: (...)u-we:ll what I did ↓have agains’ this bu:rglar
2 → .hh was he: his ↑muddy fee:t.hh
3 (0.3)

4 MOI: khh! (.) h[a ho hu-uh]
 5 LES: [You know:↑a]ll over the cushion [:s eh-]
 6 MOI: [You:r]
 7 t̩i:dy mi:n:d.Q[h : :]dear
 8 LES: [We:ll h]heh! .hh You ↑should see↑ the
 9 ↑window ↓s:ea:t.h

Rather than objecting to the potentially traumatic issue of being burgled, Lesley turns the muddy footprints that the man left into a complainable matter. She herself refers to the burglar's muddy feet as if in contrast to what one might expect to be the real problem, namely the break in ("what I did ↓have agains' this bu:rglar," line 1). The "displaced" status of this complaint is subsequently confirmed by Moira in line 4 and by her ironic reference to Lesley's subjective side in the matter (lines 6–7: "you:r t̩i:dy mi:n:d"). By agreeing on the burglary as an unfortunate event that Lesley is nonetheless able to laugh about, the interactants also agree on Lesley not being a dispositional moaner. Her basis to complain is in the circumstances and not in her.

Managing psychology in institutional talk

A second and related area of attention of current discursive psychology is the way in which psychological terms and issues are being managed in institutional talk. Research has been done in areas as diverse as child helplines, police interrogations, counseling sessions, family mealtimes, and user meetings for technology development. One of the key themes is the work that is performed by professionals so as to negotiate institutional access to the client's state of mind. A classic conversation-analytic insight is that participants locate personal experience firmly within the epistemic territory of the speaker (Sacks, 1984). This makes experience both difficult to endorse and to dispute, which in turn has repercussions for institutional activities such as giving advice and offering support.

In their study of advice-giving on a child protection helpline, Hepburn and Potter (2011) show how child protection officers (CPOs) constantly have to manage the thin line between the client's right to his own psychology and the institutional responsibility to offer advice. They manage advice resistance by, for example, using idiomatic expressions regarding things commonly known about parents and children, thereby avoiding the suggestion of having unmediated access to the caller's state of mind.

A distinguishing feature of these studies is that they start with a flexible idea of what giving advice, receiving complaints, or issuing threats and so forth, entails. While definitions are necessary they should not prevent the researcher from looking carefully at the practices performed by participants themselves. Craven and Potter (2010) studied directives issued by parents to young children during family mealtimes. They show that participants treat a "directive" as distinctly different from a "request" by projecting compliance—rather than acceptance, or refusal on the basis of unwillingness or inability—as the only possible response. A recurrent feature of directives was that they would interrupt the child's talk, which embodied the parent's entitlement over the child's actions:

(3) (Craven & Potter, 2010, p. 437)

6 KATH: [nng](.) I wanna sit
 7 [<on> th-]
 8 MUM: → [KATH'rine], [katherine don't] be:- (.) do:n' be=

Again, the boundary between participants' respective territories and the ensuing rights and responsibilities is at stake here. While ostensibly only negotiating epistemic rights, often these struggles also include deontic issues: Who has the right to prescribe what and to whom? A study of face-to-face meetings between scientific experts and celiac patients about a new gluten-neutralizing pill (Veen et al., 2012), showed how a particular question design used by the experts not only claimed direct epistemic access to the patient's life but also suggested the irrationality of the person who would refuse its offer. The preface to the expert's question presupposed the possibility of a 100% safe pill as the perfect remedy for the patient's problem-ridden life, where the yes/no format of the question itself, such as "Will you use that pill?", incorporated a preference for an affirmative response. Patient participants however proved themselves capable of resisting the question design and unpacking its presuppositions one by one.

Managing psychology in online talk

While traditionally discursive psychologists, like conversation analysts, are wary of studying online talk, this has recently changed. Conversation-analytic studies have mainly paid attention to quasisynchronous interaction, hereby focusing on turn-taking and sequential organization. The outcomes of these studies underscore the similarities with spoken interaction, that is, people copy practices from face-to-face communication in such a way as to suit the technical specificities of the medium.

Studies from a discursive psychological perspective tend to focus less on the comparison between oral and online interaction. Their prime interest is in analyzing online interaction as everyday talk in its own right (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). Structural affordances of the medium are taken into account in as far as they are made relevant by participants in the interaction. Some studies have broadened this structural focus to participants' normative orientations in the (interactional management of the) accounts themselves. The interlocking of facts and morality is of key interest here, thereby reflecting the ethnomethodological starting point that descriptions of certain events work as an account for those events as well as DP's interest in mind–world relationships.

The following example is taken from a study of talk on veganism in an online forum (Sneijder & te Molder, 2005), where the analysis focused on a conditional formulation that participants recurrently used in response to the question about supposed health problems in a vegan diet (for example: if you eat a varied diet, there shouldn't be any problems). Victor (lines 15–19) mentions drinking a glass of fruit syrup as a condition for avoiding health problems. Note how the absence of problems is presented as a logical consequence of following particular individual eating habits, and how this constructs the recipient as accountable for her own health:

(4) Reply to Almost a vegan (Sneijder & te Molder, 2005, p. 687)

Date: June 03

From: Victor

9 Hi,
 10 I do hope you found good info
 11 about a healthy diet as well.
 12 Veganism and a healthy diet are
 13 certainly not mutually exclusive.
 14 [...20 lines omitted...]
 15 → And if you have a glass of
 16 fruit syrup (without added sugar)
 17 with every meal, or
 18 another source of vitamin C, then
 19 there shouldn't be any problems
 20 certainly not with iron or zinc.

Victor constructs problems as both unnecessary and unlikely by using a scripted formulation in combination with the modal auxiliary should. If-then formulations, and scripted formulations more generally, offer predictable and recognizable patterns that reduce the need to provide an explanation. The rationality of the construction allows the speaker to project himself as “doing description” rather than managing self-interest. It can be heard as an attribution of responsibility or blame, while it avoids associations with the need to disguise ideological weakness or to protect one's lifestyle against threats from outside. Interestingly, a deviant case analysis showed how a similar construction with a more obvious normative focus was treated as a blaming, while the other posts that established a less direct causal relationship between veganism and health problems were left unanswered.

Future prospects of discursive psychology

Discursive psychology has matured into an approach that is not only critical of cognitivism as such but has produced, and continues to produce, its own body of work. Psychology is studied as a live participant concern especially, but not only, in institutional contexts. DP's relationship with conversation analysis is fruitful and still developing. The emerging interest in CA for epistemics in action, or the relation between knowledge and accountability from a participant's perspective, ties in with classic themes in discursive psychology: participants' handling of the mind/world distinction, and an interest in subjectivity management and the interactional production of factuality more generally.

Discursive psychology has a lot to offer in the context of institutional talk. It is here that participants' boundary work is at its extreme, for example, in order to protect the mind from institutional invasion, whereas there is also much to gain (and lose) for all involved. The latter aspect makes institutional talk an ideal candidate for the application of interaction-based intervention methods such as the “Discursive action method” (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2011). One of the challenging issues is how to further validate and improve these methods without being restricted to a cognitive model of

evaluation. Another challenge in the institutional area is to build on earlier studies of specific practices (advice-giving, directives, taste evaluations, etc.) and provide full-blown interaction-based pathways to understanding social issues such as persuasion, socialization, and embodied experiences.

Online interactions have long suffered from the unjust notion that they are nothing more than an inferior derivative of spoken interaction and therefore have received little or no attention, likewise in DP. The attention that was there, mainly aimed at comparing online with spoken interaction. We now know that online interaction does build on spoken interaction, although more comparative work needs to be done. But it is time to also move forward and look at online interaction as a form of talk in its own right—if only for the simple reason that an important part of life now takes place on social media and the Internet more generally. Especially in asynchronous interactions, where visible uptake is often missing, the methodological challenge is to develop a truly interactional approach. But the main interest remains in how psychology is managed, not as a category imposed by the analyst but as a resource for the participants involved in real-life interactions.

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis, Applied; Conversation Analysis, Overview; Ethnomethodology; Extreme-Case Formulations; Family Dinner Interaction; Formulations; Helpline Discourse; Indexicality; Institutional Discourse; Interpretative Repertoire; Laughter; Online Chat

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