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Discursive Psychology

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Introduction

Discursive psychology is a relatively new field or subdiscipline of psychology. It developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, mainly from social constructionism and discourse analysis (see entries), and is strongly associated with methodological innovation and the analysis of language data. However, its greater importance is theoretical, through the challenges

it has presented to conceptualizations of key psychological phenomena, such as remembering, attitudes, emotions, and to understandings of the person. It continues to be marked by disputes about its proper territory and practice, and also to generate new and differently named fields of work.

Definition

Discursive psychology is a field or subdiscipline of psychology centered on the analysis of language data, especially transcribed talk. Psychological phenomena which have more conventionally been theorized as innate, often with reference to cognition (e.g., attitudes, remembering, emotion), are reinterpreted in discursive terms as constituted in ongoing language practices and interactions, and therefore as situated, not universal, incomplete and fluid, and social or co-constructed rather than individual.

Keywords

Discourse; talk; practice; interaction; accounts; resources; rhetoric; discourse analysis; conversation analysis; ethnomethodology; construction; social constructionism

History

Discursive psychology developed in the late twentieth century. It builds on previous innovative work in social psychology associated with social constructionism, especially the work of Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter, and discourse analysis, including the work of Jonathan Potter, Margaret Wetherell, and Derek Edwards. Discourse analysis itself drew together Foucauldian theory and ethnomethodology into a methodological approach which has been widely used inside and outside the psychology discipline. Discursive psychology continues to be strongly associated with the analysis of language

data, particularly transcribed talk, but is probably now less important methodologically than for the challenges it has presented to established psychological theorizations of many phenomena, including identity (see entry), and for new developments which have followed from these challenges.

In an early article on social constructionism, Kenneth Gergen (1985) proposed that psychologists should study the language and “human meaning systems” (p. 270) which mediate people’s understandings of the world and themselves. He challenged the claims of other psychologists to obtain “objective knowledge” (p. 269) and suggested social psychologists might have more in common with academics in the social sciences and humanities, such as ethnomethodologists, anthropologists, literary theorists, and historians, than with natural scientists or experimental psychologists.

In 1987, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell published a now-famous book, *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*, which presents both a methodological and theoretical challenge to established psychology, particularly to cognitive psychology. The methodological challenge concerns the status of talk data. Potter and Wetherell propose that talk should not be treated as transparent, that is, as direct information about what it purports to report or describe. Instead, the talk should itself be analyzed, following the sociological theory of ethnomethodology, as a form of action or practice and also, following social constructionism and Foucauldian theory, as constitutive of what it refers to. The main theoretical challenge of the book is to the notion of attitudes as already existing “mental” phenomena which are conveyed to a researcher in a participant’s talk. Instead, Potter and Wetherell argue that such talk is shaped both by its contextual functions and by established ideas and ways of speaking (interpretative repertoires) which are representative of the wider social context rather than particular to individual speakers. The further radical implications of these arguments are, first, the rejection of the conventional psychological model of the individual as an agentic cognitive

processor and source of action and communication and, second, a temporal shift in the focus of research to the study of talk as ongoing process rather than as evidence of prior events.

In the same year, Michael Billig (1987) proposed in his book *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* that talk and other language use is active in a somewhat different way, as ongoing argument and debate around choices and dilemmas. He discussed the dilemmatic nature of both thought and ideology, and also the rhetorical nature of talk, drawing attention to the status of any description or statement as one possible version out of many, selected for its function in ongoing dialogues and oriented to multiple potential audiences.

Discursive psychology was subsequently developed in influential work by these authors and their colleagues, the term itself becoming well known as the title of a 1992 book by Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter. Another groundbreaking book, *Mapping the Language of Racism* (1992), by Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter, was an important empirical study of prejudice and racism, an area with which discourse analysis and discursive psychology remain strongly associated, including in the recent work of Susan Condor and Jackie Abell.

Rom Harré and Grant Gillett (Harré & Gillett, 1994) suggest that discursive psychology should be seen as part of a “second cognitive revolution” (p. 26). The challenge to cognitive psychology was developed by Derek Edwards in his 1997 book, *Discourse and Cognition*, which proposes the adoption of “a discourse based perspective on language and cognition” (p. 19) in which emotion, for example, is considered in terms of words and categories which are resources for talk, potentially useable to “perform social actions on and for the occasion of their production” (p. 22). A corollary of these ideas is that the mind itself is no longer understood as contained and interior to the person but envisaged as “spread out as a distributional flow in what participants say and do” (Herman, 2007, p. 312), located in a range of people’s practices in the different contexts of their lives, in “socio-communicative

activities unfolding within richly material settings” (p. 308).

Subsequent work in discursive psychology has continued to explore and extend these arguments, with some differences of emphasis. The main direction follows the premises of conversation analysis (from Harvey Sacks) and ethnomethodology, for example, in the work of Jonathan Potter, Derek Edwards, and Alexa Hepburn, which is particularly concerned with interaction and the sequential organization of talk, and the work of Elizabeth Stokoe on the forms of shared social knowledge investigated through Membership Categorization Analysis. The term “critical discursive psychology” (CDP) was formulated by Margaret Wetherell (1998) to describe a “synthetic” approach followed by herself, Nigel Edley, and others (e.g., Sarah Seymour-Smith) to investigate the exercise and contest of power within larger social contexts, for example, around gendered identities, by analyzing not only interaction but also the available discursive resources which set possibilities and limits for discursive work.

Critical Debates

Discursive psychology is not associated with traditional debates in psychology because it emerged relatively recently, as a critique of cognitive psychology’s concepts and methodological practices. The critique did not prompt a strong response or engagement from cognitive psychology or other parts of the larger psychology discipline, and discursive psychology has continued to develop separately. However, it is marked by a number of well-rehearsed internal debates about its own direction and practice, including between critical and discursive psychologists.

Many of these debates are around methodology. One concerns appropriate data and forms of data collection (for instance, whether researchers should study “naturally occurring talk” rather than interview data) and another the limits of interpretation and the status of the analyst, as objective observer or engaged interpreter (Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998, 2012). There is also disagreement about the usefulness of

analyzing discursive resources, such as interpretative repertoires or narratives. The diverging trends of these disagreements are towards, on the one hand, fine-grained analyses of naturally occurring talk, transcribed following the Jeffersonian notation associated with conversation analysis and, on the other, larger evidence bases which may be used by researchers to go “beyond immediate discursive practices to consider a much wider range of background conditions... [and] broader patterns of intelligibility dominant in a particular culture” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 101).

These disagreements are probably less important than discursive psychology’s continuing challenges to established practice in other areas of psychology and the social sciences. For example, for critical psychologists, its relevance lies in its questioning of many accepted ideas and its concern with power, particularly in critical discursive psychology. In addition, the argument that talk is a form of behavior and action in its own right, rather than an indication of previously formulated and fixed views, remains a useful corrective. It potentially challenges the still widespread practice, in academia and also beyond it, of presenting short quotations from research participants as reliable and enduring supporting evidence for whatever the researcher is advocating. The arguments of discursive psychology also have implications for understandings of accounts of the past, including witness statements or client talk in a counselling session or official histories. Reinterpreted in terms of their functioning in the situation of telling, such accounts acquire new significance.

More generally, discursive psychology places in question the whole nature and site of the “psychological” phenomena which are commonly supposed to preexist their description or expression in talk. The argument that talk about, for example, attitudes, emotions, or remembering is not straightforwardly referential and can be extended to a radical reinterpretation of the nature of the person, as in Herman’s account of the distributed “mind,” quoted above, and, potentially, an actor in context which accords with traditions such as distributed cognition and actor-network theory.



International Relevance

Discursive psychology was developed in the UK in a small number of universities, notably Loughborough and the Open University. However, it has important US antecedents including in social constructionism (the work of Kenneth Gergen, among others, including the UK psychologist John Shotter), ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel), and conversation analysis (Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson, and Emmanuel Schegloff). Discursive psychology retains strong international links, including Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand as well as the USA.

Future Directions

One of the most important continuing directions of work in discursive psychology concerns prejudice, inequality, and exclusion, and the talk and argument which naturalize and perpetuate them. Influential discourse analytic and discursive psychological research in this area has considered racism in New Zealand (e.g., Wetherell & Potter, 1992, already mentioned) and Australia (e.g., the work of Martha Augoustinos), nationalism and nationality, and the nature of prejudice (including the work of Michael Billig, e.g., Billig, 1995). It has been informed by related research in the area of Critical Discourse Analysis, for example, by Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak. More recent foci include English and British identities, anti-Semitism in the context of emerging Eastern European nationalisms (the work of Jovan Byford), and the emotional and affective aspects of prejudice. A related important direction concerns gender, gender inequalities, and sexism, for example, in the work of Susan Speer, Elizabeth Stokoe, and Celia Kitzinger, often with a strong focus on interactional research using conversational analysis.

A second direction is the continuing project to reconsider conventional psychological concerns in discursive terms, as already discussed, and to disrupt understandings of talk about experience, feelings, and so on as the description or expression of prior events or phenomena. For

example, this project has been recently extended to the investigation of learning, health, and illness. A somewhat different direction of development is indicated by Margaret Wetherell's recent work on affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) which has connections to critical psychological work informed by Deleuze, among others, in the work of Paul Stenner and Steve Brown (e.g., Brown & Stenner, 2009) and Johanna Motzkau (2009).

The project of discursive reinterpretation has also been applied to psychoanalysis as part of a further direction, the theorization and investigation of subjectivity and the subject. The development of this third direction is perhaps ironic, given discursive psychology's original challenge to psychological models or conceptualizations of an agentic actor or bounded individual subject. However, the ongoing internal debates may also have prompted the formulation of psychosocial approaches which incorporate psychoanalytic theory and practice, as in the work of Wendy Hollway, Valerie Walkerdine, and Helen Lucey. A feature of these approaches is that the kind of de-centered subject originally associated with discursive psychology is to some extent re-centered and given continuity in terms of investment and narrative (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), personal order (Wetherell, 2003), or narrative and local resources (Taylor, 2010). However, discursive psychology's emphasis on situatedness and complexity remains a potentially useful corrective to the completeness and coherence of the (self)-regulated subject associated with theories of governmentality (e.g., Rose, 1996).

Methodologically, the broader evidence bases referred to above are likely to include "visual" data, such as the media images discussed by many contemporary feminist researchers, and also the kinds of collected and created artifacts which are increasingly used to elicit talk data.

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Discursive Repertory

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Introduction

The concept of “Discursive Repertory” (Turchi, 2002) in psychology makes it possible for the discipline to share a single observational datum outside of the constraints of any specific theory and has its epistemological foundation in how members of the human community use ordinary language (therefore regardless of which languages they speak). Through the theorization and definition of the concept (which, as described below, is a continuation in evolutionary terms of Discursive Psychology – Anolli, 2006; De Grada & Bonaiuto, 2002; Harré & Gillett, 1996 – and also embraces ideas and contributions from authors in fields outside what is strictly psychology – the philosophers Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein), psychology can free itself from the quest for hypotheses to explain the construct of “psyche” and focus instead on what people configure and construct through the use of ordinary language.

Definition

Discursive Repertory is defined as a precise and distinct way of using ordinary language, which (in its ostensive definition) configures a reality (that is discursive, not “real”), which assumes a “factual” value for the interactants. This concept is the formalization of the use value of ordinary language (i.e., the ostensive definition of the symbolic units and rules of application which compose it) in different rules of use which conventionally represent the different constructions of sense of reality. Therefore what the interactants see as “fact” is generated by the use of language (governed by different rules shown in a Periodic Table of Discursive Repertories)

