



Commentary

Discursive psychology, focus group interviews and participants' categories

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We welcome this opportunity to discuss the application of discourse analytical approaches to the concerns of the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* and its readership. Our remarks are directed (by editorial invitation) at one specific article (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004), but are designed to have a more general relevance to the relationships between data and analysis in discursive psychology (DP). It is important at this point, before critically engaging with the article, to emphasize that we endorse and encourage the kind of work that it represents. We aim to use this discussion as a basis for general remarks on how to apply DP to everyday language and social interaction, including interactions with children and adolescents, and to raise some problems with the use of interview and focus group materials. We examine in turn: (1) the article's overall framework of theory and method, and (2) the nature of the data (focus group discussions) and its analysis in terms of 'maturity'.

Discursive *developmental* psychology, to the extent that such an enterprise has already begun, is not the study of how child discourse develops. It might overlap with that, but it has a much wider remit. Any study of mental life, or of the psychological characteristics of persons, has to be based on public materials and procedures, whether those of the psychological laboratory or of everyday life. This applies as much to the contents of consciousness as to the workings of memory, moral reasoning or gendered identities. In DP, however, this is not conceived as a matter of making private things public, nor internal events externally available. Rather, we approach the assumption of an inner-outer relationship (e.g. between thought and word) in an inverted manner. We begin with discourse practices - with observable, recordable, collections of everyday talk - and examine the ways in which psychological matters including thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, are topicalized, handled or implied, in that talk. It is not an attempt to deny the existence of thoughts and feelings. Rather, it is an approach to language and social interaction that refuses to treat talk as the overt expression or manifestation of a life within.¹ The nature and workings of a 'life within' are the kinds of

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¹ In this respect DP continues, in an empirically grounded manner, the linguistic-philosophical tradition of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin.

bases on which people may talk to each other, intelligibly and accountably. DP makes no claims of its own about such an inner world. All psychological matters and interests are referred back to the empirically tractable question of how participants themselves, in their talk, make them relevant. A developmental discursive psychology is, or would be, the study of how children come to be competent users of public forms of accountability – how they learn to talk and act in recognizable and accountable ways, which is to say, in ways describable and explicable as persons within some social order. This is necessarily a very condensed summary of DP's basic approach (see Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992, for expositions), but it can serve here as a point of departure.

The article under examination approaches a traditional developmental topic, maturity in adolescent boys, from a broadly DP perspective. Essentially, we might say that it *respecifies* concepts such as 'maturity' and the 'developmental imperative' as participants' concerns, in terms of how they are managed in adolescent boys' talk. What is important, it argues, is to investigate what *counts as* 'maturity' from the boys', rather than the researchers', perspective. This respecification² is part of DP's general project (see Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2001). DP has developed a discourse-based alternative to topics that, in mainstream psychology, are usually approached as cognitive representations explored through experimentation, the use of specially invented textual materials, and the construction of abstract cognitive models. 'Respecification' involves re-working psychological topics as discourse practices. The point of respecification is not to provide studies of the same things as are theorized in psychology, but viewed through discourse. Instead, it leads to very different understandings of what is going on. Rather than having memories, thoughts, attitudes, etc., that they carry around in their heads and produce on cue, people are shown to formulate or work up the nature of events, actions, and their own accountability, through ways of talking. These 'ways of talking' are constructive and action-oriented. They are *constructive* in the sense that they offer a particular version of things, rather than any other. They are *action-oriented* in the sense that any actual version of events, being a specific one produced on and for the occasion of its production, is always analysably doing something (e.g. countering, complaining, praising, justifying), and not merely being dumped from memory into talk.

The analytic framework

In its first sentence the article locates itself firmly in the 'discursive psychological' (DP) tradition. The term DP, since being coined by Edwards and Potter (1992), has been used to cover an increasingly varied set of traditions including the social constructionism of Harré (e.g. Harré & Stearns, 1995) and a more politically grounded 'critical discursive psychology' (Parker, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). However, the central version of DP on which the article draws is a little outdated, emphasizing construction, rhetoric and variability rather than the more conversation-analytical work of the last decade (e.g. Edwards, 1995, 1997, 2000; Potter, 1997; Potter & Hepburn, 2003; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Although its data is called 'talk-in-interaction', a term strongly associated with conversation analysis (CA), subsequent discussion of the paper's influences and methods 'borrows' from other perspectives including positioning

² 'Respecification' is a term borrowed from ethnomethodology; see Button (1991).

theory, cultural psychology, communities of practice, sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology. Yet these perspectives are often opposed to each other. For example, CA generally stands in contrast to most of sociolinguistics, and provides a distinct paradigm within the sociological field of LSI (language and social interaction).

This brings us to our first issue for critical comment on the article. The different approaches on which it draws clash to such an extent that it is difficult to borrow and mix while maintaining a framework that makes coherent sense. Instead, the mixture serves as a backdrop for making different kinds of analytic remarks at different points. The result is that it is sometimes unclear by what criteria of adequacy or method any particular analytical observation is to be judged. This in turn makes the overall analysis difficult to defend against a familiar objection to qualitative analysis – what is to stop the analyst from saying anything about a text? What are the limits, the criteria for good and bad analysis? Although that blanket objection is sometimes brought against qualitative analysis of all kinds, it can be largely obviated by the use of consistent and explicit criteria, as are found in approaches such as CA (ten Have, 1999) or, say, analysis grounded in systemic linguistics (Fairclough, 2003).

Among an eclectic mix of analytic influences, the article draws heavily on a particular approach to understanding discourse and the self: ‘positioning theory’ (Davies & Harré, 1990). This is used to criticize assumptions in traditional psychology about the self as a ‘unitary subject’, rather than understanding it as multiple, fractured and post-modern: ‘the agentive subject [...] is constantly seeking to legitimate itself, situated in language practices and interactively accomplished’ (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). This description of the self promotes a particular theory of it, in terms of agency and multiple ‘positioning’. The problem here, from a DP perspective, is that positioning theory brings into the mix its own psychological ontology. The notion that someone might be ‘constantly seeking to legitimate (their)self’ is plausibly something a person might resist and counter. There are contexts in which that kind of statement might be produced and taken as an accusation of insincerity, of grinding axes, of being defensive, of doing self-justification rather than being honest and open. People may offer all kinds of descriptions of themselves and others, on and for all kinds of occasions. We would suggest that DP soon gets into trouble when it adopts a favourite ‘theory of self’ as its own.³

In contrast to positioning theory, DP avoids theorizing the human subject, agent or self (be it multiple or unitary) as the prime object of investigation and theory, focusing instead on the range of discourse practices within which notions of self, agency, passivity, and so on, are constructed and managed. DP’s celebration of ‘variability’, as a feature of discourse, may seem to provide grounds for a fragmented theory of self, but variability is not a theory of the psychological subject. Examining variability across versions and descriptions has been an important principle of DP. It provides a powerful counter to the presumption and production of cognitive consistency in standard psychological theory and method (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and as an analytic tool for revealing the constructive and action-oriented nature of discourse. However, it is a mistake to take variability, or inconsistency, as a claim about selfhood *per se*, that selves

³ It may be objected that DP’s own, ostensibly neutral ‘functional’ view of discourse, along with concepts such as ‘concerted accomplishment’ and ‘accountability’, also imply a basically agentive and self-justificatory theory of the self. This kind of argument soon becomes enmeshed in philosophical debates. At its simplest, what we are suggesting is that all such characterizations of selfhood and mentality are pervasively under talk’s management, the very stuff of language and social interaction, and endemically relevant. But it is neither necessary nor helpful for analysts to abstract out of all that endemic, ‘defeasible’ practice an emphatically agentive general theory of the self.

are generally inconsistent and fractured. In fact, consistency is crucially important to people but, again, not as an empirical generalization about how consistent or variable people actually are, but as a participants' concerted accomplishment. Consistency is a strongly sanctioned normative requirement for being a sensible, accountable, rational, reliable human being. People work at it, as part of the bedrock of normative accountability, and may apply evaluative labels such as '(in)sane', '(ir)rational' and '(im)mature', on its basis. Consistency and variability are not best used as rival ontologies of the self.

We can apply these arguments to the article's portrayal of masculinity as contradictory, inconsistent and negotiable, rather than unitary – theory seems to come before, and as a resource for, analysis. There is a presumption that, because it is boys talking, then it is *masculinity* that is being done. So, even if we see things in their talk that are unexpected from a standard view of masculinity, the finding will be that masculinity is not what we thought it was, but that it is fragmentary, multiple and post-modern, rather than that the speakers are not 'doing masculinity' at all. The research starts, proceeds and ends with gender identities as generally relevant, given the analyst's selection and characterization of the speakers as, for research purposes, 'boys' (see also Schegloff, 1997; Stokoe, 2000, 2004). It is not clear, on data-driven criteria, at which points the relevant category for the boys' talk is 'masculinity' or 'adolescent' and not some other category. In a seminal discussion of how identity categories are relevant for both participants and analysts, and of how to ground an analysis systematically with regard to empirical data, Harvey Sacks (1979) focused on a similar topic, the adoption of alternative characterizations of and by a group of boys, as 'hot-rodgers' versus 'teenagers'. In Sacks's analysis, the point was that 'hot-rodger' was the term used by the boys themselves, and that it contrasted with what other people called them.

The data and its analysis

The article describes its data as 'everyday' talk and, as such, a suitable basis for understanding 'what counts as maturity from *their* [the participants'] perspective, and how they see themselves to be accomplishing maturity as they negotiate their masculine and heterosexual selves' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). In contrast, previous psychological studies of adolescence and maturation are guilty of 'expressing a forced choice or Likert scale attitude [that] is entirely different than expressing an attitude in *daily social interaction*' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004, emphasis added). Nevertheless, rather than everyday talk, the data are focus group interactions in which a moderator 'M' provides topic-based questions and responses, designed to elicit the boys' views and opinions: 'the boys were told that the purpose of the group discussions was to generate talk about what it means, from their perspectives, to be *growing up as young men*' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004, emphasis added). Although this might be considered some distance from the kinds of everyday settings and activities in which the boys might ordinarily tell stories and talk about their relationships with girls, we are assured that 'because the discussions were adult-moderated, the boys did orient to the setting as a research setting with questions and answers, but did so flexibly, using their own vernacular to collectively fashion their own perspectives to the moderator's queries' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). We aim here to examine the relationship between data sources of this kind, and how they are analysed.

The issue should not be how far we can trust the researchers' assurances about the talk's naturalness. Rather, it is a substantive matter of how we understand talk to work, as a medium of social interaction, including how it is produced relevantly to given agendas, interviewer prompts and responses, how topic relevance is controlled, and on the basis of all that, of how it has to be analysed. Focus group discussions attract researchers by offering a possible halfway house between the elicitation of views, attitudes and opinions through interviewing, and the exploration of real life talk-in-practices (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2003). They also offer a quick fix for the practical difficulties of obtaining naturally occurring data sets, although plenty of research manages to do so. Yet focus groups remain a kind of social interaction in their own right (Puchta & Potter, 2004), with their own ways of establishing topic and relevance. As with interviews, the talk tends to be reflective, anecdotal, and off-stage, about life in some other place, and what speakers may think about it, at least when asked. The contrast would not be with an even more relaxed and informal kind of focus group, but with settings where talk is performative of the activities it is designed for in the first place, such as fending off parental criticism, flirting with a new girlfriend, or teasing one's friends. Let us flesh out some of these concerns by examining the opening lines of Excerpt 1:

- 1 M: so is part of growing up not falling for good looks (.) is that (.)
 2 what do you guys think of that

There are a number of potentially interesting features of M's first turn that we could comment upon. For example, we might ask whether it is a 'formulation' of what the boys have said previously, or a focus group schedule question put to them by M, in which he proposes a conceptualized topic for them to discuss and 'repairs' it from one that looks like the start of an agreement check ('is that... [what you think?]) to an open question eliciting views ('what do you guys think of that'). It would be interesting to see whether or not formulating is being done here; did the boys actually theorize the developmental implications of falling for good looks in terms of 'growing up', or is this something that M puts to them? We could also comment on M's orientation to the boys as group moderator and research interviewer, displayed in how he puts this to them as a question, rather than offering his own personal opinions on the matter, as they are invited to do. This looks like normative interviewer talk, eliciting other people's views rather than expressing one's own on an equal footing, and trying not to put words into people's mouths.

The point of these remarks is not that any of these small details are especially interesting in themselves, but that the talk embodies in its detail its character as topic-relevant focus group talk. What M appears to be doing, on this brief evidence, is setting agendas, asking questions, formulating generalized, conceptualized statements out of what the boys say, and putting those research-relevant points to them for comment. It is problematic, then, to take what the boys say as an 'everyday' expression of '*their* perspective... how they see themselves' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). It is also difficult to see the interaction as a context where 'maturity is accomplished', as the article puts it. The boys say nothing about 'growing up' or 'maturity', although what they say can be heard as sequentially relevant to M's question. In any case, rather than asserting or denying that 'falling for good looks' is an index of 'growing up', the boys imply its irrelevance, at least when meeting someone for the first time. They deal with the relevance of good looks to being attracted to someone but do not, except dismissively-by-implication, discuss the relevance of that attraction to being grown up.

This imposition of a maturity-relevance frame on the boys' talk can be seen more clearly in Excerpt 2, which we reproduce here with the article's initial and subsequent comments:

In the following excerpt, the boys position themselves as being motivated in their voyeuristic interest for seeing girls in bathrooms and locker rooms, and thus not responsible or immature. In order to manage the moderator's challenges, they work up a dispositional and scripted account of the girls' motives as having causal force. Although maturity is not explicitly mentioned, the boys defend against the charge that they are habitually 'invading' the girls' privacy, which is hearable as a general index of immaturity.

Excerpt 2

Participants: M: Moderator, E: Ernie, J: Jasper, W: Wilson, A: Aaron

- 1 W: I've really gone into a girls' bathroom and I've gone into a girls' locker room=
 2 J: =oh:: the nastiest thing in the world=
 3 W: =one time was kinda' on accident
 4 M: whadaya' think the girls think about it=
 5 J: =no (.) they didn't see us=
 6 W: =I thought it was cool when I walked in
 7 M: but still (.) don't you think you are invading their::=
 8 J: =I wasn't (.) cause I thought it was CO-ED
 9 W: I had to pee I had to pee and when I walked in and saw the toilets (.)
 10 and I didn't see ours (.) well (.) I LIKED it (.) I enjoyed it
 11 [..]
 12 M: so wait (.) let's think about that (1.0) that guys are walking into girls'=
 13 → W: =well they be AL::WAYS trying to model for us (.) so::=
 14 → E: =and GIRLS be doing the very same thing (.) they'd be like ↑OHH
 lemme
 15 see your package=
 16 M: =not girls
 17 → W: OH YES (.) yes they do (.) they are just as perverted as guys (.) it's just a
 18 misconception that girls are more polite

In this excerpt, the boys are positioned as potentially immature because of the way they describe the 'coolness' (line 6) of walking into girls' changing areas. There are four soft challenges by the moderator that construct the boys as potentially immature. (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004)

The article's introductory gloss tells us how to interpret the excerpt that follows: that a story about going 'into a girls' bathroom' is 'hearable as a general index of immaturity'. This effectively provides (im)maturity as a generally relevant category for *any instance of sanctionable behaviour* that the boys may mention. The analyst can do this only on the basis that the boys are treated as talking to a researcher-led agenda on 'maturity'. But that pervasive agenda can only be an imposition on their talk by the research setting, or else an interpretative imposition on it in analysis.

Additionally, there is M's assessment of the boys' story as 'invading girls' privacy'. What is unclear here is the basis, beyond a normative presumption (on the analyst's part) about how 'mature' people should behave, for treating invasions of privacy as tantamount to '(im)maturity'. The boys do not mention maturity, nor any paraphrase of it; what they do mention, at the end of the extract, is politeness. In introducing

'maturity' as the issue, the analyst seems to be drawing on a normative notion of an ideal, considerate, rational, liberal, polite human being. But adults are perfectly capable of invading each other's privacy (Stokoe & Wallwork, 2003). What we find in the extract itself is the boys' anecdote being interpretively evaluated by M as an invasion of privacy (line 7), and the boys' subsequent denial of intent (line 8) along with an alternative, agency-denying, necessity-based account ('I had to pee', line 9). The analyst then provides a further theory-oriented interpretative frame for that, in terms of how the boys are 'positioned as potentially immature'. The moderator M provides the moral category of invading privacy, whereas the boys themselves, if it is indeed 'their perspective' that is of interest, construct an *ad hoc* interpretative opposition between 'perverted' and 'polite' (lines 17-18). Again, the analyst subsumes those expressions under the research topic *maturity*.

In fact, the interpretative claim that the boys are 'positioned' by the moderator as 'potentially immature' is difficult to see in M's actual turns (lines 4, 7, 12 and 16). Rather, the all-purpose framework of 'maturity' is imposed later by the analyst's commentary, in which it is claimed that the boys' talk '*can be heard as* dispositional immaturity', and reflect '*by extension*, their immaturity' (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). The question is, hearable by whom, and on what analytical basis? Immaturity is not a category that either the moderator or boys use to evaluate the boys' narrated actions. The analyst appears to be grounding the interpretation of the boys' actions in some *a priori* moral sense of what counts as (im)mature behaviour, rather than in what the participants are actually saying.⁴

Concluding remarks

The arguments we have made are related to each other. Our worries about analytical eclecticism, the use of focus group interview data, and the tendency to impose the analyst's concepts and concerns onto the boys' talk, can be understood as part of a coherent package of critique and positive recommendation. Clearly, we are recommending a more tightly bounded form of analysis, based preferably in conversation analysis (which we have not spelled out here), and grounded in the analysis of everyday talk that is not produced for research purposes. What brings these points together is a general understanding of how discourse works - that talk-in-interaction is constitutive of, performative of, and pervasively oriented to, the social interactional contingencies of whatever setting it is produced in. If we are to understand and analyse participants' own concepts and accounts, then we have to find and analyse them not in response to our research questions, but in the places they ordinarily and functionally occur - 'in the activities in which they're employed' (Sacks, 1992, p. 27). Interviews and focus groups are a convenient way of obtaining a lot of immediately relevant, on-topic talk. The danger is precisely the converse of that - that they encourage off-stage topical talk, oriented somewhat insistently (see M's turns in Excerpt 2 above) to the researcher's conceptual topic and agenda.

Although we have made a series of critical comments on a specific article, we have done so by invitation and in support of the journal's interest in engaging in debate and

⁴ Clearly we are treating the Moderator's talk in the excerpt as data, which is what interaction analysis of this kind requires. If the Moderator happened also to be an analyst and author of the article, that fact would have no bearing on our comments. Participants in talk can sometimes provide useful additional, contextual information but are not considered to be in a position to provide, on later reflection, privileged analytical remarks on what was being said at the time.

discussion on these topics. It is important that we reiterate our strong support for this kind of work, for the general relevance of discourse analysis (and DP, CA, etc.) to developmental (and other) psychology. Many developmental topics, and perhaps some new ones, can be approached via the study of everyday talk, and such an approach will surely bring new perspectives on how we understand children's social and cognitive competence. In making critical remarks on this particular article, our aim, like that of its authors, is to promote the value of work of this kind. We suggest that such work will benefit from a clear definition of analytic framework and methods, clear criteria for analysis, an empirical focus on social settings and interactions that are relatively independent of predetermined research agendas, and a close grounding of analysis in demonstrable features of talk. Studies of children and adolescents engaged in everyday talk are already plentiful, but are not generally located within psychology journals (e.g. Edwards, 1993; Goodwin, 1998; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997). DP is not offering an alternative developmental psychology, in the sense of a discourse-based theory of psychological development, let alone a developmental account of discourse competence. Even for adults, DP does not programmatically address their psychological competence or maturity, except as participants' categories and concerns. Its strengths are in how it is able to locate psychological concerns within the close and disciplined study of everyday common-sense interaction and accountability.

Rather than adopting 'folk psychological' ideas (such as maturity, in this case) as its own constructs and explanations, or rejecting them in favour of a technically superior scientific psychology of mental life, DP sets out to investigate the ways that people ordinarily describe and account for themselves and each other. Irrespective of the philosophical or cognitive-psychological adequacy of people's own terms of reference, those terms of reference have their own reality within the everyday accounting practices by which people actually live their lives. Along with other perspectives such as narrative and cultural psychology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, DP finds those everyday sense-making practices far from random and messy but, rather, intricately orderly, when subjected to close scrutiny. One task for a discursive developmental psychology will be the exploration, via transcribed, recorded talk-in-interaction, of how children and adults make sense of their worlds, not when asked about it in interview, nor when tested on it in experiments, but as part and parcel of living the lives and performing the actions for which those terms of reference, and accounting practices, are designed.

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