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9

Using Discourse Analysis in Social Psychology

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Introduction

Discourse analytic approaches are increasingly used in psychological research. In this chapter, we will briefly introduce the key discourse analytic approaches used within psychological research. Then, using an example from some work carried out by the first author on 'older motherhood', we will guide you through the practical steps associated with an approach to discourse analysis called critical discursive psychology and consider how this approach is successfully applied to qualitative data. Finally, we will consider some of the practical applications of the approach.

Discourse analysis and critical social psychology

The development of discourse analysis in social psychology has been linked to what has commonly been termed 'the crisis in social psychology' during the 1960s and 1970s (Armistead, 1974; Elms, 1975; Parker, 1989). At this time, social psychology was criticised for its individualistic approach, as well as on theoretical and methodological grounds (Hepburn, 2003). There was growing concern over the positivist experimental methods appropriated by social psychology and the artificiality of laboratory settings for studying human behaviour. Key theorists of the time called for a social psychology that would look beyond individual explanations of human behaviour and consider the cultural, historical and

social context in which that behaviour takes place (Harré and Secord, 1972; Gergen, 1973). The dissatisfaction many felt with promoting social psychology as a natural science using experimental, individualistic methods led to a review of the methods used by social psychologists. It was within this context and the 'turn to language' that critical approaches to social psychology were established and, as part of this, discourse analysis was first developed within the discipline (Parker, 1990).

One essential similarity and key defining feature of discourse analytic approaches is that they are underpinned by a constructionist ontology (see Chapter 2 in this book for more on this) and as such demand an alternative stance on the role of language in psychology. That is, for social constructionists, instead of being considered an accurate representation of people's internal thoughts, attitudes and emotions, language ('discourse') is implicated in the construction of social and psychological experience (Burr, 2015). There are a number of approaches to discourse analysis that have largely been developed and appropriated within psychology. The most common are Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (e.g. Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Willig, 2008), and discursive psychology (DP) (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). These two approaches to discourse analysis are distinct and divergent; yet they overlap in some fundamental ways (Burr, 2015). We will now briefly outline these two approaches, before moving on to introduce a more combined approach to the analysis of discourse (critical discursive psychology) which has developed in response to perceived limitations associated with both Foucauldian and discursive approaches.

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA)

FDA is concerned with the way in which discourses shape our social worlds and personal experiences, and is influenced by post-structuralism and in particular the work of Michel Foucault. From an FDA approach the term 'discourse' refers to a linguistic system of meaning; a set of discursive resources that constructs a particular version of something in the social world, such as an object, event or category of person. Parker describes a

discourse as 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (1989, p. 61). In addition, discourses hold implications for how individuals experience and participate in the social world owing to the subject positions that are made available within them (Willig, 2008).

Subject positions offer individuals different sets of rights, obligations and possibilities for social action, as well as having implications for their subjectivities, as Davies and Harré describe:

> Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. Davies and Harré (1990, p. 35)

Through the subject positions they make available, discourses both enable and constrain certain ways of seeing the world and ways of being in the world for those individuals who take them up (Willig, 2008). Therefore, Foucauldian discourse analysts study the way in which 'discourses facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said (by whom, where and when)' (Parker, 1992, p. xiii) in addition to what people can do or have done to them (Burr, 2015). Typical questions answered through FDA focus on the discourses that are available to people within a given culture or society, and the implications these discourses may have for individuals' subjectivities (Willig, 2008).

FDA is also concerned with the action orientation of discourse, taking into consideration the function of particular discursive constructions and whose interests they serve. In addition, there is a focus on power and the effects of discourse. At any one time there are likely to be multiple discourses that may construct different, possibly competing representations and meanings of the same discursive object that may make different subject positions available to people. However, it is the case that some discourses or versions are more prevalent and appear to be more common-sense than others, such that these discourses are usually the ones that are the most accepted, become entrenched and are considered the most truthful,

whilst alternatives are marginalised or invalidated (Willig, 2008). However, that is not to say that alternative discourses will never come into play. Counter-discourses and alternative subject positions emerge and become more 'available' to people over time and can begin with the individual through the resistance of subject positions that do not match an individual's own interests (Weedon, 1997).

FDA enables an exploration of the effects of wider societal discourses on individual subjectivity, the theorisation of subjectivity – a person's sense of self – being a key psychological concern. However, a limitation with FDA is that it positions individuals as largely passive, with their language, practices and subjectivities shaped and therefore effectively limited and constrained by pre-existing societal discourses. As a result, it does not consider the agency with which individuals are able to construct accounts, nor does it allow a consideration of situated language use – how people are able to construct and negotiate meaning to suit particular social situations or how they may construct identities or subjectivities in social interaction to different interactional ends. Although this is a limitation for FDA, the localised action orientation of discourse is a key concern within a discursive psychological approach to discourse analysis.

Discursive psychology (DP)

The focus of DP (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) lies primarily within the action orientation of discourse. Discursive psychologists concern themselves with the social actions people accomplish in and with their talk and observe precisely how individuals accomplish these actions (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Integral to this approach is the notion that language is performative – it holds a function for individuals in addition to having effects.

From a DP perspective, the task of the discourse analyst is to look at what effects language performs for people within social interaction. It is suggested that people construct versions of the social world through language and use discourse as a tool to formulate versions of events in social interaction that effectively serve their own interests. However, it does not

make any claims about the motivation behind such language use – that is, DP does not consider that individuals are necessarily intentionally and consciously constructing versions of events for this purpose. In this way, it contrasts with cognitivist assumptions made in mainstream psychology that talk is a route to cognition and is an accurate representation of a person's memories, thoughts, feelings, beliefs or attitudes. Instead, discursive psychologists would argue that people will draw upon traditional psychological concepts in everyday life in order to make sense of their experience and to construct different versions of events to different interactional ends (Edwards and Potter, 1992). As such, DP reconceptualises how psychologists should research and theorise about traditional areas of psychological enquiry, including cognition, attributions and identity, considering that these are not necessarily things that people *have*, but that they *do* in language to achieve certain social actions, meaning that DP is radically anti-cognitive (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). More recent versions of DP (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 2005) extend it to use conversation analytic principles in more detail (see also Wiggins and Potter, 2008).

A discursive psychological reading of qualitative data aims to address two fundamental questions: firstly, *what* social actions are individuals accomplishing within their talk? and, secondly, *how* exactly are they doing it? With reference to the first question, discursive psychologists consider what social function is achieved through discourse. For example, discursive psychologists consider how people construct versions of events in order to justify an action, manage stake, blame or accountability, persuade others to believe their version of events and negotiate causal attributions (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Secondly, precisely how individuals manage these social functions is considered through an exploration of the discursive and linguistic devices that are used to construct accounts.

As with Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis, a DP approach has shortcomings. One of the main limitations associated with a discursive approach is that it restricts the

analysis of discourse to the interactional episode in question. That is, it is concerned only with the function of discourse within a given interaction; it does not examine anything beyond, such as wider discursive practices (Parker, 1997), and negates the social, cultural and historical context in which the interaction is taking place. Therefore a limitation with this approach is that it focuses on the minutiae of talk-in-interaction and does not attend to how social action is determined, to some extent, by wider social and cultural meaning systems, in that it has little opportunity to critique and challenge meaning systems that are potentially limiting or oppressive for groups of individuals (Parker, 1992).

Critical discursive psychology (CDP)

One suggested way to overcome the limitations associated with both Foucauldian and discursive approaches to discourse analysis is to analyse discourse using a more combined approach. Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley have been proponents of this approach to discourse analysis (Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), which they have termed critical discursive psychology (CDP) and which has gained momentum in recent years. As an approach to discourse analysis, CDP is an attempt at reconciling FDA and DP by stepping outside the analytic boundaries that each single approach defines.

CDP, like DP, advocates an analytic stance whereby attention is paid to the agency with which individuals are able to draw on discursive resources in order to accomplish varying social actions. However, it also recognises that what is available to say is to some extent shaped by social, cultural and historical context and is limited by the discursive terrain that is available to participants at any one time (Edley, 2001). Furthermore, there is a dual focus on the approach to subjectivity within discourse, whereby CDP aims to explore how discourse can to some extent constitute subjectivities, yet on the other hand can be appropriated by participants to construct and negotiate identity in social situations.

At the heart of a CDP approach to discourse analysis, then, is a dual focus on the role of discourse. Discourse is deemed both constitutive in the sense that it, to some extent, shapes, enables and constrains possibilities for identities and social action, yet it is also considered to be constructive. That is, it can be a tool used by participants within social interactions to achieve particular effects.

Wetherell (1998) and Edley (2001) consider that a focus on three particular aspects of discourse is integral to this approach, namely identification of interpretative repertoires (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) and subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990). We will briefly describe each of these analytic concepts before going on to outline the analytic procedure we used. Following that we will introduce our case example and demonstrate how a CDP approach can be applied to social psychological phenomena in a real-world setting.

Interpretative repertoires were first introduced into social psychology by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In essence, interpretative repertoires form relatively consistent and coherent ways of representing particular objects or events in the social world. They have been described as:

> recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena. A repertoire…is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes). (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 149)</EXT>

Edley (2001) considers that the identification of interpretative repertoires in participants' talk is important in CDP because it is through these that we will come to understand the culturally available ways of talking about a particular discursive object. Interpretative repertoires are similar to the Foucauldian notion of discourses in that they constitute 'linguistic repositories of meaning' (Edley, 2001, p. 202) made available to people through culture. Edley (2001)

notes that the major difference between the two relates to the methodological and analytic focus of the work being conducted. The term 'discourses' usually signals work from a Foucauldian perspective whereby they are said to construct entire institutions and are implicated with discussions of power, shaping the practices and subjectivities of individuals. Meanwhile, repertoires are said to capture the agency with which people are able to construct the world around them and are considered the 'building blocks' of talk (Wetherell and Potter, 1992) (for a further discussion of this distinction see Edley, 2001). Interpretative repertoires can be seen as something of an available discursive currency which individuals can selectively draw on to suit the interactional task at hand.

If the identification of interpretative repertoires enables an understanding of the ways in which discursive objects are constituted through discourse, locating ideological dilemmas is said to assist with this. The concept of an ideological dilemma represents the dilemmatic nature of our common-sense understandings of the world in which we live (Billig et al., 1988). That is, there is not one singular way in which phenomena are understood, but often contrary or competing ways of making sense of and describing something. Within CDP, identification of ideological dilemmas offers an exploration of the prevalent and perhaps contradictory representations of particular discursive objects and how the tensions within and between, to use Billig's term, our 'lived ideologies' manifest themselves within social interaction.

The final concept central to a CDP analysis, which is also used with the Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis, is subject positions. Attention to subject positions is useful because, as Edley (2001) notes, 'it is this concept that connects the wider notions of discourses and interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves' (p. 210). Within CDP, subject positions are made available to individuals through interpretative repertoires. These subject positions are said to offer, yet also limit, possibilities for subjectivity and social action in those who take them up. However, van Langenhove and Harré (1999) also describe subject positions as fluid, not fixed – people use them during

social interactions to 'cope with the situation they usually find themselves in'. In other words, individuals are not only positioned within discourses or repertoires, which to some extent might constitute their subjectivity, but they also utilise subject positions, taking up particular positions within discourse to use to their own ends – to account for, justify or explain social actions.

Our case example – a CDP analysis of 'older motherhood'

Introduction to the study

Over the past few decades the number of women in the UK becoming mothers later on in life has markedly increased. A similar trend has been observed in the US, Australia and other parts of the Western world (Beets et al., 2011). 'Older mothers' are typically defined as women who have their first baby at an age considered to be advancing of at least 35 and more commonly 40. Health professionals have raised concerns about increasing numbers of 'older mothers', as they have warned of the risks of infertility in women and health risks to mother and baby that increase with advancing maternal age. Moreover, women who come to motherhood later in life are often stereotyped as 'selfish' for 'choosing' to put their careers before motherhood (Budds et al., 2013). In light of this context, and the relative dearth of qualitative research on older motherhood, particularly within a UK setting, a central aim of this research was to explore what it means to be an older mother. Furthermore, the research set out to examine how societal meanings of older motherhood might impact upon women's experiences of mothering relatively later. In order to meet both these aims, the project consisted of two studies: (1) an analysis of British newspaper articles where the focus was older motherhood; and (2) semi-structured interviews with women defined as 'older mothers' to explore their experiences of pregnancy, maternity care and early motherhood.

Why was a CDP approach appropriate?

A CDP approach to data analysis here is appropriate as it enabled an exploration of the culturally available ways of talking about 'older mothers' and the implications these might

have for shaping subjectivity and experience. However, it also enabled a consideration of how participants may use discourse as a tool to construct and negotiate their identity from both the interpretative repertoires and subject positions that are available in order to achieve particular interactional effects.

Doing CDP

Data

Similar to Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis, we would argue that a CDP approach can be applied anywhere there is meaning (Parker, 1992). Most commonly this approach is applied to empirical data collected through interviews or focus groups. However, it can also be applied to secondary data, such as policy documents, newspaper articles or other forms of mass media.

Transcription

If collecting primary data, it is recommended that data is transcribed verbatim with some basic transcription notation, through which some of the more palpable details of the discourse are marked onto the transcript. As such, we recommend a 'light' version of Jefferson's transcription notation system (Jefferson, 2004) such as that used by Potter and Wetherell (1987). This approach captures some of the key linguistic and discursive features of the discourse, whilst not compromising the readability of the transcript or the ability to attend to the wider discursive meanings in the data.

Analysis

What follows is an explanation of how a CDP approach can be applied to qualitative data. This is a series of six stages that constitute a 'checklist' of concepts that were attended to throughout the analysis. The first four stages of analysis share similarities with steps of FDA outlined by Willig (2008) and focus on the constitutive nature of discourse, the identification of the discursive terrain that is available to discuss 'older motherhood' and how it shapes

possibilities for practice and subjectivities. The final two stages draw on a more DP approach and consider how accounts of older motherhood are constructed by participants from the discursive currency available, and to what ends. These stages were applied to both the newspaper and the interview data sets.

One: Discursive constructions

Similar to the first stage of FDA, as outlined by Carla Willig (2008), the first stage of analysis involved the identification of the discursive constructions of the topic under study – in this case, 'older motherhood'. In practice, this preliminary stage involved highlighting all extracts where older motherhood – or mothering later – was referred to. This included both explicit as well as implicit references, and it is this first stage whereby the 'discursive terrain' of older motherhood is identified. Descriptive and interpretative notes or codes were produced at this stage in order to highlight the different ways in which being an older mother was discussed and, as such, the discursive meanings of older motherhood were identified.

Two: Interpretative repertoires

Leading on from this came the identification of interpretative repertoires. At this stage, the discursive constructions of older motherhood are broken down. Interpretative repertoires are usually identified in discourse analytic research through their repetition across a data corpus (Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Importantly, variation between constructions of older motherhood is attended to in order to explore and distinguish the different interpretative repertoires or ways of constructing older motherhood.

Three: Subject positions

A further consideration was to identify the subject positions or 'ways of being' that are made available for participants within the discourse, and, by implication, what ways of being are being denied. Further, the implications these subject positions may have for subjectivity and experience were examined.

Four: Practice

This stage involved considering the possibilities for practice opened up by the different interpretative repertoires and subject positions identified. That is, what various constructions of older motherhood, and the positions offered within them tell us about what older mothers can or should do, or have done to them.

Five: Constructions

At this stage, the analysis moved away from the constitutive nature discourse to focus more on the constructive ability of discourse. Here, the focus lay with which discursive resources participants are drawing on, and which they are resisting. There was an additional focus on the action orientation of discourse here. Firstly, there was a consideration of what is achieved, in an ideological sense, by drawing on particular interpretative repertoires and subject positions and resisting others. Moreover, the implications of discourse use were considered more locally, in terms of what participants are able to achieve in the interaction at hand.

Six: Discursive accomplishments

Finally there was a focus on the localised deployment of discourse through examining exactly *how* language used by participants enabled them to achieve particular interactional functions. That is, there was a focus on the discursive and linguistic devices used by participants in order to construct a particular account of something, invoke a particular interpretative repertoire or take up or resist a particular subject position.

Applying CDP to qualitative data

What follows is an example of how we applied the stages of CDP to the interviews with older mothers undertaken in this research project.

Stage one: Discursive constructions

This stage involved identifying the discursive meanings of older motherhood evident in the interviews. In practice, this meant highlighting explicit extracts where women discussed coming to motherhood later on in life and the timing of their pregnancies, as well as their experiences of being an older mother. Additionally, this stage was informed by constructions of older motherhood found in the British press (Budds, 2013; Budds et al., 2013).

Stage Two: Interpretative repertoires

Something that was frequently discussed in the interviews with older mothers was the risks associated with advancing maternal age. Generally speaking, through risk categorisation processes, women over 35 mother within a discourse of risk through which they are positioned as 'at risk' (Budds, 2013; Locke and Budds, 2013). Through the analysis, two interpretative repertoires were identified that women drew upon. The first, 'risk as contingent', constructed the level of risk the women faced as dependent on multiple and individualised factors, as opposed to maternal age alone. Secondly, through drawing on a 'normality' repertoire, women's pregnancies were constructed as 'normal', as nothing out of the ordinary, and therefore to be excused of any particular attention or concern about 'risk'.

What follows is a data extract taken from the first repertoire – risk as contingent. We will draw upon this extract to demonstrate how the final four stages of analysis may be carried out on the text by way of identifying subject positions, practices, constructions and discursive accomplishments.

This extract comes from Rebecca, who discusses the risks of fertility problems associated with maternal age. At 36, Rebecca is positioned, and positions herself, as 'at risk' of infertility, and became pregnant unexpectedly.

R   Just er (2.0) it's, it's just touch and go I mean (.) I don't erm (3.0) I know people talk about the (.) the risks of you (.) being infertile as you get older (1.0) I think that it's more (2.0) I, I think it's more down to sort of (1.0) y' I think more emphasis should be placed on the

individual because I think that we're individually quite different (.) and I think it would be helpful if people knew earlier on (.) how, how fertile they were and how long (.) you know what their chances were.

IV   Hmm.

R   Um (1.0) because if (.) somebody had said to me (1.0) you would have no problem getting pregnant right up until the age of 45 (.) I pr' (.) I probably would have waited even longer to be in (.) a (.) relationship and have that support.

IV   Hmm.

R   But it's because you just don't know.

IV   Yeah.

R   That I kind of, you know, I got to 35 and thought (.) y'know I don't want to risk (.) you know, it, it was in my life plan having children (.) don't want to risk not ever having (.) children.

Throughout this extract she invokes a contingent repertoire in which fertility risk is something that is unique, individual and dependent on the individual woman, rather than maternal age necessarily: 'people talk about the risks of you being infertile as you get older…I think we're individually quite different' (lines 2–6).

Three: Subject positions

The subject position debated within this extract is whether or not Rebecca is positioned as 'at risk'. Within this extract we can see that Rebecca is positioned as 'at risk' of fertility problems owing to her maternal age through wider understandings of age-related fertility categories: 'people talk about the risks of you being infertile as you get older' (line 2). The implications of this in terms of her subjectivity or 'being' at risk are most felt when she discusses how she did not 'want to risk not ever having children' (lines 20–21). Thus

positioned as 'at risk', Rebecca saw the world from the vantage point of that position and considered herself to be 'at risk' of fertility problems.

Four: Practice

The implications of this subject position for practice can be observed as Rebecca alludes to the impact that concerns about age-related fertility problems had on her timing of pregnancy: 'I got to 35 and thought y'know I don't want to risk it…it was in my life plan having children…don't want to risk not ever having children' (lines 19–21). Based on being 'at risk', Rebecca suggests she was prompted to plan motherhood imminently for fear that if she left it any later she would be unable to have children. This was despite the fact that she was in a relationship she described as 'complicated' – a relationship that subsequently ended, leaving Rebecca as a single mother.

Five: Constructions

In drawing upon a contingent repertoire throughout this extract, Rebecca builds up a critique of the taken-for-granted assumption that advancing age is associated with fertility problems in all women. Instead, she constructs fertility as unique and individual, meaning that the subject position of 'at risk' does not necessarily apply to all older mothers – including herself. Further, using her own experience as evidence, she discusses the implications of the absence of this repertoire from women's understandings of fertility and in doing so speaks to the importance of alternative understandings of the relationship between maternal age and fertility problems.

As such, the ideological function of the discourse surrounding risk and maternal age is apparent through this extract. It is this discourse that shapes Rebecca's decision-making about when to have a child. Had she been aware of counter-arguments and different information she talks about waiting longer to be in a relationship and have support, rather than becoming a single mother: 'because if, if somebody had said to me you would have no problem getting pregnant right up until the age of 45 I pr', I probably would have waited even

longer to be in a relationship and have that support'. Rebecca's alignment with this discourse and so concern about age-related fertility decline additionally functions to account for her status as a single mother and justify her decision-making regarding the timing of her pregnancy.

Six: Discursive accomplishments

Finally, we can take a look at the discursive accomplishments of Rebecca's talk and examine exactly how the language she uses assists in achieving these different interactional functions. For example, Rebecca's account of her decision-making around the timing of pregnancy is of interest here. In her account she suggests she rushed into pregnancy owing to the pervasiveness of the concerns about infertility in older women and her consequent positioning of being 'at risk' of fertility problems. Her positioning is clearest in lines 20–21 where she discusses not wanting to risk 'not ever having children', which is an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). Using this extreme case formulation enables Rebecca to position herself as 'at risk' of the worst case scenario – not ever being able to have children – and functions to justify her decision surrounding the timing of her pregnancy – namely not waiting to be in a relationship. This description also constitutes a three part list (Jefferson, 1990), which is a rhetorical device which bolsters the persuasiveness of her account and shores up her subjective feelings of being 'at risk'. Again, this has the effect of further legitimising her actions.

Reflection of use of this method in this research

Carrying out a CDP approach to data analysis is not exactly straightforward. Although we have outlined a set of six stages in the analytic process, we are not suggesting that these stages should be followed in a linear process, although this may be helpful to a beginner to CDP to provide some analytic structure.

As we have argued in this chapter, the benefit of this approach to discourse analysis is that it avoids the limitations associated with pursuing either FDA or DP in isolation and as such

was the best approach to take in order to meet the aims of the research project. As Brown and Locke (2008) in their discussion of contemporary methods in qualitative psychology note, research needs to be 'contextually grounded', 'socially oriented' and offer 'politically informed analysis' (p. 387). Given the different aspects of CDP, we would suggest that it is a key method in being able to fulfil this brief. In this sense, discourse analysis has a clear potential to be applied and there are a variety of research studies that, through their findings, can offer insight in order to work towards social change. Willig (1999) suggests that this view sees discourse as 'social critique'. In this way, the research study here could be viewed in this vein as a social critique of the ways in which 'older mothers' are positioned in the press with the subsequent interview work noting how the mothers resisted and changed these discourses into the positive 'older mother'.

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