
Discursive Practice

Analysis, Context and Action in Critical Research

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Researchers new to discursive research in psychology often face problems because many 'introductions to discourse analysis' describe discourse only from a limited linguistic or sociological point of view. This paper focuses on the contribution of semiological and Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis that have been influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories in order to provide an overview of discourse analysis itself as a form of discursive practice. These approaches have been explicitly aligned recently to the development of critical psychology. They also directly connect with the notion of discursive practice, and there are possibilities within this tradition, I want to argue, for working through this discursive tradition in qualitative inquiry to arrive at something that might really correspond to critical research in psychology. The argument here is located primarily in the British debates over 'discourse analysis', and this parochial starting point is then used as an opportunity to reflect on the specific cultural contexts in which critical work is received and rewritten. The paper moves through four sections, which deal respectively with what semiology offers to discourse analysis, the conditions of possibility for discursive practice, examples of the cultural conditions of possibility for the uptake of discourse analysis in psychology, and the way that discursive practice might connect with some of the concerns of critical psychology.

The Life of Signs

Discourse analysts in psychology study the way texts are constructed, the functions they serve in different contexts and the contradictions that run through

them. We use the term 'discourse' because our conception of language is much wider than a simple psycholinguistic or sociolinguistic one. Some of the work from sociolinguistics which has explored the semantics and pragmatics – the meaning and doing – of spoken and written texts has been useful in drawing attention to the ways in which a seemingly smooth text can be taken apart, and to the different implications of different types of statement within it. However, a theoretical tradition more closely attuned to political critique has been that which draws on structuralist and post-structuralist ideas (e.g., Henriques et al., 1984).

The founding figure of structuralism, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), once imagined that there could be a new science called 'semiology' which would study the life of signs in society. The exploration of semiological patterns of meaning has sometimes been carried out under that heading, and sometimes under the related (US American) heading of 'semiotics' (Hawkes, 1977). Although discourse analysts in psychology have tended to focus on spoken and written texts, a critical 'reading' of psychology as part of culture should encompass the study of all the kinds of symbolic material that we use to represent ourselves to each other (Parker, 2002). All of this symbolic material is *organized*, and it is that organization that makes it possible for it to produce for us, its users, a sense of human community and identity. Semiology in general, and discourse analysis in particular leads us to question the way subjectivity – the experience of being and feeling in particular discursive contexts – is constituted inside and outside psychology.

The organisation of discourse through patterns and structures fixes the meaning of symbolic material, and this makes it possible for discourse analysts to take those texts as our objects of study, unpick them and show how they work. The process of focusing on specific texts could lead us pragmatically to treat these as abstracted from culture when we carry out our analysis, and so we have to be aware of the ways in which the meanings we study are always produced in their relationship to other texts, the way they are 'intertextual'. When we take a ready-made text or select some material to create a text, we are able to trace connections between signs and to identify regularities that produce certain circumscribed positions for readers. We can then study the ideological force of language by displaying the patterns and structures of meaning. That is, we can identify distinct 'discourses' that define entities that we see in the world and in relationships, and as things we feel are psychologically real in ourselves.

Saussure made a crucial distinction between individual 'speech acts' on the one hand, and the 'language system' which determines how they may be produced and what sense they would be able to have on the other. Roland Barthes (1973) extended this analysis to look at the way terms in language do not only seem to refer directly to things outside language, through 'denotation', but also evoke a network of associations, through 'connotation', and operate as part of an ideological 'second-order sign system' which he called 'myth'. Myth naturalises cultural meanings and makes it seem as if language not only refers to the world but also reflects an unchanging and universal order of things. Because it does not make a *direct* claim to represent the way the world should be, but insinuates itself into taken-for-granted frames of reference, myth is one of the effective ways that ideology works. There are problems of reading and interpretation here that cannot be addressed by quantitative approaches in psychology.

Signs and steps of analysis

Although researchers in the field of discourse analysis often warn against systematising their approach, because it should be thought of more correctly as a sensitivity to language rather than as a 'method' (e.g., Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Willig, 1999), it is possible to indicate stages that might usefully be passed through in order to identify contradictions, construction and functions of language. Parker (1992, 2002) outlines a number of 'steps', for example, of which seven will be mentioned here. The researcher is encouraged to (i) turn the text into written form, if it is not already, (ii) free associate to varieties of meaning as a way of accessing cultural networks, and note these down, (iii) systematically itemize the objects, usually marked by nouns, in the text or selected portion of text, (iv) maintain a distance from the text by treating the text itself as the object of the study rather than what it seems to 'refer' to, (v) systematically itemise the 'subjects' – characters, persona, role positions – specified in the text, (vi) reconstruct presupposed rights and responsibilities of 'subjects' specified in the text, and (vii) map the networks of relationships into patterns. These patterns in language are 'discourses', and they can then be located in relations of ideology, power and institutions.

Walkerdine (1991), for example, analysed a little piece of transcript in which a small boy in class subjected a woman teacher to a stream of verbal sexualised abuse. One of the tasks of the analysis was to situate this encounter in the particular pedagogical practices that had trained

and prepared this teacher to interpret and respond to how boys and girls express themselves. In this way Walkerdine was able to explore how competing discourses of devalued female sexuality and liberal education theory framed the way the participants in the interaction could relate to one another. The schoolboy positioned the teacher as a woman, and so silenced her, and the woman, who had been trained to value the free expression of children, positioned herself as a good teacher, and was then unable to silence the boy. The example shows us something about the way post-structuralist approaches to discourse understand power and history. Psychologists who study power, of course, will usually be tempted to treat it as the deliberate exercise of authority over another person who 'conforms' or 'obeys'. However, power in discourse is more complicated, and the notions of 'subject position' (Henriques et al., 1984) and 'interpellation' (Althusser, 1971) have been useful in capturing the way in which the 'powerful' and 'powerless' are addressed and recruited. Power was played out in this classroom in such a way that the woman participated in, and reproduced her own oppression.

These discourses could only work here, of course, because of the wider systems of power in male-female relationships and 'regimes of truth' in contemporary education. History in discourse analysis, then, should not be seen as something that pulls the strings of individual actors; rather, it lays out a field of action in which individuals understand themselves and others. An analysis of the rules of discourse that govern any particular social formation must also, then, be an analysis of how individuals are configured by and themselves reconfigure those rules when they are recruited and resist. That is, we attend to the forms of power subjects reconstruct as they participate in the rules and what forms of resistance it is possible for them to display. The macro-level, then, is something that pervades, constructs and draws sustenance from the micro-level.

Walkerdine does not follow a set procedure or work her way through 'steps' in the analysis, and those examples of discourse analysis that follow steps usually do so for purely pedagogical purposes (e.g., Parker, 1994, 1999a). However, she does identify, for example, the 'subjects' (the particular character of the 'woman', 'boy', 'teacher' and 'child') in the text as objects constituted in the discourse and specify the rights, responsibilities and patterns of power that they are implicated in. The woman teacher in Walkerdine's study was as much at the mercy of psychology, through her pedagogical training, as of sexism. Psychology

itself operates as a kind of 'myth' in commonsense, and it runs alongside a range of exclusionary and pathologising practices that commonsense justifies as being natural and unquestionable (Barthes, 1973). Commonsense cannot be combated with a simple account of what 'reality' is, because our seemingly direct perception of reality is always framed by discourse.

Psychology pretends that it is 'realist', but it is actually only so in its own limited empiricist sense of what 'reality' is. Discourse analysts, on the other hand, challenge the way the discipline claims to study 'the real' through focusing on the way that psychological realities are constructed in psychological texts. These texts may be inside the discipline or 'outside' in popular culture. It is possible to analyse the particular qualities of a 'realist' text as something that constructs a sense of the world outside as taken-for-granted without concluding that claims about the world can never be explored and assessed (Parker, 1998, 2002). Some of the analyses of visual texts in film theory, for example, have been useful in showing how ideology works through representing something on the screen as if it were a transparent window onto the world (McCabe, 1974; cf. Durmaz, 1999). Psychological reports play the same type of trick when they pretend to provide a transparent window onto the mind, and a critical discourse approach links analyses of these written forms with the visual texts that surround us and which make the reports seem reasonable and commonsensical.

This is why an analysis of psychological phenomena needs to be undertaken alongside an analysis of practices of psychology in Western culture, and then that analysis must extend its scope to the way psychology relays discursively-organised representations of the 'self' through its own practices as part of the 'psy-complex' (Rose, 1985, 1996). It is unwise, then, to appeal to commonsense as an always-trustworthy resource to challenge psychology. The stuff of mental life lies in discourse, and it then makes sense to say that we are elaborating an alternative 'discursive psychology'. However, this needs to be argued through theoretically more than methodologically if discourse analysis is to become more than just another method and if it is to contribute to the development of critical psychology (Parker, 1999b).

There is still a good deal of resistance to discourse analysis in the discipline, but it has succeeded in establishing itself in undergraduate courses in some countries and in academic journals and introductory textbooks. Sometimes it even defines what researchers in Britain understand qualitative research in psychology to be. This newly acquired

status for discourse analysis is a mixed blessing though, and we need to take a few steps further, beyond method, to 'discursive practice' in order to understand what it offers and what it occludes.

Discursive Practice

Discursive practice takes us through the 'turn to language' and 'turn to discourse' to a conception of language as materially effective. The turn to language in psychology in the late 1960s and 1970s shifted attention to aspects of human activity that was neglected by traditional psychology. We see this in the 'new paradigm' ethogenic approaches (e.g., Harré and Secord, 1972; Marsh et al., 1974). Then the 'turn to discourse' in the 1980s and 1990s helped us to link with frameworks attempting to address links between politics and subjectivity. We see this particularly in the use of post-structuralist theories (e.g., Henriques et al., 1984; Davies, 2000).

In fact, the Walkerdine (1991) example of what might now all too easily be reframed as 'discourse analysis' only makes sense in the context of debates about forms of 'practice' and its opposition to 'experience' in Britain in late 1970s and early 1980s. These debates saw a sustained refusal of the way Marxism in Britain had adapted to local forms of empiricism, in which direct appeal to unmediated observation and felt experience figured as key motifs in the struggle against ideology (Anderson, 1980). There was then an attempt to make use of ideas from structuralist and post-structuralist writing, including a critique of the 'subject' in psychology (e.g. Adlam et al., 1977). This broader context is the reason why Henriques et al. (1984) already deployed the notion of 'discursive practice', and already anticipate some of the problems with humanism, liberalism and empiricism that discourse analysis has encountered in psychology in recent years. It is the very separation of the methodological developments in discourse analysis inside British social psychology from wider cultural, political and economic conditions that makes the task of reinstating the role of practice in critical research now so urgent.

The shifts into language and discourse inside the discipline still risk falling into idealism as a reaction to the fake materialism of mainstream positivist psychology. Traditional psychology was unable to grasp the importance of language other than as varieties of verbal behaviour, or meaning other than through quantitative representation, or embodiment other than in forms of biological structure. But now a turn to discursive practice allows us to grasp the linguistic, meaningful,

embodied nature of human nature that has become the concern of more recent critical social psychologists (cf. Nightingale, 1999; Willig, 2000). One could think of the return to material practice in discourse research in dialectical terms, as a grasping of the behavioural embodied nature of human psychology at a higher level of concreteness than traditional psychology.

I want to show how this is possible by reviewing in a little more detail where discourse analysis came from and by giving a brief history of the development of its methodological and theoretical background so that we may understand, to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault (1980), its 'conditions of possibility'.

Conditions of possibility

Foucault's writing is very valuable for the work of critical discursive research, and his analysis of practices of discipline and confession in modern Western society give us some guidelines for how we may understand the realm of the 'psychological' in capitalist culture (1977, 1981). It should be said that Foucault (1980) was actually suspicious of the term 'ideology' because it may prompt people to find an essential underlying 'truth' that could be counterposed to its 'false' picture of the world, but Foucauldian discourse analysis in psychology now is generally more sympathetic to the ways in which Marxist literary theorists have struggled with the term 'ideology' and have tried to save it for a reading of texts (Eagleton, 1991; cf. Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Foucauldians would then look at how the organization of language in a culture provide places for the phenomenon to make sense, and at the 'surfaces of emergence' for certain representations and practices of the self (Hook, 2001; cf. Mather, 2000).

If we connect our work with the Foucauldian tradition in this way, the approach can function as a bridge to a critical understanding of contradiction, the constitution of the modern psychological subject and its place in regimes of knowledge and power. It is then possible for the researcher to break more completely from mainstream psychology and to view it as a series of practices that can be 'de-constructed', de-constructed in process of 'practical deconstruction' closer to the Foucauldian and Marxist projects than to the more liberal forms warranted by much writing inside literary theory and philosophy (e.g., Parker et al., 1995). The conditions of possibility for the emergence of discourse analysis are as fragmented and complex as discourse analysis itself. Discourse analysis reflects (because it did not pop out of nowhere)

and, in this broader Foucauldian frame, may help us to reflect upon (because it attends to contradiction, construction and functions of theory) the multiple material conditions that made it possible.

Attending to conditions of possibility can help us to capture better the interweaving network of discursive practices in which academic notions come to make sense. It is better than the notion of '*Zeitgeist*', which is often used in US American introductory textbooks to characterise 'the spirit of the age' and the development of fitting forms of psychological theory, because that notion leads us into idealist conceptions of the cultural setting for the emergence of ideas. Foucault's (1980) analysis of 'conditions of possibility' for new discursive practices is more useful for critical psychologists precisely because it does not 'psychologise' culture in the way that notions of shared homogeneous collective mentality in descriptions of '*Zeitgeist*' seem to do. This is important here because the way we tell the story of the development of discourse analysis will frame the way we understand what it is, what it does and what we can make it do. To simply recount a history of ideas can be tempting because it seems immediately accessible.

For example, we might say that Rom Harré disagreed with Michael Argyle at Oxford about the proper way to explain behaviour (Harré and Secord, 1972), and then Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell criticised assumptions about underlying singular meaning that Harré shared with Argyle, taking the emphasis on language further to look at variability in language alongside the way it was constructed and the functions it served (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Erica Burman and Ian Parker, among others, believed that the work of Michel Foucault, the French historian and philosopher, had anticipated these developments and that they provided a more radical version of discourse analysis (Burman and Parker, 1993). They wanted to remind people that a book first published in 1984, *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al., 1984), had already brought these post-structuralist ideas into psychology, and they argued for a Foucauldian discourse analysis that would look at history, institutions and power as well as patterns of language and conversational turn-taking.

This kind of story is useful for some purposes but it portrays the motor force of theoretical developments as being inside the heads of individuals and it reduces material discursive preconditions to the 'social context' in which people had their good ideas and argued them through, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. To study the 'conditions of possibility' for a phenomenon, on the other hand, is to

trace the material discursive settings within which accounts may make sense.

The conditions of possibility for an event are the interplay of semantic resources and lines of force that render it thinkable and understandable. Thinkable in the sense that forms of language already render it into a particular shape, already fold it into meanings so that we can hold onto our sense of what it is without being driven into isolation and madness. Madness, as Foucault (1971) argued, is precisely an example in extremes of thought driven out of language, with 'reason' operating as a discourse upon madness which frames it and interprets it, makes it susceptible to what may be reasonably spoken about. Certain conditions of possibility render it understandable in the sense that others are able to employ the same notions, to wield the same words with something approximating to the same effect, but with those effects structured by positions of speaking inside and outside certain institutions. Different forms of reason distribute rights to speak to mad doctors in one institution (a psychiatric hospital for example) and to mental health system survivors in another kind of institution (such as a radical self-help group). System survivors have had to resist mainstream definitions of what it is understandable to say about madness and to physically carve out a space, counter-institutions where counter-discourse may be thinkable (Parker et al., 1995).

The development of discourse analysis is a less dramatic case. It is possible to identify two aspects of its conditions of possibility, the first in 'paradigm shifts' ostensibly internal to the discipline of psychology and the second in broader 'crises of representation' in academic institutions. When we address 'paradigm shifts' of any kind in academic work we must, of course, attend to the multiplicity of determinations that operate around the academic institutions; the 'conditions of possibility' for a new practice are always traversed by political and economic crises (Parker, 1989). Let us take paradigm shifts first.

Paradigm shifts

Discourse analysis emerged in psychology partly because there had already been a sustained critique of 'old paradigm' laboratory-experimental approaches by people like Harré and Secord (1972). Potter and Wetherell's (1987) work was a response to, and was made possible by, this critique. To understand this we have to move beyond a narrative that focuses on the battle of ideas taking place between individuals.

The new paradigm critique that laid the ground for the 'turn to

language' and then the 'turn to discourse' consisted of two parallel, complementary and contradictory strands. First, a scientific methodological critique, in which it was argued that it is possible to improve old cognitive-behavioural psychology, which only studied people as if they interacted in silence, through the development of methods which would attend to language. An example would be the study of structured patterns of role-rule relationships through the gathering of accounts in little social worlds (e.g., Marsh et al. 1974). The second strand was a humanist moral-political critique, in which it was argued that a 'new paradigm' would respect the meaning-making capacities of human beings and the expression of these in language. An example would be the study of patterns of respect and contempt (e.g. Rosser et al. 1976). The dual nature of this critique is captured in the slogan of ethogenic new social psychology 'for scientific purposes treat people as if they were human beings' (Harré and Secord, 1972, p. 84).

In turn, the kind of discourse analysis that Potter and Wetherell (1987) championed has provided a pole of attraction for writers from 1970s 'new paradigm' social psychology (e.g., Harré, 1998), and has helped legitimate qualitative research in psychology departments in the last decade. This has then led to the argument that it is possible to yoke the 'turn-to-discourse' to a 'second cognitive revolution' in which most of the mental machinery will now be seen to have been out in the public sphere all along (Harré and Gillett, 1994). Some critical writers in social psychology who had been tempted to turn to the study of rhetoric as an alternative to laboratory experimentation (Billig, 1987) and to the study of the way that people handle dilemmas in everyday talk (Billig et al., 1988) would now see their work as 'discursive', and would also make claims, based on that research, that they now know more about the nature of human thinking (Billig, 1991). These various elaborations of discourse analysis have also contributed to critical perspectives in psychology. Wetherell and Potter's (1992) analysis of racism, for example, connects with more radical Foucauldian forms of discourse analytic research.

This paradigm critique, however, emerged in the context of wider critiques, broader conditions of possibility. To understand that we need to embed the new paradigm critiques in a bigger picture.

Crises of representation

Discourse analysis was part of a wider movement in different disciplines concerned with crises of representation. There are academic-symbolic

aspects of these crises and material-institutional aspects. We can notice that just as discussions of continental European philosophy emerged in the old 'polytechnic' sector, so discursive and critical work in psychology in Britain has taken faster in that sector. To talk of 'conditions of possibility', then, is to include an attention to certain institutional practices and spaces, in which there was greater flexibility in terms of academic boundaries and greater permeability in terms of class boundaries, and this is something which is also refracted through gender and culture. We can reflect on these a little further, and note the way in which discourse analysis emerged as a practice that was interdisciplinary and interested.

It was *interdisciplinary* in the sense that many different kinds of studies of discourse flowered, cross-cutting and overlapping, so that it was possible now to draw on 'philosophical' and 'literary' ideas while we were supposed to be doing science. An example would be the transdisciplinary play of the Beryl Curt group (e.g., Curt, 1994). It was *interested* in the sense that the study of discourse emerged not for its own sake but as part of political projects of those in different constituencies in higher education who found a place to speak differently and to build on their perception that speaking mattered. An example would be the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall et al., 1980). In recent years feminist psychology has provided a base inside the discipline which has best represented these interdisciplinary and interested aspects of discourse analysis (e.g., Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995).

The crisis of representation is marked in the shift from speaking of 'representation' to 'signification' (e.g., Henriques et al. 1984). This shift is, at least, one of refusing to accept that the descriptions that psychologists or other social scientists give of the world do actually represent it and of studying instead the way that the descriptions signify by way of their connections to other forms of language, ideological forms of language. However, the depth of the crisis can be seen in the way that this tactical refusal of representation quickly folded into the refusal to believe that any account can more adequately represent the world. This is a position that does present, if not represent, political problems for Marxists and many feminists who want to use discourse analysis for ideology critique (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). It is here that we need to locate the emergence of the early critical projects in psychology that drew on structuralist and post-structuralist ideas (e.g., Adlam et al., 1977; Henriques et al.,

1984) in the context of debates over empiricism and experience in English Marxism (Anderson, 1980). I want to sidestep this particular problem for the moment, however, so that I can move to broader cultural conditions of possibility for the way discourse analysis has emerged.

Cultural conditions of possibility

Looking at those broader cultural conditions of possibility does itself raise questions about ideology. I will describe two examples of the uptake of discourse analysis in order to reflect on the specific forms of discourse that construct 'discourse analysis' for us. Now we also see how parochial British debates in discourse analysis have become, and how the 'us' is constituted as one voice, which often pretends to be all voices. The first example concerns the role of 'empiricism' in English culture and psychology.

Empiricist discourse

I have referred already to the empiricism of mainstream psychology. Empiricism is the stance that psychologists take against theoretical arguments they do not like, and it underpins the idea they have about the possibility of finding out about the world by examining it and measuring it without any presuppositions. The problem is that anyone who observes the world or other human beings or themselves has to make use of presuppositions that are laced together in some witting or unwitting way in a *theory* of some kind. Empiricism itself, of course, is a theoretical position; it is 'the philosophical pretension to nonphilosophy' (Derrida, 1978, p. 152). One study, which we could actually see as a discourse analysis or study of discursive practice, which throws light on the role empiricism plays, is Antony Easthope's (1999) *Englishness and National Culture*. Here we can see the deployment once again of the notion of 'practice' from the 1980s debates over the role of 'experience' inside English Marxism. What Easthope does is to study the way empiricism operates as a cultural dominant in English culture as a form of discourse. He describes it like this:

English empiricist discourse, I propose, maintains itself on the back of a binary opposition between the real and the apparent, an opposition reproduced and reworked in many directions, including: objective/subjective concrete/abstract practice/theory clear/obscure fact/fiction serious/silly common sense/dogma sincere/artificial amateur/professional hard/soft

truth/pleasure right/wrong Protestant/Catholic English/French home/foreign centre/extreme virility/effeminacy masculine/feminine (Easthope, 1999, p. 90).

I have also drawn attention to the way that discourse analysis has taken root in British social psychology, to the dismay of experimental social psychologists in other countries. But although we might take this hostility to discourse analysis as a sign that we are doing something right, discourse analysis itself does still seem uncannily close to the way Easthope describes empiricist discourse. For Easthope, 'the three defining features of empiricist discourse' are:

the literary object is pre-given, yielding knowledge of itself to experience (as it were); the critical subject is similarly autonomous and pre-given, able to experience the text objectively (so long as he or she resists the subjectivity of desire); and language, not interposing significantly between object and subject, text and reader, is essentially transparent (or can be) (Easthope, 1999, p. 120).

You only have to look at discourse analysis studies in psychology journals to see that their transcripts are precisely taken as 'pre-given' and as if they were open to objective study. There are appeals to 'rigour' of analysis, which adopt the same claims about validity as mainstream psychology, that is claims about the possibility of direct unmediated analysis that can be shown to be correct.

Easthope pursues the question of what the 'conditions of possibility' might be for this state of affairs, and he accounts for the way that empiricism has survived for centuries as an ideological form in England by locating empiricist discourse in its political economic context: 'One might expect that a culture which has not experienced traumatic disruption since 1660 would retain the structure of its signifying chains unaltered into the present' (Easthope, 1999, p. 28). What this means is that we have to account for the way that the 'crises of representation' that I described earlier were able to operate and what the structural *limits* to the crises were.

Easthope's account raises questions not only about forms of discourse analysis that do seem to play into empiricism by obsessively studying turn-taking in transcripts but also about our own studies of discursive practice that we like to think of as escaping empiricism. Easthope argues that in England post-structuralism

was pulled into the orbit of the prevailing radical discourse, ‘New Left’ Marxism, in terms that allowed many of the old empiricist themes to reappear under new management. An opposition between ‘theoretical practice’ and ‘ideological practice’ was able to support: (1) a confident appeal to reality (albeit a reality acknowledge as a constructed one); (2) a capacity to discriminate between a true discourse or knowledge and one that was manifestly non-transparent (referred to as ‘ideology’ rather than as ‘jargon’); (3) a heavily moralised view of the subject (though officially this was a subject-in-process) (Easthope, 1999, p. 202).

This warning draws attention to the dangers of using discourse analysis to ‘expose’ ideology in capitalist society or patriarchy and of appealing to a ‘real’ account which we assume is true discourse, and as a consequence producing an account of subjectivity uncannily similar to the subject of bourgeois ideology. This subject is thus thoroughly ‘deconstructed’ but it is still expected to be an agent of change.

The second example of cultural conditions of possibility for present-day discourse analysis concerns the role of individualism in North American culture and psychology.

US American individualism

Individualism – as the reduction of societal processes to the level of the person – takes different forms in different sectors of capitalist culture, and it is sometimes easier to identify when its discourse is unfamiliar to us. The specific variants of individualism in US American culture appear within certain ‘conditions of possibility’ that US Marxists have often diagnosed and combated. The attempt avoid reflection on these conditions of possibility is itself woven into the celebration of individual pragmatic experimental engagement with the world, one ‘which construes any incident as an essentially fresh experience which might break every precedent’ (Novack, 1975, p. 27).

US American individualism is not worse than English empiricism, but it poses a specific problem for critical psychologists because of the dominance of US American textbooks, and this is one reason why social psychologists in the 1970s thought that ‘European’ social psychology was more progressive than the American tradition (e.g., Moscovici, 1972; Parker, 1989). I discovered something of this phenomenon again myself when I wrote a chapter on ‘discursive psychology’ for a critical psychology introductory textbook edited in North America (Parker, 1997), with one editor in US America (Dennis Fox) and the other then

in Canada (Isaac Prilleltensky). The second draft of my chapter (which is referenced in these extracts as V1: my submission) was sent by the editors to ‘student judges’. (This second version, my submission, is now published as ‘Discursive psychology uncut’ in Parker, 2002). The editors took account of their comments and sections were rewritten and sent to me. I was then asked to approve the rewritten version (referenced in these extracts as V2: the version rewritten for me). I responded with a final version that was a middle way which still retained something of what I wanted to say (and extracts from this version are referenced in these extracts as V3: the agreed version that went to press).

What these editors rewritten sections (in V2: the version rewritten for me) display is something of the ideological shape of North American culture, even in the work of writers who are ‘critical’, through motifs of ‘expression’, ‘interests’ and ‘imposition’.

First, the motif of ‘expression’. In one section of my version I said:

Although discourse analysts in psychology have tended to focus on spoken and written texts, a critical ‘reading’ of psychology as part of culture should encompass the study of all the kinds of symbolic material that we use to represent ourselves to each other. All of this symbolic material is organized, and it is that *organization* that makes it possible for it to produce for us, its users, a sense of human community and identity. Semiology in general, and discourse analysis in particular leads us to question the way subjectivity (the experience of being and feeling in particular discursive contexts) is constituted inside and outside psychology (V1: my submission)

This is exactly the formulation I adopted at the beginning of this paper, of course, but after rewriting, that section of the book chapter came back as:

Discourse analysts study the way in which various forms of communication serve social, ideological, and political interests. They also study the way in which written and verbal texts reveal the subjectivity of the authors of these *discourses*. That is to say, how is the content of what authors say related to their feelings, thoughts, and place in society? (V2: the version rewritten for me)

There is the idea in these first few sentences that ‘feelings’ and ‘thoughts’ are the source of what people say and that these things are only later revealed in discourse. There is a claim that if we study discourse we will

find the thing that lies behind it, that is we will be able to ‘reveal the subjectivity’ of speakers. The next sentences went on to reinforce that idea, and I was horrified to read that I was taken to be arguing that:

People develop and express their identity through the use of verbal, non-verbal, and other symbolic means of communication, such as art. The way these verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic expressions are organized reveals a great deal about our subjectivity and ourselves (V2: the version rewritten for me)

There was nothing I could do with the first few sentences, but I rewrote the bit which talked about the way people ‘develop and express their identity’ by putting ‘express’ in scare quotes and then qualifying what had been said:

People develop and ‘express’ their identity through the use of verbal, non-verbal, and other symbolic means of communication, such as art. Then, when they feel as if they are genuinely ‘expressing’ something inside themselves, they pick up and reproduce certain discourses about the nature of the self, and they find it difficult to step back and question how those ways of describing the world may have come from, and what interests they may serve (V3: the agreed version that went to press)

To talk of ‘interests’, however, was also dangerous in this context, and the next motif that emerged in the rewriting was that of ‘interests’ as thoroughly conscious and individualised. I have to first give the bit of the text which provides the context, and actually this bit was cut out by the student judges and editors, before moving on to the bit that was rewritten by them. I wrote:

Foucault’s historical research focused on *contradictions* between discourses and the ways in which the self is torn in different directions by discourse. The unified image of the ‘self’ in contemporary psychology and society is no more than that, an image, and so discursive psychology has to take care not to assume something undivided in the person underneath discourse. The term ‘deconstruction’ is sometimes used in this context to describe the way in which a text can be unravelled and the contradictions in it displayed so that it becomes clear what ideas are being privileged and what the costs are of that. A critical discursive reading is always, in some sense, a deconstruction of dominant forms of

knowledge, and the reader constructs a different account as they deconstruct a text (Derrida, 1981; Eagleton, 1983) (V1: my submission)

Then we come to the section, which was rewritten. Originally I wrote:

While the notion of variability tends to celebrate diversity of meaning in pluralist spirit, the notion of contradiction links more directly with struggle, power and the deconstruction of discourse in practice (V1: my submission)

This came back rewritten as:

While the notion of variability tends to celebrate diversity of meaning in pluralist spirit, the notion of contradiction links more directly with struggle, power and the deconstruction of discourse in practice. For instance, by examining contradictions in people’s discourses we can reveal how they uphold their interests while pretending to be neutral or compassionate toward others (V2: the version rewritten for me).

The problem with this, of course, is that it makes it seem as if when people use discourse they not only use it deliberately but they also know exactly what their ‘interests’ are so that they can manipulate other people while ‘pretending’ to be neutral. Any notion of the work of ideology on those who exercise power over others is brushed out. All I could do is reinstate the section and insist that this was the way I wanted it to read, viz:

While the notion of variability tends to celebrate diversity of meaning in pluralist spirit, the notion of contradiction links more directly with struggle, power and the deconstruction of discourse in practice (V3: the agreed version that went to press)

Again, when we talk about ‘power’ there is a problem for a culture suffused with discourses of power as always deliberate and exercised by individuals over others. The third motif in the writing-rewriting process was that of the ‘imposition’ of power. For the context of the problem passage I wrote:

Discourse also recruits readers into subject positions by ‘interpellating’ them, calling out to them and constructing forms of identity that they

must experience for the discourse to make sense (Althusser, 1971) (V1: my submission)

This sentence was cut by the editors. The next sentence, which was rewritten, originally read as follows:

When the notion of 'subject position' is linked with developments in Foucauldian and post-structuralist theory we have a valuable tool for cutting through to a better understanding of abuses of power and ideological mystification in psychology and its wider culture (V1: my submission)

This sentence was rewritten as:

The notion of 'subject position' is a valuable tool for understanding abuses of power in psychology and its wider culture. We can see that people are silent or obedient because of the 'subject position' imposed upon them. Some will speak and some will remain silent (V2: the version rewritten for me).

The problem with this is that it not only makes 'subject position' into something that is imposed on people, presumably deliberately by those abusing power and who know they are defending their interests, but that it makes it seem that if people can speak out then things will not be so bad. Here we see an ideological motif of people being given voice and then expected to take full responsibility in bourgeois democracy. I dealt with this by removing the reference to people having subject positions imposed upon them and adding a caveat at the end, as so:

The notion of 'subject position' is a valuable tool for understanding abuses of power in psychology and its wider culture. Some will speak and some will remain silent. In this perspective, it is as much a problem when people speak in certain ways as when they are silent (V3: the agreed version that went to press)

I should emphasise that there is no simple line that we could trace through discourse analysis using, for example, the work of Foucault, which would ensure that we would assemble a reliable critical perspective. Still less is there any guarantee that writing in England will save us from ideology. What I have noticed about individualism in the US American

rewriting of a text also needs to be elaborated with respect to English texts. There is always a struggle over the meaning of terms and what effects they have within regimes of truth (Parker and Burman, 1993). We could, for example, see 'discursive psychology' as part of a counter discourse which embeds psychological processes in culture and politics, but it could also be taken and absorbed by mainstream psychology to make the discipline all the more resilient and adept at deflecting critique.

The direction of 'analysis'

Discourse analysis is part of a distinct practice of method that now needs to stretch back to the process of 'data-gathering' and stretch forward to the process of 'data-representation'. In this way we start to connect with some of the concerns of action research (Goodley and Parker, 2000). We need to take care, however, to ensure that 'action' here is drawn conceptually closer to 'practice', and away from appeals to 'experience' and 'empowerment' that are mobilised in much Latin American 'liberation psychology' and 'participant action research' (Jiménez-Domínguez, 1996). One way discourse analysis is 'frozen' is through it operating as a procedure of 'analysis', as if a text could be selected and discourse analysis 'applied' to it independently of specific questions, and as if the process of 're-presentation' of the text could proceed independently of specific answers. This is not only a question of what we put into a text as an actual or supposed author but also what a reader gets out of a text.

This does not mean that discourse analysts should take up the position of 'reader reception theorists' in literary theory however (e.g., Iser, 1978). The notion of 'reader reception' invites us back into a cognitivist notion of the individual as having some sort of interpretative paraphernalia inside their heads that helps them to decode what was happening around them. It also presupposes that there could be a position for a reader that was free of discourse, and that this independent reader would be able to analyse what was going on in the text from an objective standpoint (Eagleton, 1983). Discourse analysts looking to literary theory will find other descriptions in Barthes (1977) work of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts, of different kinds of discourse that either seem closed and only able to be read or seem open to be *written* as well as read, open to be *changed*. Readerly texts – psychology textbooks, for example – only allow the reader to reproduce them. Writerly texts are open to the reader to participate and transform the meanings that are offered. Some of the ideas from the tradition of 'narrative therapy' may be useful in this respect (Monk et al., 1997; Parker, 1999c).

First, what if we worked discursively right from the *beginning* of the research? Would it be possible, for example, to ask questions which opened up contradictions and possibilities rather than closed things into collections of themes. The 'questioning' procedure of Michael White (1988) is one way of 'deconstructing' the categories employed in a conversation, in his case a therapeutic conversation. Would it be possible to take that process of questioning up, though not necessarily with therapeutic intent, in order to work with people as participants rather than subjects? Here there is also a question about how 'deconstruction' can be useful. White's work is part of a movement of radical questioning of the way therapy too often locates pathology inside individuals and then turns to individual 'experience' of that pathology as the locus of the treatment. Narrative, or 'discursive' therapy, thus treats the language of pathology as precisely what must be attended to, and the questioning procedure aims to 'externalise' the problem, to locate the pathology as a property of discourse (Monk et al., 1997).

Second, what if we worked discursively right to the *end* of the research? Would it be possible, for example, to bring participants into the analysis of discourse rather than treating texts as abstracted systems of meaning, a procedure warranted by the so-called 'death of the author' in literary theory? How can we produce 'writerly' texts, texts that are accessible and useful to people as part of a process of changing rather than simply representing the world? Would it be possible to work with people who speak to us and help them to 're-author' their own texts? The challenge here is to work the White (1988) questioning procedure into something that takes that 're-authoring' to the point where our research participants are able to develop their own forms of theoretical repositioning in relation to the text. The task is precisely to elaborate new forms of discursive practice instead of retreating once again into the dead end of individual experience.

Discursive practice would then need to comprise the following four aspects. First, discourse analysis should be considered as movement rather than a fixed method, a 'sensitivity to language' that is betrayed if it is reduced to a series of steps. This is something that Potter and Wetherell (1987) have always argued and something that still needs to be taken seriously by those who think they are more 'radical' than them. Second, discourse needs to be considered as part of the problem rather than as automatically a solution to the problems of traditional psychology. To take account of this we need to see representational practices as embedded in other practices such that analysis of one bit of

text entails analysis of the texts that provide its conditions of possibility. The analysis offered by Easthope (1999) is one attempt to do this in a way that is relevant to the problems we face in psychology today. Third, the study of discursive practice is always itself historically embedded, something that can be captured in the notion that capitalism is 'textual', trapped in a tension between change, evoked in the phrase 'all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 1965, p. 37), and the fixity of commodification and reification. This, of course, opens up possibilities for movement as well as closes down the free play of meaning. Here recent work on the nature of language in contemporary capitalism needs to be taken up and elaborated (e.g., Chouliarki and Fairclough, 1999). Fourth, discourse analysis is always already also something that is carried out *outside* academic institutions, and it reflects, refracts, replaces modes of reading that already take place in culture. Here we learn from some of the forms of action research that has looked to political action as the key site of psychological processes. Our task then is to reframe and rework discourse analysis so that it is also the analysis of action and change (Burman et al., 1996; Goodley and Parker, 2000). What we then learn from the debates about 'discursive practice', and the way the notion has operated as a critique of direct appeals to individual experience, is that it is not enough to engage in 'action' without a good deal of theoretical analysis of what the conditions of possibility are for any form of action to take place.

Conclusion

Discourse analysis has become a 'method' in psychology, but this very success threatens to turn a once radical alternative into something adapted to prevailing ideological conditions in the discipline. An attention to those conditions of possibility and to the direction of analysis is necessary if work on discourse research is to maintain itself as a counter-discourse within the broader field of qualitative research and to link with action as a form of practice in critical psychology.

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