

Burman, E. and Parker, I. (eds) (1993) *Discourse Analytic Research: Repertoires and Readings of Texts in Action*. London: Routledge.

Chapter 6

Autobiography and change: rhetoric and authenticity of ‘Gothic’ style

[pp. 94-113]

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a teenager’s desire to identify with a tribe - and to follow religiously its dress code - is entirely normal.

(Today 7 July 1990)

In this chapter, I shall address two related issues: first is the issue of why some young people join subcultures; the second is that of the significance or meaning of subcultural style. Two sorts of answers to these questions have been given: one sociological and the other social psychological. I shall outline each of these briefly before turning to a discourse analysis approach to these issues.

TWO READINGS OF YOUTH SUBCULTURES AND STYLE

The sociological accounts of youth subcultures which proliferated in the late 1970s and early 1980s were concerned with the socio-structural conditions and class contradictions that created problems for male, white, working-class youth. Subcultural style was interpreted as a collective response to these shared problems because it represented a form of symbolic resistance to dominant (middle-class) cultural values whilst defending or reclaiming traditional working-class values. The challenge was symbolic because it did not constitute an actual or successful solution to subordination. From this perspective, joining a subculture can be regarded as a solution to socio-structural problems (see Brake, 1985; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).

The emphasis in the social psychological perspective is on identity and its benefits for individuals. Within this approach, it is assumed that subcultures provide a pool of available resources [95] which particular individuals or groups can draw upon in their attempt to make sense of their own specific situation and construct a viable identity (Brake, 1985; Murdock, 1974). The need for a viable identity is particularly acute during adolescence because physical, relational and social changes during this period, together with widening social and political interests, disturb the previously established ‘self-system’ or the system of categories which are used to define the self (Palmonari *et al.*, 1984). That is, there is a need to redefine ‘who I am’. The process of joining a group is conceptualized as one of cognitive self-definition through the internalization of, in this case, subcultural category. The result of this process is that ‘the group is cognitively represented within the mind of the individual member’

(Turner *et al.*, 1987: 101). Once self-defined, individuals are said to employ a process of self-stereotyping through which they adopt criterial attributes of that category (cf. Turner, 1982; Turner *et al.*, 1987). According to this perspective, the local 'visibility' of a particular subculture will be an important factor in joining, since others may provide models or exert influence over the individual in their decision to join (cf. Widdicombe, 1988).

Both these accounts, however, overlook the important issue of how members themselves account for the significance and meaning of the subculture, its style, and their membership. In the sociological account, the meaning of subcultures and style is regarded as a 'hidden code' which can be recovered through semiotic and structural analysis, drawing upon the conceptual tools of Marxism, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and Althusser (Cohen, 1980).¹ Within the social psychological account, style is regarded merely as signifying membership and identity; the meaning of social identities is rarely addressed explicitly (cf. Condor, 1989). This is partly because the more interesting questions from this perspective are to do with the process of joining and the behavioural and cognitive consequences of membership on those occasions when it is salient to the individuals concerned. These processes are investigated experimentally or through the statistical analysis of questionnaire or interview responses according to theoretically derived hypotheses. Nevertheless, '[t]he nagging sense here is that these lives, selves and identities do not always coincide with what they are supposed to stand for' (Cohen, 1980: xviii). [96]

A THIRD APPROACH: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The discourse analysis approach I adopt involves asking questions that differ from those outlined earlier because the focus is different: the site of investigation here is not the social structure, style, nor the individual, but language. It therefore entails collecting accounts by talking to people or generating a pool of, say, media articles about subcultures. The question, 'Why do some young people join subcultures?' is replaced in my research by a concern with autobiographical accounts of change to unconventional appearance. Instead of asking what (cognitive) processes underlie membership and its adoption, I am concerned with how the significance of change constituted within accounts, and with what effects. I am also concerned with how the meaning of style is negotiated within the context of these accounts.

The discourse analysis approach is concerned with different issues because its assumptions differ from those more usually adopted. Traditionally, talk is *about* experiences, identities and mental states; and language is regarded merely as a tool for gaining access to this underlying reality. By contrast, the discourse analysis perspective assumes that experiences, selves and social and psychological phenomena are constituted in and through language; and that their meanings are inseparable from the ways they are described within the interactional context (Garfinkel, 1967; Potter and Wetherell, 1987: see also Gergen and Davis, 1985; Shotter and Gergen, 1989). Thus, it is assumed that lives, selves and experiences and their significance are constructed through culturally available resources and practices.

These cultural or linguistic resources are regarded as sets of shared meanings, statements, ideas, and so on which may contain contrary themes. An important point is

that these cultural resources are not pre-given, fixed or finite and they can only be understood in and through their use, that is, in practice. The term 'practice' is appropriate because it indicates that language is a form of social activity; utterances do things and language or talk thus has an essential action-orientation (cf. Austin, 1962; Sacks lectures, 1964-1972; Wittgenstein, 1953). Moreover, the term suggests some form of social organization and it is assumed that talk is socially organized in at least two ways. First, it is sequentially organized (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) and the sequential unfolding of descriptions is often significant for our understanding of what is said. Second, talk is [97] organized according to culturally available but tacit 'reasoning procedures' which seem to inform speakers' use of resources such as specific words, phrases or illustrative examples. That is, utterances seem to display a sensitivity to the kinds of inferences that are thereby made available, and others that are thereby avoided. Often, therefore, considering what is not said but could be said can be useful as a preliminary step in the analysis. It is important to stress, since the terminology is potentially confusing, that these 'reasoning procedures' are not located in people's heads as underlying cognitive or information processes. They are, instead, dynamic and pragmatic aspects of language use.²

ANALYSIS

Strategies

There are two features of the analytic strategy I adopt. First, is simply developing a sensitivity to the way in which language is used. Schenkein (1978) refers to this as a certain 'analytic mentality' in so far as it involves the employment of a range of intuitive skills and a way of looking at materials. Although these skills are tacit and do not lend themselves to procedural description, they are not mysterious and can be developed through practice and example (see Wooffitt, 1990; Wootton, 1989 for more detailed discussion). The second feature relates to the inferential and interactional aspects of talk. Following Paul Drew (1987), I find it useful to regard the ways things are said as a solution to a problem. The analyst's task is therefore to identify the problem and how what is said constitutes a solution. In other words, the analyst can examine the materials with a view to answering three (related) questions: What interactional business is being attended to? How do speakers demonstrate their orientation to this business? What strategies and procedures seem to inform this orientation? (cf. Wooffitt, 1990).

To summarize, the object of analysis is to explicate the culturally available resources and tacit reasoning procedures which seem to inform what is said, and to identify the nature of the interactional tasks thereby addressed.

Background

To illustrate this approach I shall present and analyse two extracts [98] from autobiographical accounts given by Tony and Lisa whose appearance could be classified as 'gothic': black clothes, leatherjackets, dramatic eye make-up and long black hair. These extracts are taken from one of a series of discussions conducted with people who 'looked different' in various locations in London and Reading Rock Festival during

September 1989 by Rob Wooffitt and myself. The discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

In these extracts, Tony and Lisa describe the period in their lives when they began to change from a 'conventional' to an unconventional appearance. I will argue that the ways that their descriptions are formulated addresses a very sensitive issue. In describing change to unconventional appearance, hearers are likely to draw inferences as to what motivated that change. One obvious inference is that speakers were copying others or deliberately conforming to a particular image. This inference is perhaps especially likely given two features of their description; change took place during adolescence and it was unconventional in nature. Such reasons or motivation for change might be regarded as problematic, however, in so far as they can be used to index the shallowness of that change.

The object of this analysis is to furnish an appreciation of the ways in which the speakers orient to and negotiate this problem. Specifically, I shall identify three types of resources which are used. They concern: negotiating the existence and potential influence of others; descriptions of these potentially relevant others; and the ways that appearance is characterized as an expression of the true self.

Negotiating the existence and potential influence of others

In the following extract Tony and Lisa discuss the origins of their change to unconventional clothing ((.) indicates a pause in speech)

(Ex. 1) [1989; 14: p.1] 17A:3G:2M/F

- 1 *Sue:* was there a time when you wore conventional
2 clothing (.) or high street fashions?
3 *Tony:* when I was about um up till about the age of
4 fifteen I just wore conventional clothes but I
5 didn't listen to conventional music
6 *Lisa:* yeah I wore I wore my I sort of started wearing
7 like unconventional clothes when I was about
8 thirteen and like it took me a whole hour to put
9 this long black skirt on and walk down the street [99]
10 see what I mean it took me a long time That's
11 when I started. I didn't know anybody else
12 dressed in black or anything I just did it purely
13 for myself
(a few lines omitted)
14 *Lisa:* I didn't know anybody at all. I came from a
15 really tiny sort of really small little village
16 and like everything I did came under close
17 scrutiny. It wasn't until I was about fifteen
18 that I realized there was like loads of other
19 people who sort of dressed the same way as I did
20 or sort of the same ways things like that
21 *Tony:* yeah cos I sort of started wearing make up and I

22 didn't even know about other people wearing it. I
23 started wearing it and putting on these black
24 clothes and things like that and then I went into
25 town one week cos like I was considered really
26 freaky by everybody. All these people who lived
27 on this estate hadn't ever seen anybody like me
28 before. I went to this town one evening and
29 walked by this pub and I saw loads of people with
30 like hair spiked up and things like that and they
31 were a lot more way out than me even though I was
32 considered the biggest freak of the area but they
33 were a lot more way out than me. I was overawed
34 by the fact that there was other people who
35 actually dressed differently to what everybody
36 else wears round the area

Tony and Lisa both identify a point in their lives when they began to change their appearance in unconventional ways, and they describe the nature of change. Their accounts, however, entail more than just a description of these changes; the speakers also refer directly and indirectly to the existence of others similarly dressed.

First, accounts of the 'what' and 'when' of change are formulated in the context of denying knowledge of others similarly attired, although this latter information is not directly relevant to the question. Thus, Lisa states that she 'started wearing like unconventional clothes when I was about thirteen ... I didn't know anybody else dressed in black or anything' (lines 6-12). Similarly, Tony says that I sort of started wearing make up and I didn't even know about [100] other people wearing it ...' (lines 21-2). As I said earlier, when young people describe change to an unconventional appearance, hearers may draw negative inferences regarding the reasons for that change. For example, they may infer that the speakers were copying or influenced by others, or conforming to a particular image. In order for such inferences to constitute a legitimate reason for change, however, one needs to have some knowledge of the existence of unconventional others, and of the attributes that render them unconventional. Formulating change in the context of denying knowledge of potentially relevant others thus has three effects: (i) it directly denies the likely assumption that Tony and Lisa changed their appearance to conform to a particular image; (ji) it acknowledges the existence of potentially relevant others; (iii) it implicitly acknowledges that their existence could, in other circumstances, provide a reasonable explanation for change.

Second, both Tony and Lisa provide an account of an occasion on which they became aware of the existence of potentially relevant others. These accounts clearly establish the temporal order of events; the origins of change occurred prior to the discovery of similarly alternative others, even though these others did exist at the time. Lisa, for example, states that she began changing her appearance at about the age of thirteen although 'it wasn't until I was about fifteen that I realized there was like loads of other people who sort of dressed the same way as I did' (lines 17-19). Tony states that he started changing his appearance and *then* he 'went to this town one evening and walked by this pub and saw loads of people with like hair spiked up ...' (lines 28-30). His

reaction to this discovery further confirms the temporal order in so far as he was 'overawed by the fact that there was other people who actually dressed differently ...' (lines 33-5). In addition, it is through these descriptions that speakers are able to account for their current knowledge of the existence of similarly alternative others whilst simultaneously warranting their denial that it can be used to explain their own change to unconventional appearance.

Third, both speakers refer to the locale in which they grew up and in which change took place. First, Lisa describes the difficulty she experienced in presenting herself publicly in her 'long black skirt'. She says: 'It took me a whole hour to [put the skirt on] and walk down the street ... it took me a long time' (lines 8-10). Since the action of putting on a skirt does not normally take a 'whole hour', and since the action of walking down the street in an article of [101] clothing is not in itself difficult, we can infer that the difficulty lies in the anticipation of others' reactions. This difficulty is rendered more comprehensible in the context of Lisa's next reference to the locale. She says that 'I came from a really tiny sort of really small little village and like everything I did came under close scrutiny' (lines 14-17). This description portrays an image of a small community in which everyone knows everyone else and is interested in and knowledgeable about their business (hence 'everything I did came under close scrutiny'). Such places are not normally associated with trend-setting or style consciousness, and neither do they tend to have the retail outlets to support alternative style. Moreover, the strong sense of community and scrutiny gives the impression of a place in which conformity is rife; where, moreover, pressures to conform would normally tend to sanction against nonconformity. Lisa's description of her immediate locale at the time of change therefore further warrants her claim that there were no models around to influence her.

Tony refers to the inhabitants of the estate on which he lived at the time of change. He says that 'I was considered really freaky by everybody. All these people who lived on this estate hadn't ever seen anybody like me before' (lines 25-8). The first point to notice about this utterance is its sequential position in the account. That is, its insertion between two beginnings of his description of how he came to realize that there were others ('I went to this town ... on lines 24-5 and line 28), indicates its significance for that story. The second point is that Tony's difference is described from the perspective of the estate dwellers: they considered him 'freaky' (because) they had not seen anyone like him before. The third point is that in his description of their reaction to his appearance, Tony uses the extreme case formulations, 'everybody' and 'ever seen anybody like me before'. These formulations make the strongest possible case for, and hence justify, the claim with which they are associated (Pomerantz, 1986). Drawing upon these observations, one effect of characterizing their reaction as he does is to indicate their (and by implication his own) naivety as regards the existence of nonconformist others and the absence of such others in the vicinity. It hence provides the relevant background to his later account in so far as it emphasizes that their existence was something he had to discover. The use of extreme case formulations clearly legitimates his denial of knowledge of potentially influential others.

To summarize, in describing the origins of change to unconventional appearance, Tony and Lisa are faced with a problem: the existence of alternative others could warrant the assumption that change [102] was in some way influenced by or because of them.

They negotiate this problem by suggesting that, whilst the presence of others might provide an adequate explanation for change in other circumstances, it is not appropriate in their cases. They do so by indicating their lack of awareness of potentially relevant others in three ways: through an explicit denial of such knowledge; through providing an account of how they later came to realize the existence of these others; and through their description of the 'naivety' of the locale in which change took place. The credibility of their accounts is further enhanced by the ways in which the potentially influential others are described.

The nature of the relevant others

In the extract above, Tony makes three references to 'unconventional' and hence potentially relevant others. First, he says that at the time he began changing his appearance, he was not aware of others (men) who wore make-up. He later describes an observation of a group of people whose appearance made him realize the existence of similarly unconventional others. He says that he saw 'loads of people with like hair spiked up and things like that' (lines 29-30). There is an interesting but implicit contrast between those features of his own and of others' appearance that suggest nonconformity. Their nonconformity is indicated by their hairstyle, his by wearing make-up; moreover, he describes wearing black clothes and 'things like that', but makes no direct reference to the others' clothing.

Tony's second reference to the others is made in the context of a direct comparison between his own appearance and theirs: 'they were a lot more way out than me' (lines 32-3). He thus suggests that whilst the others are also unconventional, there is a difference in the degree to which he and they are unconventional.

Tony's third reference to potentially relevant others occurs when he describes his reaction to the discovery that others also ascribed to an unconventional appearance. He states that 'I was overawed by the fact that there was other people who actually dressed differently to what everybody else wears round the area' (lines 33-6). An alternative, more succinct, and equally plausible way of formulating his reaction might be that 'I was overawed by the fact that there were other people who also dressed differently'. Such a description would flow more directly from his previous comparison between [103] his and their 'freakiness'. Instead, however, Tony compares their appearance with 'what everybody else wears round the area'.

The point is that each reference to these unconventional others avoids focusing upon or emphasizing similarity between his own appearance and theirs. That is, the first reference to the others implies that any similarity between himself and these others lies in the fact that they appear unconventional, and not in the nature of that unconventionality. His second reference limits or undermines the extent of the similarity between himself and the others entailed by nonconformity. Finally, the reference to 'what everybody else wears' establishes a standard or norm according to which they deviate. The implication is that he also deviates, but not necessarily in the same way. It is proposed that Tony's references to alternative others displays a sensitivity to the potential reaction of disbelief to a high degree of coincidence: for if what he discovered were people who dressed exactly the same as himself the credibility of his earlier denial of knowledge of similar others, and hence the absence of influence, would have been undermined. Lisa similarly

appears to display such sensitivity when she corrects her initial statement that she realized there were ‘other people who sort of dressed *the same way*’ (line 19) to one that is more vague and therefore makes available less strong inferences as to the degree of similarity: ‘sort of the same ways things like that’ (line 20).

There is a further point. In denying knowledge of similarly dressed others, speakers refer to collections of others or ‘loads of people’ whose appearance is characterized by black clothes, spiked-up hair and so on. The features that the speakers describe make available, in this context, particular category labels or terms; namely, goths or punks (cf. Sacks, 1972). Building upon this observation, it seems that speakers’ avoidance of the inference that they were conforming to a particular image could be accomplished in a more straightforward manner by denying explicitly that they were aware of the existence of punk or gothic subcultures. It is interesting therefore that they do not employ such labels.

Wooffitt (1992) suggests that being able to name some state of affairs or an object implies having knowledge about them, such that one can recognize what counts as that object or state of affairs. Moreover, naming suggests a commitment to the in-principle existence of the object so named, and can be taken as an indication of interest in the phenomenon. Drawing upon these observations, had Tony or Lisa named the relevant others as gothics or punks, [104] we might infer that they were able at the time to recognize these others as members and thus that they had the appropriate criterial knowledge of what counts as gothic or punk. We might, moreover, infer some interest in those subcultures. The availability of such inferences would, however, undermine their implicit claim that they were not motivated by a desire to conform to a particular image at the time.

To summarize, both speakers describe an encounter with similarly non-conventional others. In describing these others they display a sensitivity to the kind of incredulous reaction that might greet the coincidence of sameness or their ability to name these others as, say, gothic. Moreover, that the others are not named deflects the inference that change has to do with more than appearance; that, in other words, it might have something to do with their interest in subcultural forms.

Appearance as an expression of true self

I have suggested that descriptions of change to unconventional appearance are designed to avoid the inference that change was motivated by a desire to copy others or to conform to a particular image. A third means of avoiding these negative inferences is the provision of an alternative reason for changing appearance. In extract (1) (pages 98-9), Lisa says ‘I just did it purely for myself (lines 12-13). In the following extract, which occurs a few lines later in the interview transcript, Tony also provides a reason for change. He does so in the context of responding to my request for an autobiographical account of change.

(Ex. 2) [1989; 14: p.2] 17A:3G:2M/F

- 1 *Tony:* I mean ever since I started wearing clothes which I
- 2 chose then they may be conventional clothes but I
- 3 probably wear them in a strange way you know in a
- 4 strange mixture so they always so I always you know

5 look strange to people anyway even if I was wearing
6 conventional clothes and it went on really
7 cos feeling different to everybody else
8 and what I'm wearing is a way of expressing
9 the isolation really you know
10 if if you felt isolated from everybody else
11 then once you get to the age where you can choose [105]
12 for yourself then I would choose to wear clothes
13 where I could show that I felt differently
14 to everybody else around me
15 so that's how I started doing it

In this extract, Tony's statement, 'ever since I started wearing clothes which I chose' (lines 1-2), could constitute a perfectly adequate account of change. It seems reasonable that change to unconventional appearance comes with one's ability to choose one's clothes rather than, say, wearing those provided by one's parents. What is interesting about Tony's utterance is that he does not terminate his description at this point. Instead he goes on to say that 'they may be conventional clothes but ... I always look strange to people anyway' (lines 2-5). He simultaneously switches from the past to the present tense, from 'ever since' and 'I started' to 'they may be'. This switch suggests two things. First, that there is something problematic about accounting for change in terms of choice of clothing, and that what follows his initial statement constitutes an attempt to avoid this problem. Second, it suggests that what he says is not only applicable to the past, or to the period of change, it is also relevant to the present. It is worth examining Tony's utterance in some detail in order to identify the nature of the problem, and how what follows constitutes a solution to that problem.

There are three observations relevant to Tony's reformulated account. First, he says that '*they may be* conventional clothes' and later, acknowledging that his present appearance is not conventional, that '*even if I was* wearing conventional clothes' he would still appear strange to other people. In other words, they would regard him as strange in conventional and in unconventional clothing. Second, Tony provides an explanation for why this might be so. He says: 'I probably wear them in a strange way ... in a strange mixture ... so I always look strange to people anyway.' Third, this explanation is formulated as *probable* and therefore not necessarily the case. There seem to be several functional effects of the way that this description is formulated. First, in relation to the first observation, the implication is that inferences regarding Tony's strangeness are not derived from his attire and he thereby undermines its significance. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that normally people who wear conventional clothing do not look strange. Tony's strangeness is therefore something that warrants an explanation. Thus, his [106] provision of an explanation displays a sensitivity to and addresses possible incredulous reactions whilst maintaining the point that the type of clothing is not in itself significant. This is the second functional effect of his description. The remaining effects are derived from the way that the explanation is qualified as *probable*. Comparing this with the plausible alternative, 'I wear them in a strange way, we can suggest two functional effects of the qualified statement. First, it suggests that he derives the notion of strangeness from others' reactions. (Similarly, in

lines 4-5, he says that 'I always look strange to people anyway'). Constructing strangeness from others' perspective orients to the reality of his claim. Second, this construction avoids the inference that the way he wore conventional clothes was a deliberate or motivated attempt on his part to appear strange.

I said above that Tony's reformulated account of change appears designed to overcome problematic inferences made available in the initial utterance, 'ever since I started wearing clothes which I chose' (lines 1-2). It is worth, therefore, comparing the two accounts of change. First, the initial statement suggests the significance of clothing; by contrast Tony's reformulation undermines the significance of clothing. Second, to choose something implies a conscious and hence deliberate decision on his part; it implies that change in his appearance was motivated specifically by a desire to look different or strange. This inference is not made available in his reformulation. At this point we are presented with a puzzle: if Tony's strangeness is not derived from his appearance, nor a deliberate attempt to appear so, what is it that accounts for his strangeness, and for his adoption of unconventional clothing? A solution to this puzzle is provided in the following part of this extract.

Tony says: 'cos feeling different to everybody else and what I'm wearing is a way of expressing the isolation' (lines 7-9). Thus, he suggests that his strangeness is derived from a feeling of difference, and this feeling is presented as a fact about himself. That it is a 'feeling' implies something more deep-rooted than, say, a belief that one is different. Moreover, formulating this feeling of difference in contrast to 'everybody else' and later referring to it as 'the isolation', conveys the *individual* nature of this difference; it is not shared with others. The implication is that Tony's strangeness is rooted in an inherent feeling of difference; it is not attributable to his unconventional appearance, nor to an intentional choice to be different. [107]

In addition, Tony provides an alternative means of understanding the significance of his clothing. He says that 'what I'm wearing is a way of expressing the isolation really' (lines 8-9). Thus, he implies that his clothing is of significance merely as a vehicle of expression. Furthermore, that it is 'a way' suggests that there are potentially other vehicles of expression available. Thus, there is nothing intrinsically important about these clothes. The idea that clothing is merely a vehicle for expressing deeper feelings is reaffirmed in the final part of this extract in which Tony presents us with a hypothetical scenario: 'if you felt isolated from everybody else then once you get to the age where you can choose for yourself then ...' (lines 10-12). Grammatically, this statement should be continued in hypothetical terms: 'you would choose ...' and so on. Instead, however, the scenario is concluded with reference to his own case and hence becomes no longer hypothetical. Thus, Tony himself 'would choose to wear clothes where I could show that I felt differently to everybody else around me' (lines 12-14). One effect of this switch is an implicit contrast between the hypothetical or general case and his own. The implication is that given a feeling of difference, some would not choose to wear unconventional clothes; instead they would try to hide their intrinsic difference. Tony, however, does not try to hide his difference. It is proposed that, through this contrast, he constructs an image of himself as, to coin Potter and colleagues' (1984) term, an 'honest soul' in so far as he lets his underlying feelings, his 'true self, shine through. It is worth noting, moreover, that in contrast to his initial statement 'ever since I started wearing clothes which I chose' (lines 1-2), this later statement implies that choice is not to do with

clothing *per se*, but to do with whether you allow your feelings to be manifested through clothing. Since ‘that’s how I started doing it’ (wearing unconventional clothing) he implies that his change in appearance was genuinely motivated by a desire to express his true feelings and self; his style is therefore authentic.

Summary of analysis

In this analysis, I have outlined three resources upon which speakers drew in their autobiographical accounts of change to unconventional appearance. First, in these accounts, change occurs in the absence of influence by relevant others. Second, these others are not named and their similarity to the speakers is limited. Finally, [108] change is motivated by a true self which is independent of appearance, but which is expressed through appearance. I have suggested that these descriptive sequences are solutions to a problem of authenticity. That is, they are designed to address potential and negative inferences that change is motivated by a desire to conform to a particular image, or merely to copy others, and is hence insincere.

CLAIMS AND QUALIFICATIONS

Before drawing any conclusions from this research, it is useful to address some important methodological issues. It may be objected that I have presented an interpretation of two selected extracts taken from a single group discussion. I have given no indication of the frequency of the phenomena I discuss, nor have I paid any attention to the representativeness of my ‘sample’ (neither subjects nor material). Finally, since I have paid no attention to the context in which the ‘data’ were collected, how can I tell that the accounts are not peculiar to the circumstances in which they were collected, or to the interviewer who collected them? An important implication of these objections is that I can make no general claims on the basis of my analysis either about autobiographical accounts, or about the factors underlying membership of subcultures.

In a sense, these kinds of objections are misplaced: my concern was with how these autobiographies were constructed, with the resources used, and the functions thereby served. It was not my aim to identify how often these resources were used nor to address underlying causal factors. Nevertheless, it is worth addressing them directly because they are precisely the kinds of reactions with which discourse analyses are likely to be greeted. In addition, general, causal statements are often more immediately persuasive than those about specific cases.³

My first point relates to concerns over the context-specificity of my findings. It seems unlikely that the resources I observed were generated solely by my presence; it is more useful to regard them as culturally available resources which speakers drew upon in my presence. Therefore, the research situation can be regarded as a context in which resources and practices are elicited or used, rather than created (see also Potter and Mulkay, 1985). Moreover, there seems no good reason to suppose that the resources observed are solely a product of the interview situation. Any situation can be described in a variety of ways and it seems unlikely, especially [109] given its roots in the realm of traditional social science discourse, that it is the characterization, ‘interview situation’, that is of relevance to the speakers.

Second, since I present all the material I analyse, you do not have to take my interpretations on trust; you can inspect the relevant materials to see for yourselves if my observations seem valid. Furthermore, from the analysts' point of view, knowing that an audience will be able to consult the material acts as a powerful constraint upon careless or unjustified observations (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

My third point is that focusing the analysis on what is said ensures that it answers to the details of actual incidents and events (in so far as these accounts are themselves events). Moreover, it can be argued that the act of changing or adopting certain features of appearance cannot be extricated from the meanings or interpretations given to that change; such meanings are constructed and negotiated in the back-and-forth flow of discussion. It is therefore appropriate to study change and its meaning in the interactional context in which both are constructed. It is worth briefly contrasting this with the more orthodox social psychological approach where, in order to establish the broad empirical laws which are commonly the goal of such work, researchers must isolate processes from the very context that gives meaning to the phenomena in which they are interested. In addition, since research is usually led by theoretically derived hypotheses, rather than observation, there is always the possibility that one is investigating fictions of one's own making (Parker and Shoter, 1990).

One advantage of the discourse analysis approach is therefore that the focus is on the ways that people themselves account for the significance of their style. A second advantage is that, because it entails talking to people, it goes some way towards giving a voice to those hitherto silenced and in this sense helps 'empower' the subjects of traditional social science research (cf. Bhavanni, 1990). There is, however, a certain irony in this approach and its objectives. In an important sense the participants themselves are irrelevant because it is the language they speak that is the site of investigation. I have taken apart what was said, subjected it to detailed examination, justified doing so with reference to often dense theoretical arguments, and presented it to a select audience; I have not handed back to my participants what they said even in an interpreted form. (This is partly a problem of doing research with passers-by.) [110]

Moreover, there is a danger that analytic 'expertise' merely replaces scientific expertise as the means of distancing researcher and researched. It is therefore questionable whether the 'democratic' underpinnings of this approach can ever be fully realized in practice (see Deborah Marks Chapter 8, this volume, for a discussion of this problem). On the other hand, that we are 'experts' can be used to legitimate the discussion and practice of discourse analysis and related issues within the academic institutions in which we are based. There are no easy solutions to such dilemmas, but it is worth recognizing them.

Having said all this, my analysis has highlighted an alternative construction of the meaning of style to that found in the social psychological and sociological accounts outlined earlier. The analysis therefore raises wider issues in so far as it exposes the one-sidedness of the social-science accounts of subcultures and style (which have also filtered into lay discourse). It thereby renders problematic the simplicity of these accounts, and the way that they neglect the issue of authenticity. This claim deserves some justification. In the analysis, two 'readings' of style were manifested. On the one hand, style signifies group membership and conformity; and on the other it is an expression of individuality and the true self. The first reading, which both speakers reject in their own cases,

resonates with the social psychological account in so far as joining a subculture is simply a matter of adopting certain criterial attributes of the category (copying others, conforming to a particular image), and redefining the self cognitively as a member. Moreover, when situationally salient, members are said to become depersonalized or to lose their individuality, becoming instead an exemplar of that collective identity (cf. Turner *et al*, 1987).

The analysis presented here suggests that this reading of membership and style is problematic precisely because it implies conformity and the loss of individuality and this is regarded as inauthentic. Furthermore, Rob Wooffitt and I showed how, on some occasions, this type of account is actually used as a resource to undermine some members of subcultures (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). For example, later in the interview, Tony says that the hard-core punks 'really hate the goths cos like they just say oh it's just image you know it's so image orientated and that's all it is it's really shallow'. By contrast, Tony's authenticity is warranted by the second reading of style since change was motivated by a desire to be true to his intrinsically different self. It is this latter meaning [111] of style that is absent in the social psychological account, and hence it is one-sided.

I am not suggesting, however, that style is an individual matter of one or the other meaning; for each requires the other for its significance (cf. Billig *et al*, 1988). That is, we can read these accounts as a protest against a 'collective' reading of style only because the latter meaning is available and potentially relevant as a means by which to understand change. Furthermore, the 'social psychological' or collective identity version is *also* used as a resource by these speakers. For example, Tony says later in the discussion:

nobody wants to be a total individual, nobody wants to be so isolated from everybody else you know so gothic is a way of being quite individual but at least you have got a few people who might know what you mean.

Therefore, it seems more useful to regard style, its meanings and its implications as essentially a dilemma which perhaps reflects a wider, recurrent ideological dilemma of individuality versus collectivity that inheres in everyday experience and thinking (Billig *et al*, 1988). There is no easy solution, nor is one likely without a change in the nature of society and thinking. At present, therefore, it is more appropriate to consider the rhetorical processes of negotiation and argument as people deal with this and related dilemmas in everyday social existence. The analysis presented here illustrates one way in which this dilemma is negotiated in the autobiography of change.

NOTES

1 This is not an issue of which the sociologists are unaware. Hebdige, for example, concludes *Subculture - the Meaning of Style* (1979) by conceding that it is highly unlikely that the members of any subcultures would recognize themselves in his book. On the other hand, this is not regarded as a damning criticism of the approach for its utility does not reside in its resonance with subjective experience.

2 It is perhaps useful to situate this approach in relation to similar work. In common

with conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984), the analysis focuses on the ways that utterances are designed to perform specific activities; yet it is not as concerned with 'the technology of conversation' (Sacks, 1984: 413). In common with discourse analysis (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), the analysis concerns the concerns the constructive nature of language use; but I am not concerned with identifying interpretative repertoires *per se*. Finally, in common [112] with both these ethnomethodologically inspired approaches to the study of discourse, I am interested in the action-orientation of language.

3 It is important to emphasize, however, that the analysis of a specific case is by no means the only way of practising discourse analysis. Instead, one might identify common patterns, or descriptive sequences within a variety of accounts (see, for example, Drew, 1987; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). Alternatively, instead of analysing just a small section from this discussion, I could have considered how the intrinsic nature of difference is also developed in the context of an interest in the super-natural; or how issues of individuality *and* collectivity are addressed and negotiated in other parts of this and other discussions. The pursuit of a more wide-ranging analysis in the space permitted would, however, necessarily entail compromising the detail of the analysis presented here.

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