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Chapter 9

Against discursive imperialism, empiricism and constructionism: thirty-two problems with discourse analysis

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The ways in which discourse research can open up texts, and produce innovative analysis is evident from the preceding chapters, and we have already rehearsed advantages of the approach (Chapter I, this volume). In this chapter we turn to the disadvantages. Each of the contributors to this book has drawn attention to problems with the methods they adopted, and we will briefly review some of these before going on to outline some of the deeper dangers with the discourse analytic approach. The bulk of the chapter consists of criticisms of discourse analysis: we will outline problems that have been identified in current practice, problems in the framework as a whole, problems that flow from attempts to escape these issues, problems which arise, as a consequence, in teaching the approach and problems attending the wholesale application of the approach to everything. We will conclude with some questions about the way forward for discourse analysis.

FIRST PROBLEMS

The development of a newly arrived approach will meet, as a matter of course, objections from the host discipline, and the drawbacks to discourse analysis identified in the preceding chapters pick up some of the concerns of the mainstream in psychology. Six issues immediately emerge, and some of these will undoubtedly appear in criticisms of discourse analytic studies a researcher may produce.

Six problems of method

The first three problems are ones that will be relevant to most types of research currently carried out in psychology. (i) Discourse [156] analysis is, as Gill (Chapter 6, this volume) points out, very labour-intensive. The task of trawling through pages of interview transcript (not to mention the transcribing of the material in the first place if interviews or recorded discussions are used) is a tedious and time-consuming one. In this respect, discourse analysis, as with many other varieties of qualitative research is usually *more* difficult than positivist number crunching (Banister *et al.*, forthcoming). (ii) It is difficult to determine whether the different repertoires or discourses are present in the text as discrete phenomena, or whether the changes in context are responsible for changes in meaning. As Macnaghten (Chapter 4, this volume) points out, it is sometimes difficult to determine that *different* discourses are at work. Marshall and Raabe (Chapter 3, this volume) are also worried about the idea that we could imagine that we were simply 'letting discourses emerge'. Discourses are not

already there waiting to be found but emerge (as much through our work of reading as from the text). (iii) It is difficult to move from a specific text, from a particular usage, to a wider context (Macnaghten, Chapter 4, this volume), and it is frustrating to feel that, as Gill says, we cannot make broad empirical generalisations; there is thus a 'failure to theorize universal processes'. Widdicombe (Chapter 6, this volume) makes the related point that discourse analysts do not give any indication of the frequency of usage of rhetorical devices.

These concerns flowing from the standpoint of traditional psychology can be augmented by three problems that express the frustration of analysts wanting to do critical work, and wanting discourse analysis to be a critical approach. (iv) The analyst is often restricted, for practical reasons (having to fit a research project into a limited space or time), to the confines of the text. It is often the case, as Marshall and Raabe (Chapter 3, this volume) say, that there is often little opportunity for consideration of large-scale political consequences of the repertoires in the material being studied. While this could be seen simply as a problem of reductionism hitting social psychologists again (Billig, 1976), there are particular ironies, and issues to be confronted when the repertoires have been understood as having their source in the surrounding social and political context.

(v) The traditional complaint that discourse research does not provide a sufficiently rigorous methodology, in which the reader is satisfied that the analysis has produced the only possible reading, is mirrored in Stenner's (Chapter 7, this volume) complaint - that the analysis tempts us into trying to close the text to alternative readings. [157]

To introduce closure is to do violence to the variety of possible interpretations that could be given of the text when it comes to life in a discourse analytic reading (and to the variety of possible meanings which were present to those who once wrote or spoke the text).

(vi) There is a further problem here which follows from that of bringing about closure, which is to do with the power of the analyst to impose meanings upon another('s) text. Stenner (Chapter 7, this volume) argues that there are ethical problems in having 'power and control over other people's words', and Widdicombe (Chapter 6, this volume) raising the issue of experts legitimating discourse. These are issues of power and morality in research. As part of a movement in research that rejected the dehumanising methods of traditional psychology, it is right that discourse analysts should consider the power of the researcher as expert, and, as Marks (Chapter 8, this volume) argues, the exercise of power is all the worse when covered over by the illusion of 'democratisation' and the disingenuous fantasy of 'empowerment'. Are there more problems that threaten to enmire the researcher? There are.

Six further problems of method

We can supplement the six issues raised by the contributors to this book with a further six identified, in a commentary on discourse analytic research in Britain, by Figueroa and López (1991). These problems appear, at first glance, to be of a different type from those raised so far, for they look as if they could be solved (if the researcher did her research properly). This appearance, however, is deceptive since these are problems of another order that demand critical and challenging reflection on the parameters of the research framework and process. (vii) There is a serious danger of attempting to prevent the analysis of grammatical constructions from leading to an analysis of the social relations implied by discursive forms. Some varieties of

discourse analysis particularly that influenced by post-structuralism) do deliberately focus on social relations and 'subject positions' in discourse, but even here the temptation for the researcher is to simply identify rhetorical devices (or repertoires, or discourses), and the report of the analysis neglects the way that language always does things, always reproduces or transforms social relationships. The analysis threatens to avoid the 'performative' aspect of language (Bowers and Iwi, 1991). [158]

The production of different social relations in different discourses is overdetermined by the production of different social relations in different texts. (viii) Not only are there different social relations set up in different discourses, but different types of text work in different ways (they are accessible to different readers, and are read according to their form and context). There is a risk of taking what one imagines to be the 'method' of discourse analysis and applying it to all texts, without bearing these differences in text in mind. This would become particularly important if the framework was used to analyse texts which were not written or spoken (art, filmic or music texts). The fact that the discourse analytic strand of psychology has tended to focus on spoken or written texts (as reflected within this book) suggests that this is an issue that we are evading rather than resolving. (ix) A related problem here, and a symptom of confusion over competing styles of analysis, is that of using such terms as 'discourse', 'text', 'narrative', 'theme' and 'story' as if they were interchangeable. The meanings and uses of these particular terms need to be carefully specified. The next three problems concern deeper issues to do with the overarching analytic framework and commitments of the researcher.

(x) There is a danger of idealism, not only with reference to the problems of relativism and voluntarism (which we discuss below), but also in the attention only to language at the expense of an attention to the materiality of power. Although power is certainly (re)produced in discourse, power is also at work in the structural position of people when they are not speaking. Power relations endure when the text stops (Parker, 1992a). In part, the reluctance of psychologists to engage with the issue of power in a systematic way is a result of the focus historically of the discipline of psychology upon the individual. Other disciplines are left to deal with societal factors. (xi) There is a serious separate issue here in the isolation of psychology from other disciplines, and the attempt to confine analysis to psychology. This is manifested in the problem of 'competence', the reluctance to address the degree to which the cultural competence of the reader is necessary. Some awareness of cultural trends, of allusions to political and social developments, is essential for a discourse analysis to work. If you do not know what a text is referring to, you cannot produce a reading. (xii) The problem of the (lack of) cultural knowledge of a reader is echoed by another problem which is that of the position of the reader as researcher. Contributors to this book pointed to the problem of power [159] relations between researcher and researched and the ethics of imposing meanings, but in the process of reflection we also have to be aware of the way in which analysts are not only readers but also producers of discourse. They are implicated in the production of the forms of knowledge they describe. To offer a reading of a text is, in some manner or other, to reproduce or transform it.

And another two problems of method: interpretive vigilance and ambivalence

We hesitate to add these further two problems identified by Figueroa and López (1991), for they apply to the contributions in this book, largely as a result of our editorial decisions as to which material should be brought together here. These points,

however, should be included, for they pertain to the overall state of discourse analytic research (of which this book is but a symptom). (xiii) There is in several of the chapters collected here a sensitivity to the way language is gendered, but there is still a question as to how what Figueroa and López call the 'interpretive vigilance' exercised by feminists over readings could be extended to include an attention to other varieties of oppression. Despite the panic particularly in the United States) at present over 'political correctness' in language (Robbins, 1991), we still do believe that a moral/political sensitivity to the way oppression is maintained in language is required of discourse analysts (who are supposed to be aware of social relations in texts). (xiv) An ambivalence (and we use the word advisedly) over the use of psychoanalytic concepts is a problem that we have exhibited in this book. The book chapters collected here contain no explicit discussion of psychoanalysis. This is not so much of a problem because there are forms of discourse analysis appearing which use psychoanalysis (Walkerdine, 1988; Hollway, 1989; Parker, 1992a). Rather, the (more complex) problem here is that discourse analysts are pursuing their texts in a way that is suspicious of what is manifest, and looking to hidden meanings. We use terms, for example, like 'overdetermination' (to refer to the multiple causation of semantic phenomena) and at the same time seem wary of making the connections with psychoanalysis, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' par excellence.

The fourteen problems we have outlined so far have already touched on more fundamental problems than those pertaining to the refinement of technique. Now we want to pursue these deeper issues further. We will organize our reservations about discourse [160] analysis by using the notions of 'empiricism' and 'constructionism', for it appears to us that these terms are not in a type of opposition in which one is right and one is wrong, but are twin problems. The rush to constructionism that discourse analytic research hastens is not a solution to the empiricism of orthodox psychology (an empiricism that discourse analysts wish to escape).

EMPIRICISM AND CONSTRUCTIONISM

Psychology traditionally adopts an empiricist' approach to human action. This means not only that the discipline favours empirical work, and would like to check theories against the world (and we would agree that empirical studies are necessary), but rather it means that it adopts the view that the only knowledge worth having (or that it is *possible* to have) is derived from the prediction and control of (probabilistic) laws of behaviour. This refusal to acknowledge the role of theory in the production of knowledge (except when it is viewed as 'bias'), and a fetish with the collection of what it thinks are neutral facts, is empiricism. Harré makes the point that the refusal of empiricists to look deeper than the surface, and the compulsive measurement of what is going on at the surface, is closely connected to an inability to cope with uncertainty: 'The more powerful and speculative, the deeper do our theories purport to go in the exploration of nature, the less can we be certain of their correctness' (Harré, 1981: 9). The only way that psychologists can be certain about things is to cling to what they can measure. Empiricism is bound up with an obsession with truth. The shift to discourse analysis is ostensibly part of a movement away from empiricism towards social constructionism (Gergen, 1985). Social constructionism encompasses a range of approaches in psychology which share the view that our knowledge about ourselves is culturally bounded, and that different cultural (and subcultural) systems entail different psychologies, sometimes called 'indigenous psychologies' (Heelas and Lock, 1981). The traditional empiricist psychologists are

ridiculed for their preoccupation with truth, and constructionism instead looks to a more open analysis of the way psychology' changes from culture to culture, from historical period to historical period, and the way our knowledge of that psychology will necessarily also change. There is a profound connection between psychology and culture, and we have to take care not to misunderstand how that connection works and, in [161] particular, in which direction that connection operates. Empiricist psychologists might go so far as to acknowledge that psychological theory seeps out into culture and affects it (and this undoubtedly does happen), but social constructionists (and we would count ourselves among them on this point) would say that it is more the case that culture contains particular distinct types of psychology which seep into and mould the discipline of 'psychology'.

It is all the more paradoxical and disturbing, then, to find discourse analysis in practice slipping from social constructionism back to empiricism. We have two suggestions as to why this should be, but we want first to offer examples, describe some of the problems in discourse analysis, that are connected to this slide to empiricism. The set of problems here occurs in the teaching of the approach.

Back to empiricism: a further seven problems

By 'teaching' we mean all attempts to persuade someone that discourse analysis is a 'good thing' and to explain why. One of the worrying aspects of discourse analysis is the abstract character of the debates. The theoretical framework is not easy to understand, and as such it is open to the charge of elitism when we elaborate an analysis which defies simple exposition and which explicitly resists generalized description or easy 'how-to-do-it' rules. What we want to deal with here now is how discourse analysis can function in ways that are compatible with traditional empiricist research through our efforts to make it more accessible.

Reactions of those new to discourse analysis is broadly of two sorts, and their reactions constitute two further problems. (xv) For a first group without a political commitment or framework, the approach is either incomprehensible or irrelevant. The only way to deal with this confusion is for them to learn 'how to do it' and so slip into an alternative, and more dangerous position, in which they treat the analytic style as applicable to the deconstruction of anything and everything. (xvi) In contrast, a discourse framework holds an implicit appeal to a second group, those who already have some political sense and can recognize its relevance and scope. They know already that language contains and reinforces ideology. Those who are already politicised do discourse analysis without knowing that they have done it, or what it is that they have done. They have simply generated the analysis that makes sense to them in a fairly atheoretical, but politically informed, way. Then, to this second group, the [162] relativism ushered in by some aspects of reflexivity is frustrating since it supports the prevailing taboo on politics in the academe. It then becomes a route from politics to opportunism.

These two problems in the reactions of those we teach pale into insignificance when we turn to consider the problems we reproduce when we teach it. We will identify five problems here. (xvii) The first is that of treating it as a value-free technology. The easiest (and safest) way to teach discourse analysis is to present it as a technology, as a theory-free method or as a tool to do research. This encourages the view that discourse analysis can be 'applied', that it is an 'it' (Potter *et al.*, 1990). The project to 'identify' discourses not only sets up a divide between method and interpretation that flies in the face of an emphasis on reflexivity in the new wave of

anti-positivist psychology, but through this it also sets up a position of separation between the discourse analyst and the text. In our second-year undergraduate 'discourse analysis' self-directed practicals in Manchester, for example, students are told not to be reflexive, because they do a reflexive analysis in their 'interviewing' practical. We collude in the value-free technology game when we support such a bizarre diversion of work. In the activity of determining the scope of, and terms within, discourses we imagine that the boundaries which we are setting are necessary in order to make the work manageable. But in doing this we are also subscribing to a fantasy of non-involvement in the material we are analysing not dissimilar from the traditional methodologies we turned to discourse analysis to escape.

(xviii) We are also ineluctably caught in the trap of reifying the discourse. Further empiricist dangers lurk within discourse analysis's tendency towards abstraction. Depicting discourses as abstract and autonomous meaning systems that float above social practice, or that constitute social practice in mysterious ways, can work to remove discourse analysis from the realms of everyday life. It becomes an academic pursuit, and so we are continually subject to the charge of reifying discourse (Potter *et al.*, 1990). Additional difficulties are involved in specifying the relationship between discourses and the social practices that give rise to them. Just as empiricism constructs its model of the world, treats what it measures as the real (by the process of 'operationalizing' its concepts), so discourse analysis may be in danger of mistaking discourse as the sum total, rather than the manifestation of, structural relationships. [163]

(xix) Although we want to show that discourse research produces more interesting analyses than traditional psychology, we cannot pretend that we are able to 'discover' things in the way that the rest of the discipline thinks it does, and in our attempt to flee from this we encounter the problem of banality. If discourse analysis tends towards overcomplexity and abstraction, it also encounters difficulties in dealing with the familiar. Perhaps we could justify the (imaginary) separation between researcher and text as working to 'defamiliarize', or make strange, everyday practices in which we are ordinarily embedded in order to more clearly investigate their rules and structures. We could see it as a sort of critical-analytic ethnography; discourse analysis tries to elucidate webs of meaning, and the relations and consequences of competing meaning frameworks. But one problem we encounter is that we find it difficult to classify or categorize the seemingly 'obvious'. The analysis can seem like 'common sense', a charge which echoes popular, and well-founded, resistance to mainstream psychology.

(xx) The next problem in teaching is where we encounter once again, in a modified form, the perils of reductionism. In this respect, discourse analysis has clear continuities with empiricism, and this continuity lies in its reductionist tendencies. This reductionism can be either of the psychological or sociological variety, and here the problem appears as one of voluntarism (or, to counter that, crude anti-humanism). The explicit or implicit identification of intentional agents manipulating discourses or engaging in discursive strategies (because there is an inadequately theorized notion of resistance and discursive position) smacks of a voluntarism that tends also towards cognitivism. On the other hand, the conception of discourses as if they were 'tectonic plates' whose clashes constitute subjectivity can present so distributed a notion of power that there is no room for agency, thus also lapsing into mechanistic explanation (Potter *et al.*, 1990). The problem here is macro-reduction to discursive structures which complements micro-reduction to individual agency, giving rise to a different, but equally unhelpful, illusory or limited scope for struggle.

(xxi) Finally, we have to resort too often (in our desire to be clear in our account of how discourse analysis could be done) to a temporality and a historicism. The elaboration of a range of positions in relation to language (even when it is seen as social practice) does not necessarily imply a commitment to change those positions. There is a danger that in delineating the structure of (albeit historically [164] constituted) discursive relations we implicitly overemphasize the static features of discursive relations. This is an effect which, paradoxically, threatens to reinstate discourses as being as universal, fixed and timeless. It is necessary for discourse analysis to theorize fluctuations and transformations in discursive relations to ward off a reading of them as unchanging.

From constructionism to empiricism

We suggest that there are two causes of this last cluster of seven problems. The first is to do with the location of this research in traditional academic institutions. Although we argued earlier in the book (Chapter 1) that the existence of discourse groups and discourse units as supportive environments for the development of discourse research and theory is necessary, there is still the question of how the rules of institutions (and the career ambitions and investments of participants who have to work within those rules) deform critical thought, and ensure that radical work plays the game. In many respects, our problems in relaying discourse work to others is a function of that context. The second cause is to do with the nature of contemporary culture, and the transition, in some sectors particularly some academic sectors) of culture from modernity' to 'postmodernity' (Lyotard, 1984; Burman, 1992a; Parker, 1992b). Two important characteristics of the postmodern turn in culture are the shift from depth to surface and the shift from a belief in truth to a celebration of the impossibility of truth, to uncertainty. This double shift, the flight from depth and truth, is, we believe, the cultural setting for discourse analysis. And, in the way that changes in culture always provide the conditions of possibility for changes in (the discipline of) psychology, this setting encourages a variety of discourse analysis which is simultaneously hostile to notions of depth (as empiricism always was) and happy with uncertainty (which empiricism traditionally was not). Discourse analysis, then, risks mutating into a form of postmodern constructionist empiricism.

Empiricism and imperialism: three more problems

The next twist, and it is exacerbated when culture itself increasingly appears to take a postmodern form (that is, it appears to be only surface and to be revelling in uncertainty) ' is that discourse analysis turns into a form of academic imperialism. This happens when it [165] is used to give sense to all everyday discursive clashes. That everyday clashes of meaning can be informed by discourse analysis is clear. The issue is whether this is always helpful. When is discourse analysis useful, and when is it useless?

These three problems are as follows, and they each revolve around the slogan 'you don't have to be a discourse analyst to see that ...'. (xxii) The first concerns the question as to whether discourse research is taken to be applicable to an issue because it is 'interesting', or whether it should be applicable because the issue is embedded in a particular and significant context. Is discourse analysis the goal, or should we rather be using it strategically (with other goals in mind). For example, the claim by some male lecturers that there is no moral problem in sleeping with students is often

justified by an appeal to the liberal notion of 'choice'. The student in higher education is an adult, so the claim goes, and so it is up to her to 'choose'. That this position obscures (excuses, and abuses) power is a point that a discourse analyst could easily miss. An analysis of the connections between notions of choice used here and free-market images of choice used to justify inequality in economic relationships between owner and worker, producer and consumer) might be seen merely as 'interesting', and it would skirt the real issue. The notion of 'choice' is used here rhetorically to hide power, and you don't have to be a discourse analyst to see that.

(xxiii) A second, related, issue is whose analysis we are dealing with. This sets up further questions of practice in terms of the positions the discourse analyst constructs. The current plans for 'community treatment' of people who have experienced mental distress are interpreted by self-advocacy groups as thinly disguised devices for their regulation and control (e.g. BNAP, 1988; Lawson, 1988; LAMHA, 1988). Here, the analysis offered by the group we would presumably want to support coincides with that offered by post-structuralists (e.g. Foucault, 1975). However, in this case, the job of the progressive discourse analyst is surely to publicize the analyses presented by these groups rather than expropriate them, rather than presenting them as if they were ours. To unravel the rhetorical tricks of those in power is part of politics, and you don't have to be a discourse analyst to do that.

(xxiv) The next problem is to do with normalization, and normalizing powers, of the discipline. Clearly, the rise of a particular approach within the academe is overdetermined, but there are certain dilemmas, not to mention dangers of ahistoricism at work here. There is something colonizing about the current vogue for discourse [166] analysis which invites people retrospectively to recast what they have done as 'discourse analysis' or persuades us to 'recognize' them as really 'being discourse analysts. The drive to constitute a specific method or area called 'discourse analysis' can be seen as arising from the pressures of academic practice. This stems from the need to 'discover new approaches, get jobs and establish corporate identities (such as 'discourse units') within a market-oriented academic landscape. There are many powerful studies of language around, and you don't have to be a discourse analyst to take them seriously.

In this last cluster of three problems, the connection with politics is clearly at issue. Now we want to turn explicitly to the politics of discourse analysis.

DISCOURSE AND POLITICS

Is the progressive moral/political impulse associated with discourse work a necessary or intrinsic feature of the approach? This is a vital question for researchers who turn to discourse analytic research because it seems to offer a critical framework, not only for understanding accounts (the 'data') but also for understanding why the rest of psychology cannot deal with textual material. It is important to address this question in order to counter the general reformist and recuperative dynamic of academic practice (that is, the way the academic world absorbs criticisms and makes them a part of itself and all the stronger as a result). Given the undoubtedly helpful work conducted within the framework of discourse analysis, as the preceding chapters indicate, it is tempting to see this critical dynamic as somehow inherent within the approach itself; rather than as simply a feature of the way it is used. We need to take care to distinguish between the radical or politicising 'applications' of discourse analysis and any radical claims made for the theory itself. It does sometimes seem that such politics as do underlie varieties of discourse approaches are either ambiguous or

even, occasionally, hostile to critical work. We will identify four problems here, and then four traps (additional corresponding problems) that occur when a researcher tries to escape these problems. (Board game to follow!)

Four political problems

(xxv) The first is the problem of relativism. Acknowledging readings as multiple and mutually co-existent can work to usefully [167] problematize and disrupt dominant accounts. Meanings are tied to the time and space in which they are elaborated. Hence claims to universal timeless truths made by social sciences such as psychology are thrown into question. This is fine when we want to criticize or disrupt accounts by indicating how there is no fixed interpretation. We may do this when we want to challenge the truth claims of dominant psychological models for example. However, it becomes difficult, using this model, to elaborate a position where it is possible to privilege or maintain a commitment to one reading rather than another (Burman, 1992b). In other words, a motivated, partisan political orientation is proscribed. Theory floats disconnected from any political position, and this is a return to a disturbingly familiar liberal pluralist position.

(xxvi) The problem of difference is connected to that of liberal pluralism in discourse analysis. The attention to variability, and then to difference within the discourse framework which initially seemed so fruitful and sympathetic to feminist concerns, for example, has proved to be limited in practice. There is a necessary conceptual link between notions of 'variability' in language and of 'difference' in meaning. The emphasis on the specificity of situations, and of sociohistorical conditions tends towards a fragmentation of positions, making collective action difficult. Such collective action would necessarily be 'unitary' (1)ring things together as one type of force or 'collective subject', and would sit uncomfortably with discourse analysis's critique of the rational integrated subject (Eagleton, 1991).

(xxvii) The attention to difference then brings in its wake the 'problem' of resistance, or of making resistance problematic. The notion of discursive position has been a fruitful area for the politicised use of discourse analysis. Analysts have shown how it is possible to use multiple positionings within discourse to negotiate power relations (Hudson, 1984; Walkerdine, 1981). Yet where difference reigns supreme, so resistance threatens to be envisaged primarily only as residing within the individual. Although of all the theorists contributing to the discourse 'package', Foucault (1980, 1981) has the most developed and explicit analysis of power, this is still located within individual and spontaneous reactions (capillaries of micro-power resisted by the body), rather than planned, directed struggle. Power is seen as so distributed within the mutual and changing relations of institutions as to remain an intangible and inescapable condition of subjectivity. The analysis of power as all-pervasive threatens to usher in an exhausted and passive fatalism and surrender [168] of political vision. If power is everywhere, and where there is power there is resistance, then why bother trying to change the order of things?

(xxviii) The issue of reflexivity becomes a problem when it becomes part of the solution. Reflexivity has been useful in exploring researcher involvement and effects. However, focusing on the researcher's construction of the account rather than what is being accounted for has its problems too. Here, the key question concerns the status of the account. This issue crops up in the form of worries about how everything is being reduced to discourse, for how can we interpret anything if all meanings relate only to each other and not to something outside? Self-referentiality breeds solipsism. We

agree with those who wish to focus on signification, language as productive when it has no 'referents' outside (Henriques et al, 1984), but it is also important to hold onto some notion of representation. Representation and interpretation presuppose the independent existence of that which is represented or interpreted, but a strong discourse position tries to deny this. First, the emphasis can shift the focus to the account rather than what is being accounted for. Second, wallowing in the researcher's interpretive assumptions and processes can detract from the importance of the topic and possible political interventions. Third, agonizing about subjectivity and power can lead worried researchers to abandon the project of making interventions that go beyond reflexive concerns because of anxieties about exploitation or the paternalist relations set up in research.

Attempts to escape the problems: four more problems

In the attempts of researchers to grapple with the four problems we have just identified, there is a danger that the attention to subjectivity could work in four equally deleterious ways. (xxix) It can work to treat interpretive processes as matters to be confessed as interfering with the account (as when the research is said to be merely 'subjective'). (xxx) It can work to constitute the account (as when the research is offered as one person's valid opinion of what is happening). (xxxi) The subjectivity of interpretation could be seen as detaching the analysis from reality, rather than explicitly positioning the researcher within the research (as when the research is claimed to be 'just' an account). (xxxii) If all research is rendered only fictive, then it can be said that we cannot make material interventions with our work, because our work is just another fiction. (This arises [169] when the researcher claims that she had 'no effects' on her interviewees). Taking these problems together, we start to glimpse the vista of interpretive regress, and political immobilization, that could lie ahead for overenthusiastic discourse analysts.

What this review of political problems with discourse analysis suggests is that it does not offer a political position in its own right: The politics can only lie in the strategic appropriation of the framework.

This, indeed, is the position that is developing amongst feminists who have been using discourse work (in its broadest sense) outside psychology. Discourse frameworks were taken up by feminists in particular as providing a welcome relief from single-factor models of oppression which deny or devalue varieties of struggle. However, the reception of discourse analysis by feminists has shifted from an initial enthusiasm (e.g. Weedon, 1987) to increasing caution emerging from across a spectrum of disciplines as diverse as philosophy (Lovibond, 1989), geography (Bondi, 1990), film theory (Creed, 1987; Penley, 1989) and cultural studies (Moore, 1988).

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

This survey of thirty-two problems with discourse analytic research is not exhaustive. There may be fifty-seven varieties of problem! Some points we have noted here have been developed at greater length elsewhere (Burman, 1991), and there have been other criticisms of discourse analysis outlined by different writers (Bowers, 1988; Abrams and Hogg, 1990). The problems we have identified have, in some cases, been problems to do with the turn to language in psychology, particularly in its post-structuralist forms (Burman, 1990).

Discourse analysis will undoubtedly develop in ways which will 'solve' some of the problems, and make others worse. Directions that the approach is moving in, or could move in, have been identified at meetings of discourse researchers. Figueroa and López (1991) noted five striking 'absences' in their encounter with discourse analysis in Britain, absences which we can here note also as suggestions for issues that discourse analysis could turn to address. Each absence also signifies something important about the state and future of discourse analysis: (i) The methodological process by which the material was produced (masked by an implicit intuitivism in some cases); (ii) discussion of the institutional appropriation of the 'method' [170] as part of the apparatus of traditional psychology; (iii) the relation between discourse and modes of production, not only in texts studied but in the approach (why this approach now?); (iv) the link between the rise of discourse analysis and the contemporary 'crisis of knowledge' (1) postmodernity and the suchlike); and (v) how the analysis of discourse is related to the cultural space which is its context (for example, in the ideological and political forms of British society).

These absences, and perhaps we could take them now alongside the thirty-two problems, raise all the traditional questions of models and morals of research in psychology, and more. The positions outlined in the chapters in this book do offer visions for making worthwhile political interventions using discourse analysis. This activity may take a variety of forms. Discourse analysts now can champion the cause of a particular discourse by elaborating the contrasting consequences of each discursive framework, and can promote an existing (perhaps subordinate) discourse (as the empowerment', 'giving people a voice model of research). We can intervene directly in clarifying consequences of discursive frameworks with speakers (as in training or action research, for example), as well as commenting on the discursive-political consequences of discursive clashes and frameworks. If we do not do one or all of these, we will be assimilated into mainstream empiricist research. We would then find our work relayed among the repertoires of the discipline, rather than offering, as it should, critical readings of its texts.

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