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*Manufacturing individual  
opinions: market research  
focus groups and the  
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## **MANUFACTURING INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS:**

## **MARKET RESEARCH FOCUS GROUPS AND THE DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVALUATION**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses a paradox. On the one hand, discourse and rhetorical studies have provided evidence that evaluative talk is both variable and rhetorically organized. On the other, a wide range of social psychological research is produced that both presupposes and finds evidence of enduring underlying attitudes. One explanation for this may be that, on some occasions at least, the results of attitude research are a consequence of procedures that restrict and refine from everyday evaluative practices in a way that ensures the 'discovery' of underlying attitudes. This paper explores this explanation in one domain where there is a major practical concern with attitudes and opinions, namely market research focus groups. Detailed analysis of transcripts of 8 market research focus groups identifies three procedures that moderators use to produce freestanding opinion packages: (a) they display rhetorically embedded evaluations as inconsequential; (b) they provide formal guidance for participants to produce freestanding opinions; (c) they formulate participants' talk as freestanding opinions, stripping off rhetorical elements. The findings are supported by considering deviant cases. This illustrates one way in which evaluations are transformed into freestanding attitudes. More broadly contributes to a body of work that studies how social science methods work in practice.

## Introduction

Over the last decade a discursive social psychological approach has been developed in parallel to more established social psychological perspectives. Discursive social psychology (henceforth DSP) is the application of ideas from discourse analysis to issues in social psychology. Its publication record stretches back through the 80s where empirical, theoretical and conceptual arguments were developed in both discourse and rhetoric research (e.g. Billig, 1985; Billig, 1996 [1987]; Litton and Potter, 1985; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Since then these strands of work have largely merged together, drawing on work in conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992), and tackling topics in both social and cognitive psychology (Antaki, 1994; Edwards, 1991, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992, 1993; Potter & Edwards, forthcoming; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

In this paper we will push this argument forward using the topic of attitudes and opinions. This is a topic that has marked out DSP from social cognition and other traditional approaches. DSP has provided both a critique of traditional conceptualizations of attitudes (Billig, 1996 [1987], 1988, 1989; Burningham, 1995; Potter and Wetherell, 1987, 1988; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell, *et al.*, 1987) and a

respecification in terms of evaluative practices and orientations (Potter, 1998; Myers, 1998; Verkuyten, 1998). Put simply, DSP studies documenting both the **variation** and **rhetorical organization** of evaluations present problems for social cognition and other traditional accounts of attitudes; while studies of the **pragmatics** of evaluations suggest new ways of understanding their role in people's practices.

Such DSP studies, however, throw up a paradox. How can they be reconciled with the wide range of research that both presupposes and finds evidence of enduring underlying attitudes? After all, attitudes continue to figure in a very large number of social psychological studies and continue to be viewed as one of its most indispensable concepts (Manstead, 1995). One possible way of making sense of this paradox is to consider the connection of method and theory. Could the sorts of methods of attitude research that have been used restrict the appearance of evaluative variation and exclude evidence of the rhetorical organization of evaluations? Arguments of this kind have been made with respect to Likert scales and other quantitative measurement techniques (Billig, *et al.*, 1988; Potter, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

In this study we consider an area of psychological research where qualitative studies of attitudes are commonplace, namely market research. In particular, we will consider the use of focus groups that are now widely used as a

way of 'eliciting' people's opinions, attitudes and beliefs about products, policies and services. Our interest will be in the way evaluations are treated, and particularly how they are produced as 'freestanding opinion packages'. That is, how they are treated as bundled packets that can be listed, counted, and passed from one to another.

Focus groups are structured around an interactional dilemma (Puchta, 1999; Puchta and Potter, 1999; cf. Billig *et al.*, 1988). On the one hand, focus group participants are asked to 'always say,=whatever comes to mind' (see extract above). On the other, participants seem to be carefully policed into 'what exactly comes to mind'. In this study we will investigate the procedures that focus group moderators use for discovering the traditional notion of opinion **within** participants, while overtly eliciting it **from** them.

### ***The Discursive Psychology of Evaluation***

In traditional social psychology attitudes are treated as having a number of core features. They are:

- (a) located within the individual (and are perceptible as subjective experiences);
- (b) these internal states can be observed in verbal, behavioural or physiological reactions;
- (c) they are (generally) static;

- (d) individuals differ regarding their evaluative reactions;  
and
- (e) these reactions can be measured by attitude scales.

Let us be cautious in what we are claiming. There is now a wide range of more or less subtle and complex theorizations of attitudes in the social cognition literature (see, for example, studies discussed in Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Elsewhere we have discussed some of these theoretical complications (e.g. Potter, 1998). However, our concern in this paper is with the broad sweep of social psychological research, including research done in marketing contexts, that uses attitude measures without necessarily being concerned with potential theoretical nuances and respecifications. We take it that most readers will recognise the core features listed above as characteristic of studies that apply attitude notions to particular topics.

This traditional notion has been reworked from a discourse and rhetorical perspective. The rhetorical nature of attitudes is stressed by Billig (1988, 1989, 1991, 1992) who claims that, rather than carry attitudes around as fixed entities, people:

- give views in particular contexts;
- produce evaluations where there is at least the possibility of argument (they tend not to argue about the virtues of gravitational force);



- while expressing an evaluation *for* something, and marking the justification of their own position, often simultaneously express criticisms *against* the counter-position.

Whereas Billig stresses that attitudes are rhetorically occasioned and are therefore inextricable from the arguments in which they occur, Potter & Wetherell (1987; Potter, 1998) have drawn attention to what people are *doing* by making evaluations (or displaying a lack of evaluation) in particular settings. Both Billig and Potter & Wetherell highlight variations in evaluations as evidence critical of traditional research. The point is here that evaluations are not treated as ready-made cognitive objects, but as entities that are worked up by the participants in ways that are suitable for what is being done (compliments and complaints, persuading people against courses of action, and so on).

In this paper our interest will be in whether the conduct of focus groups will involve particular interactional practices to strip off these rhetorical and performative elements of evaluative talk. That is, we will ask whether focus group practices obscure precisely those features of evaluations that distinguish DSP and traditional approaches.

Before moving to this, however, there are some terminological issues that need to be tackled to prevent confusion. Social psychologists have sometimes distinguished

the term 'attitude' from 'opinion', reserving the former for underlying evaluative positions and the latter for verbal statements of those positions. This distinction is plausible when making certain traditional assumptions, but it is not used consistently in the market research we are studying. Moreover, even traditional researchers find it hard to sustain consistently in practice. On the one hand, for example, popular recent definitions of attitude (such as Zanna & Rempel, 1988) define attitudes as 'evaluative categorizations' (starting to blur the distinction between evaluation and action) and attitudes are anyway typically (although not always) operationalized in research studies in terms of discourse activities ('verbal responses'). On the other hand, research on people's 'opinions' is rarely concerned with verbal statements as such (how they are occasioned, what they are doing); in practice 'public opinion' is treated as an underlying variable much like attitudes are treated in social psychology (see, for example, Curtice & Jowell, 1996).

Researchers using focus groups, and discussing focus group methodology, sometimes compound this terminological blurring by describing focus groups as concerned with POBAs - an acronym that brings together a deliberately fuzzy set of notions: Perspectives, Opinions, Beliefs and Attitudes (see Puchta, 1999). From our DSP perspective, the analytic topic is 'evaluative practices' (assessments in discourse and their various uses), so we are neither committed to the terms

'attitude' and 'opinion', nor to producing a technical demarcation between them. Our expectation is that there will be a wide variety of uses of evaluations and the available meta-language may capture some better than others.

### ***Focus groups and interaction***

Focus groups derive their results from interaction and are participant centred. This is emphasised in the various books that are available giving guidance on the proper conduct of focus groups (e.g. Krueger, 1998; Morgan, 1997). It is also typically emphasised by the group moderator (the researcher who is present and guides and oversees the group). For example, this extract is taken from the moderator's introductory remarks at the start of a focus group:

It would be nice, (.) ((clears her throat)) all in all, (1.0) if we could have a >so-called< ↑group-discussion, if we could really get into a ↑dis↓cussion,=and I don't want to ↑interro↓gate,=and I certainly don't want to ↑test ↓you, (.) and it's not about ↑know↓ledge, but about o↑pin↓ions, >you just always say,=whatever comes to mind, (.) and there are< no, (.) right or wrong answers.

Note the way the contrast is built between knowledge and opinion, and how participants are encouraged to avoid treating answers as right or wrong.

The relationship between interaction and the 'results' of market focus groups is quite complex. The companies who commission the group (in this case typically concerned with

extending the line of a particular brand of cigarette) pay for three kinds of output. They may have a representative who watches the interaction from behind a one-way mirror; they will be given a video of the interaction; they will be given a report of the interaction written by the moderator (which typically summarises themes and gives sample quotes of people's 'views'). None of these forms of output takes priority over the others. This means that the moderator is a central part of the data production. He or she can, for example, display the importance of something by showing attention to it or visibly ignoring it. This will be apparent to the client whether through the one-way mirror or on the video, or in what is quoted in the report.

Our general question is how is it that moderators can work with this material, which according to DSP ought to contain evaluations which are variable and rhetorically organized, and can *nevertheless* manage to pick out attitudes and opinions as decontextualized and freestanding entities in the course of the interaction?

It will help avoid confusion here if we note that there are two notions of interaction in play. On the one hand, there is a traditional social psychological notion of interaction that considers people as owning memories, beliefs and attitudes and considers interaction as an arena in which those things are expressed and communicated. In DSP, on the

other hand, interaction is treated as a set of occasioned practices where evaluations may be developed and undermined, often built contrastively for ongoing arguments, and where they may sometimes be **constituted** as 'attitudes' or 'beliefs' tied to individuals.

Note that DSP does not claim that people do not, on occasion, avow personal opinions or construct their talk in the language of freestanding attitudes. What distinguishes DSP from traditional alternatives is how such avowals are understood (broadly, as actions rather than as indexes of underlying dispositions). This means that the empirical phenomena that are most consequential theoretically involve situations where evaluations are rhetorically constructed. These are therefore what will focus on in this paper. And our interest will be in how such phenomena are handled methodologically. That is, how do moderators deal with the rhetorical finessing of argumentation, and in particular how, if at all, do they re-package such formulations into freestanding entities? We will also be concerned with evidence that moderators train participants that freestanding opinions are appropriate to produce in focus groups.

### ***Conversation Analysis of institutions and social research***

In this study we have drawn heavily on the theoretical assumptions and analytic perspective of Conversation Analysis.

Let us indicate how we have done this and why. One of the main assumptions of Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) is that contributions to interaction are contextually oriented. Heritage suggests that talk in interaction is both '*context shaped* and *context renewing*' (1984:242). That is, a speaker's contribution is both designed with regard to the local configuration of activity and in particular the immediately preceding actions, and itself inevitably contributes to the framework in terms of which the next action will be understood. This is a dynamic view that considers context not as given, but as an active accomplishment. CA makes a break from conventional approaches of institutional settings that adopt a 'container' model of institutional contexts (Heritage, 1987) and instead emphasises the way participants orient to, and constitute the nature of institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

Recently CA workers have started to apply this perspective to the process of social research itself. For example, Suchman and Jordan (1990) and Schaeffer and Maynard (1996) have studied interactional processes in survey interviews, Antaki and Rapley (1996; Rapley and Antaki, 1996) have studied the administration of a quality of life questionnaire, and Myers and Macnaghten (Myers, 1998; Myers and Macnaghten, 1999) has considered the management of focus group interaction. These studies identify generic organizational problems that appear in research methods such

as interviews and focus groups, and study the organized solution to them (see also Schegloff, 1990). One way of conceptualizing our current study is as a contribution to this literature on interaction in social research, which has a particular concern with the way participants manage the task of producing opinions out of interaction.

### ***Research questions***

Our research questions are stimulated by the contrast between the claims of DSP about the rhetorical and performative nature of evaluative talk and the presence of a large body of focus group market research that purports to work with and identify individual attitudes and opinions. In particular, we will address the following questions.

- How do moderators deal with interaction between participants in which opinions may be rhetorically developed?
- How do moderators use meta-formulations to encourage freestanding evaluations?
- What procedures are used to strip off the rhetorically embedded nature of evaluations?

## **Method**

### ***Analytic materials***

Videotapes of eight focus group tapes run by six different moderators were the analytic basis for this study. The groups were mainly conducted to give advertising people and product managers the possibility to, in their terms, 'experience the experience' of smokers (from behind a one-way-mirror). Such groups are routinely video-recorded. Tapes were selected to satisfying the following criteria:

- They used a range of different moderators;
- All the moderators where highly experienced (this was their full time occupation), although they varied in their skill (judged by the head of the market research department);
- Some of the groups covered broad and some narrow topics.

These criteria were chosen to facilitate generalization from the findings.

Each focus group lasted for ninety minutes or more; the number of participants varied from seven to eleven. We transcribed two focus groups from beginning to end, segments of thirty minutes from six focus groups and the opening sequence from every focus group, making altogether more than



six hours of transcribed talk. Further transcript was made from the video as needed. Out of six moderators in the materials four were male and two were female; this broadly reflects current employment patterns in the area. In all groups, about half of the participants were female. As participants are chosen to reflect the target group of the discussed cigarette brand, only one focus group consisted of middle-aged participants, all the others consisted of 'young' smokers - from the age of eighteen until about twenty-eight.

### ***Transcription and translation***

The focus groups were conducted in German. They were transcribed in German and these transcripts translated into English; a bilingual English speaker checked all translations. The analysis was done on the German original, but for presentation purposes we will work primarily with the English translation. We discussed from case to case, how best to transfer pauses and characteristics of speech production such as emphasized sounds from the German original to the English translation.

All cigarette brands talked about in the groups have been pseudonomized by naming them after capital cities. Participants are named P1, P2 etc.; the moderator is Mod..

Standard Jeffersonian transcription conventions have been used throughout (see Ten Have, 1998, for a recent summary). The principle conventions are as follows.

He Underlining indicates stress or emphasis.

(0.8) Numbers in parantheses indicate periods of silence, in tenths of a second. Pauses under 0.5 seconds have not been timed and are shown as (.).

() Parentheses indicate talk difficult to transcribe. Words inside such parentheses indicate the transcriber's best estimate of what is being said.

[] Left-side brackets indicate where overlapping talk begins; right-side brackets where overlapping talk ends.

= Equal signs indicate a 'latched' relationship without any silence.

° Talk appearing within degree signs is lower in volume relative to surrounding talk.

>< 'Greater than' and 'less than' symbols enclose talk that is noticeably faster than the surrounding talk.

, Commas are a 'continuation' marker, indicating that the speaker has not finished; marked by fall-rise or weak rising intonation, as when enunciating lists.

? Question marks signal 'questioning' intonation, irrespective of grammar.

. Periods (full stops) mark falling, stopping intonation ('final contour'), irrespective of grammar, and not necessarily followed by a pause.

Various features taken from the video (bodily orientation, writing, non-vocal activities such as opening and holding up cigarette packets) are noted on the transcripts, as they become relevant for the analysis.

### ***Analytic Procedure***

The materials were analysed using techniques from CA and DSP (Drew, 1995; Heritage, 1997; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 1996, 1997; Potter & Edwards, forthcoming; Ten Have, 1998). Rather than attempt to code and categorize the materials, the focus is on the situated nature and action orientation of participants' talk. Participants' own orientations are used as a principle resource for making sense of interaction (if participants treat something as an invitation, say, that is powerful grounds for the analyst treating it in this way). In this case, we are particularly concerned with the orientations displayed by the moderators when participants display evaluations in freestanding or rhetorically embedded ways. Analysis of this kind is at least partly a craft skill and therefore not easy to turn into a specific recipe. However, carefully transcribed examples of the original materials are presented along side the interpretations to allow readers and reviewers to judge the adequacy of claims.

In the analysis we have mainly chosen to present one instance of each of the phenomena we are concerned with. This is a compromise between journal space and reader patience, on the one hand, and allowing the reader the option to assess our analysis of a range of examples, on the other (further examples and analyses are available in Puchta, 1999). Our analysis is concerned with identifying a normative pattern rather than a general statistical association, so our analysis of potential deviant cases is particularly important for supporting the adequacy of our claims.

## **Analysis**

### ***1. Rhetorical construction and moderator reciprocity***

Let us start with a relatively coarse grained observation about moderator reciprocity. The moderators in our sample display attention (that is, visibly attend) to freestanding opinion formulations and display disattention to (explicitly) rhetorically embedded formulations. In Figure One the talk is schematically summarized rather than directly transcribed to highlight this pattern of interaction. The arrows indicate to whom speakers address their contributions (shown by posture and gaze).

Insert Figure One about here.

Asked to describe a cigarette's taste the participants P1, P3, P4, P5 and P6 initially report assessments directly to the moderators (there are two moderators in this focus group) and the moderators take notes. However, participants P3, P4 and P5 then address comments to each other (see circles V and VI). The point of interest here is that the moderators do not write down these comments. In VII P2 redirects interaction to the moderator with his comment:

Well I'll stick to it.

This not only receives an explicit receipt from the moderator ('Hm mm, '), but is also written down. The contrast here, then, is in the moderators differential attention to contextually and rhetorically formulated contributions such as 'No, I don't think so' (see circle V) and freestanding individual opinions such as 'Well I'll stick to it' (circle VII).

This example is a useful start-point as it illustrates the kind of phenomena of interest. However, what is going on is often more subtle than this. In the following 3 sections we will look at techniques that moderators use to head off interaction between participants with its associated rhetorical construction of evaluations and to formulate freestanding opinion packages from rhetorically organized talk.

## 2. Displaying inconsequentiality

One of the most straightforward techniques for displaying the inconsequentiality of rhetorically embedded evaluations is to ignore them. This is seen in the interaction patterns above. Let us consider an example in detail.

The following extract comes from a focus group where the participants are discussing the name for a new cigarette brand. 'Cape Blue Ultra' is the proposed name for a planned light line extender (lower tar version) of the stronger 'mother brand' 'Cape'; the Cape Blue Ultra packet is blue, the Cape packet is red.

(2) Source: Blue17,919; file: diagra1a; video: 27:11

1	Mod.	What do the others	Was meinen die andern?
2		think? (1.0) What kind	(1.0) Was ist das fürn
3		of a name is this? (1.3)	Name? (1.3) Oder, (1.1)
4		Or, (1.1) how do you	wie findet Ihr den? (.8)
5		like it? (.8) Or what do	Oder was fällt Euch dazu
6		you associate with it?	ein?
		<i>13 lines omitted</i>	
20	P1	=That says <u>absolutely</u>	=da kann ich mir
21		nothing to me at all.	<u>überhaupt</u> nichts mehr
22		(.8) Ultra, okay, well I	drunter vorstellen. (.8)
23		can, (.) consider,	Ultra, okay, da kann
24		whether it is (.) <u>light</u> ,	ich, (.) mir noch
25		or, (.) especially	überlegen, ob das nun
26		strong, or whatever,	(.) <u>leicht</u> , oder, (.)
27		but, (.6) <u>blue</u> is	besonders schwer is,
28		totally without a	oder sonst was, aber,
29		statement, I think.	(.6) <u>blue</u> hat irgendwie
30			<u>überhaupt</u> keine Aussage,
31	P2	(>Well,<) perhaps it is	(>Ja,<) vielleicht
32		called <u>blue</u> purposely to	heisst die <u>blue</u> extra,
33		set it apart from the	um die von den roten
34		red ones.	abzusetzen.
		<i>12 lines omitted</i>	
47	P3	Well, then it ought to	Ja, dann müsste ja bei
48		say on the, (.) <u>blue</u> -	der, (.) blau- (.) bei
49		(.) on the red one, (.)	der roten, (.) müsste
50		<u>red</u> .	<u>red</u> draufstehen.



market. The moderator then asks, or, more precisely, gives a 'directive as a question substitute' (Heritage and Roth, 1995):

Well presumably, (.) someone did indeed, have something in mind here, and if you would just try to, (.) put yourself, in their place, ((continues))(lines 81-7).

Note the way that the moderator avoids acknowledging P2's argument. In emphasising that someone did have something in mind in giving the line extender the name 'Cape Blue Ultra' she implies, that up to then nobody in the group 'had something in mind' and urges the group members to put themselves 'in their place'. Although the moderator has tolerated talk between participants, she displays it as inconsequential.

The general point, then, is the way that the moderator encourages participants to produce freestanding opinions by ignoring opinions that are produced in discussion between participants. This displayed disattention will be available to the observer using the one-way mirror, of course, as it is on the video.

### ***3. Meta requests for freestanding opinion talk***

Sometimes moderators 'go meta'. That is, they provide explicit formulations of the kind of contributions that are welcome (cf. Simons, 1989). These formulations do not



explicitly ask for freestanding opinions; however, they provide examples where this feature is apparent.

Consider the following extract. It revolves around a so-called projective question concerning the features of a typical smoker of the brand London.

(3) Source: London,596; file: eviden3; video: 33:04

1	Mod.	((continues)) What, (.)		((fährt fort)) Was, (.)
2		well, (.) other		so, (.) hat=hat er noch
3		characteristics		für Eigenschaften,=wie
4		does=does he have,=how		lebt er so, (.)
5		does he live, (.)		BESCHREIBEN SIE ihn ma
6		DESCRIBE HIM as one (.)		so wie man sich den .hh
7		could uh=imagine him .hh		inner Rolle inm=inm Kino
8		in a role in a=in a film		(.) eh=vorstellen könnte
9		(.) or=or in a		(.) (oder=oder im
10		[book or, ]		[Buch oder,)]
11	P1	[Well, at any rate] down		[Also halt auf jeden
12		to <u>earth</u> , >because< he		Fall ]
13		is also sen <sup>↑</sup> sitive, (.7)		bodenständig, >weil
14		crea <sup>↑</sup> tive,		halt< auch sen <sup>↑</sup> sibel,
15				(.7) krea <sup>↑</sup> tiv,
16	(1.1)			
17	Mod.	Hm mm,		Hm mm,
18	(1.6)			
19	P2	Hedo[nist, ]		Genuss[mensch, ]
20	P1	[Educated,] yes,	addresses	[Gebildet,] ja,
21			P2	
22	P3	Yes,	addresses	Ja,
23			P2	
24	P2	Likes eating out,		Geht gerne essen,
25	P1	Yes,	addresses	Ja,
26			P2	
27	P3	(xxxxx)=	addresses	(xxxxx)=
28			P2	
→ 29	Mod.	=Yes, <u>EVERYBODY IS</u>		=Ja, <u>JEDER DARF SEINEN</u>
30		<u>ALLOWED</u> [TO ]=		[EIGENEN]=
31	P1	[Yes,]=		[Ja, ]=
32	Mod.	=describe his own.=now		=beschreiben.=jetzt
33		[don't lets talk]		[reden wir mal nicht]
34	P1	[Educated, ] (.)		[Gebildet, ]
35		and well also a		(.) und halt auch nen
36		hedonist, that's it		Genussmensch, das wars
37		[(now) ]		dann halt [(auch) ]
38	Mod.	[Hedo-,] okay, yes,	addresses	[Genuss-,]
39		that's already pretty	P4	okay, ja, das ist ja
40		vivid ((continues))		schon ma ganz plastisch,
41				((fährt fort))

The notable thing here is that when P1, P2 and P3 begin a joint description of the typical smoker of London cigarettes, the moderator shouts emphatically:

=Yes, EVERYBODY IS ALLOWED [TO ]=

P1: [Yes,]=

=describe his own.=now [don't lets talk] (lines 29-33).

The turn is left hearably incomplete, but participants would be expected to be able to project it as 'don't lets all talk at once' (the incompleteness here might lessen the effect of telling the participants off). The moderator goes meta in the sense that he explicitly offers a rule on how to provide contributions: everybody has the right to describe his/her 'own typical smoker'. It is notable that after this turn the participants return their focus to the moderator, addressing their contributions to him. Thus P1 elaborates on her own projective smoker, and produces it as a freestanding description addressed to the moderator:

[Educated,] (.) and well also a hedonist, that's it [(now)] (lines 34-7).

The moderator acknowledges and confirms the description ('[Hedo-,] okay, yes, that's already pretty vivid'; lines 38-40).

Note the way the detail of the interaction is in line with our general account. P1's description in 34-7 is more or less a combination of her own and P2's earlier contributions

(P2 has provided 'He[donist,]' (line 19) and P1 '[Educated,] yes,' (line 20)). When the three participants produce contributions linked by agreement tokens ('yes') these are queried by the moderator. However, when a participant formulates very similar contributions as a freestanding opinion, and when it is addressed to the moderator, the opinion is not only accepted but also praised. The general observation here is that the moderator's intervention with a meta observation about the conduct of the participants leads to the production of a freestanding opinion package.

So far we have considered how the moderators deal with rhetorically oriented opinion production by ignoring it or making explicit injunctions against it. We will now consider another approach, which is for moderators to 'strip off' the rhetorical elements and thereby formulate freestanding opinion packages.

#### ***4. Stripping off the rhetorical context***

Let us consider an example of stripping off rhetorical context. This is an exercise where the moderator asks which brands the participants would place near the light cigarette brand Stansted<sup>1</sup> in a hypothetical shelf.

(4) Source: Hensted7,932; file: echo53; video: 29:30;

1	<b>Mod.</b>	<b>((continues)) imagine,=&gt;you go</b>	<b>((fährt fort)) stellen Sie</b>
2		<b>and stand in front of a</b>	<b>sich vor,=&gt;Sie stellen sich</b>

3		↑ <u>gigantic</u> ,< (.) u:h, (.6)	vor nen ↑ <u>riesigen</u> ,< (.) e:h,
4		she:lf, (.) with <u>only</u>	(.6) Rega:l, (.) <u>nur</u>
5		cigarette brands on it. (1.0)	Zigarettenmarken drauf. (1.0)
6		Which brands would you place	Welche Marken würdese (.) zu
7		(.) near the Stansted.	der Stansted stellen.
		<i>29 lines omitted</i>	
37	P1	((continues)) because I would	((fährt fort)) weil ich würd
38		just mechanically sort them	einfach stur nach den Werten
39		according to the contents	sortieren,
40		labels, <sup>2</sup>	
41	Mod.	<u>After the contents labels</u> um	<u>Nach Wer</u> ↓ <u>ten</u> hm mm,=
42		mm,=	
43	P1	=I would do it just	=Einfach stur nach den <u>Werten</u>
44		mechanically according to the	würde <u>ich</u> gehen=
45		contents <u>labels</u> =	
46	P2	Well I [(xxxxxxxxx) ]	=Also ich [(xxxxxxxxx)]
47	P1	[Without first] ev-	[Ohne zuerst] (je-)
48		looking at the packet, so then	auf die Packung zu gucken,
49		exactly as is the case	also genau wies im Tabakladen
50		>somehow< in the <u>tobacco</u> shop	>irgendwie< auch der <u>Fall</u> ist,
51		too,	
		<i>21 lines omitted</i>	
73	P2	((continues)) product wants to	((fährt fort)) Produkt sich
74		position itself, then on no	selbst plazieren will, dann
75		↑account next to other light	doch auf gar keinen ↑Fall
76		products, (.8) but certainly	neben anderen Light-Produkten,
77		next to the Heathrow,=then the	(.8) sondern auf jeden Fall
78		(.) loyal Heathrow smokers,	neben der Heathrow,=dann die
79		who have perhaps, (.) kind of	(.) treuen Heathrow Raucher,
80		an irritated throat anyhow,	die vielleicht mal nen
81		.hh say "Oh, then I'll just	bisschen, (.) Kratzen im Hals
82		try its younger brother" (.)	haben sowieso, .hh sagt "Oh,
83		so to speak,	dann nehm ich doch mal den
84			kleinen Bruder (.) davon"
			sozusagen,
		<i>36 lines omitted</i>	
121	P3	But I find, that you=	Ich find aber schon, dass Du
122			den=
→ 123	Mod.	=(A moment) the Stansted would	=(Halt mal) also die Stansted
124		then be the younger brother of	wär der kleinere Bruder der
125		the <u>Heathrow</u> .	<u>Heathrow</u> .

Near the start of the sequence P1 stresses he would categorize brands 'mechanically' according to 'labels' (lines 37-40). During P1's turn the moderator orients his attention to other participants and P2 starts to come in. However, P1 continues displaying his opinion. P2 then presents his opinion in using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, in press):

on no ↑account next to other light products, (lines 74-6).

He constructs his argument as a counter-argument to P1 and stresses that the very light Stansted should be positioned next to the less light Heathrow, so that Heathrow smokers with an 'irritated throat' (line 80) might say: "'Oh, then I'll just try its younger brother'" (lines 81-2).

Now comes the phenomenon of interest. At the end of P2's long turn, a third participant (P3) tries to gain the floor, but is interrupted by the moderator:

=(A moment) the Stansted would then be the younger brother of the Heathrow. (lines 123-5)

The moderator formulates an element of P2's talk which has been used to undermine P1's argument (see Heritage, 1985). What we see, then, is that the moderator picks out an argument used to support a particular position and presents it as a freestanding thing. The general point here is that when participants produce evaluative talk, which develops explicit rhetorical contrasts, these can be removed to leave the evaluations as freestanding entities tied to individuals.

In our corpus there is, however, evidence that there is a conversational environment in which the production of *non*-freestanding opinion displays is tolerated, that is, attended to, and formulated as focus group relevant. In our final

section we will attend to such deviant cases and consider their implications for our general claims.

### **5. Deviant cases**

Up to now we have claimed that moderators in market research focus groups display a preference for individual opinions in the form of freestanding packages. They systematically ignore rhetorically developed opinions, or explicitly offer 'rules' against their use, or they formulate such opinions with their rhetorical elements stripped off. However, there are certain occasions where agreement tokens are tolerated as rhetorically formulated contributions. These are particularly interesting as potential cases which might raise problems for the sorts of pattern we have identified, or which allow us to refine our claims. In this section we will look more closely at the environment in which such sequences are embedded.

The following extract revolves around discussion of the 'typical smoker' of Cape Blue Ultras. The moderator is following up on a participant's description, asking her whether the 'typical smoker' is a man or a woman.

(5) Source: Blue17,334; file: eviden7; video: 12:13

1	<b>Mod.</b>	<b>Hm mm, (.) this was</b>	Hm mm, (.) das war schon
2		<b>already a very vivid</b>	ne sehr plastische
3		<b>description,=was it a</b>	Beschreibung,=eher Mann
4		<b>man or a woman, (.) in</b>	oder Frau, (.) Deiner

5		<b>your opinion?</b>		Meinung nach?
6	P1	<b>Doesn't <u>matter</u>.</b>		Das ist <u>egal</u> .
7	Mod.	<b>Doesn't matter,=</b>		Das ist egal,=
8	P1	<b>=Hm mm,=</b>		=Hm mm,=
9	P2	<b>=I'd say, probably a</b>		=Ich würd sagen, eher
10		<b>woman.</b>		Frau.
11	P3	<b>Me too,</b>		Ich auch,
→ 12	many	<b>(Me too,)<sup>3</sup></b>		(Ich auch,)
13	Mod.	<b>Why?</b>	makes a	Warum?
14			'funny'	
15			attempt to	
16			address	
17			all, who	
18			said 'Me	
19			too,'	
20	P3	<b>Because women, (.) are</b>		Weil Frauen, (.) eher,
21		<b>usually (.) [light]</b>		(.) [Light]raucher sind,
22		<b>smokers,</b>		
23	P2	<b>[Yes, ]</b>		[Ja, ]
24	Mod.	<b>Hm mm,</b>		Hm mm,
25	(1.6)		mod. takes	
26			notes	
27	P3	<b>But those in love, (.)</b>	mod.	Aber so die lebens, (.)
28		<b>with life, (.) I too I</b>	continues	lustig, (.) ffind ich
29		<b>ththink,</b>	taking	auch,
30			notes	

In response to the moderator's question at the start of the extract P1 says the gender of the imaginary smoker does not matter. This is immediately contradicted by P2: '=I'd say, probably a woman.' (lines 9-10). P3 supports P2 ('Me too,'; line 11) and several other participants join in and signal their approval. The moderator makes a hearably and visibly humorous attempt to address this group of participants and asks for their reason for the judgement (line 13). What is interesting here, is the way that the 'me too-advocates' are treated as a single entity with a collective view. Unlike other interactions, they are not asked to describe their individual judgements 'in their own words'.

How can we account for this deviant case? We suggest that it marks out a distinction between qualitative opinions

and categorical judgements. Think of the difference between the question 'do you smoke Marlboro?' which can be answered with a yes or no, and 'what is it about Marlboro that you like?' that would require you to specify some qualities or attributes. In the former case, agreement tokens are readily interpretable as placing participants in a category; while in the latter case they leave the association of particular participants with individual qualities opaque or ambiguous.

Let us take a further case to explore this. While Extract 5 involved a categorical judgement about gender, the moderator in the next extract asks for a numerical judgement:

how long does one need when one tries a new brand, until one, (.6) <comes to a reasonably satisfactory conclusion about it,> (lines 1-5)

Note the way the moderator again accepts again agreement-tokens (line 29).

(6) Source: Blue19,773; file: eviden6; video: 46:16

1	<b>Mod.</b>	<b>By the way how long does one</b>	Wie lange braucht man
2		<b>need when one tries a new</b>	eigentlich wenn man sone neue
3		<b>brand, until one, (.6) &lt;comes</b>	Marke probiert, bis man so,
4		<b>to a reasonably satisfactory</b>	(.6) <einigermassen für sich
5		<b>conclusion about it,&gt;</b>	nen stimmiges Urteil hat,>
		<i>11 lines omitted</i>	
17	<b>P1</b>	<b>(It's) about <u>half</u> a packet,</b>	(Des is) sone <u>halbe</u> Packung,
18		<b>or, at least °three or four</b>	oder, zumindest °drei vier
19		<b>should &gt;then&lt; I think</b>	Stück sollten >dann< glaub ich
20		<b>certainly,° (.7)</b>	schon,° (.7)
21		<b>[well for me (at least xxxxx)]</b>	[also brauch ich (zumindest
22			xxxxx)]
23	<b>P2</b>	<b>[Well but this <u>really depends</u></b>	[Also das kommt <u>echt</u> darauf <u>an</u>
24		<b>(.) &gt;(well)&lt; there really are</b>	] (. ) >(also)< es gibt
25		<b>brands, from which I take two</b>	echt Marken, da rauch ich zwei
26		<b>pulls</b>	Züge
27		<b>(and find them</b>	(und find sie
28		<b>[kind of disgusting]</b>	[eigentlich widerlich)]



→ 29	many	[(Yes, <sup>4</sup>	]	[Ja,	]
30	P1	(Also.) (.8) but with this one		(Auch.) (.8) aber bei dieser	
31		I wouldn't know,		wüsst ichs jetzt nicht,	
32	P2	No, <sup>5</sup>		Nee,	
33	+				
34	some				
35	(2.3)				
36	Mod.	And what would you assume		Und was würdest Du vermuten	
37		((continues))		((fährt fort))	

Let us highlight two features of this sequence. First, the question is unusual in asking for a number of some kind ('how long') rather than for a qualitative opinion. Second, the answers are organized contrastively (three or four cigarettes vs. two pulls vs. don't know). Although this is not quite as simple as the previous case, the continuum is chunked into three categories. It is these categorical claims that receive the unqualified agreements and disagreements.

The general point, then, is that there is an environment in these market research focus groups where agreement and disagreement tokens are treated as acceptable. This environment is one where the participants are offering categorical judgements, or judgements on a numerical continuum, rather than qualitative opinions.

## Discussion

Let us summarise the main points of our analysis before discussing some more general issues to do with focus group practice and the discursive social psychology of attitudes. We

have tried to show the way freestanding individual opinion packages are produced in focus groups. That is, although evaluative talk is recurrently produced in the form of rhetorical contrasts and agreement/disagreement tokens, the moderator deals with this kind of talk in three particular ways.

- First, and most simply, it is ignored (Sections 1 & 2).
- Second, various occasioned meta rules or injunctions are developed to support the production of freestanding opinion packages (Section 3).
- Third, when moderators formulate opinion packages out of sequences where participants produce them rhetorically and contrastively, these rhetorical elements are stripped off to leave freestanding opinion packages (Section 4).

Finally, we considered deviant cases. The only examples that fell outside the three management techniques were those where participants were offering categorical judgements.

We have concentrated here specifically on the individuation of evaluative talk into personal opinion packages. However, elsewhere we have considered the way in which moderators generate 'opinion talk' rather than 'factual talk', as well as the use of 'repeat receipts' as a common device for stripping off rhetorical orientations (Puchta, 1999; Puchta & Potter, forthcoming).

With respect to the practice of focus groups, the production of individual and freestanding opinions is typically what is required. For example, one of the most popular manuals on the conduct and analysis of focus groups describes three different models of report writing:

The first style of presentation consists of the question or idea and is followed by all participant comments (the raw data model). The second style is a summary description followed by *illustrative quotes* (the description model). The third style is a summary description with *illustrative quotes* followed by an interpretation (the interpretative model). (Krueger, 1994:167, emphasis added)

Krueger gives examples of 'illustrative quotes' for a focus group on the topic what parents look for in youth organizations:

The person in charge must be a good influence because children idolize their leaders.

Leaders are the most important thing in a youth organization. I don't want a crank for a leader.

I want a adult who is patient and kind to work with my kids. (1994:167)

Such quotes are in the form of what we have called freestanding opinion packages. For example, they are similar to the participant's utterance in Extract 1 that was considered worth writing down by the moderator:

>Well I'll stick to it.< I think it's a bit aromatic.<sup>6</sup>

What we have observed in our materials, then, is in line with the 'good practice' formulated by Krueger.

We do not wish to criticise this practice here; in some ways it seems to be well suited to the goals of market research. We can speculate that such freestanding opinion packages are relatively easy to understand for the audience watching the group, and relatively easy to draw market-related conclusions from. Furthermore, they provide relatively straightforward raw material for the moderator to write up. Colourful descriptive evaluations can be tied to individual participants and the scope of agreement/disagreement tokens does not have to be determined. This may provide a simpler basis on which to make practical recommendations.

What we have revealed are the detailed interactional procedures through which these opinion packages are produced. It may be that an alternative moderating and analytic practice that highlights rather than obscures the rhetorical organization of evaluations would be a basis for different or even improved recommendations. However, we have no evidence either way on this issue. Moreover, it would be a particularly difficult issue to resolve: for what neutral method would be used to assess the impact of these different methodological practices? Luckily this is, anyway, not our primary concern in this paper.

Our broader concern is with the nature of opinions and attitudes and their conceptualization in social psychology. We started with the puzzle that traditional attitude research

tends to discover enduring underlying attitudes without being troubled by the kinds of variability and rhetorical organization highlighted in DSP. Our proposed methodological answer to this puzzle is that attitude measurement procedures have features that obscure these features. The example of market research focus groups illustrates one way in which this can happen.

This evidence does not **directly** undermine traditional conceptualizations of attitudes in favour of the DSP approach to evaluative practices. Nor does it criticise recent developments in attitude theory. That is not its point. Rather it counters the argument that the DSP approach cannot be true because various kinds of traditional attitude research work. It illustrates one way in which such work may miss the phenomena highlighted by DSP. And it complements arguments about the way quantitative attitude measures may miss such phenomena for different reasons (Billig, *et al.*, 1988; Potter, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

To end with we would like to offer two more general points. First, it is undoubtedly the case that the reconstruction of rhetorically embedded evaluations into freestanding opinion packages is not restricted to focus groups. Our guess is that it is a feature of a range of everyday and institutional practices. One of the aims of a discursive social psychology of evaluation will be to study

these practices and highlight both their generic and specific features.

Second, and more speculatively, we would like to highlight a link to more sociological and historical conceptualizations of the nature of social science and its objects. One of the arguments of the philosopher and discourse analyst Michel Foucault (1972) is that the objects of social science study are constituted out of its discourse practices. Much work within the Foucaultian research tradition has taken an expansive historical perspective (e.g. Danziger, 1990; Rose, 1989). In this case we have shown how the practices of focus group moderation can constitute freestanding opinion packages as social science objects.

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<sup>1</sup> The pseudonyms of two brands are airports to show that they belong to the same 'family'.

<sup>2</sup> The participant refers to the nicotine and tar level of cigarettes as declared on the respective packet.

<sup>3</sup> This defies transcription as the participants say one after another **and** simultaneously 'Me too,'.

<sup>4</sup> This defies transcription as the participants say one after another **and** simultaneously 'Yes,'.

<sup>5</sup> This defies transcription as the participants say one after another **and** simultaneously 'No,'.

<sup>6</sup> Utterance is in contrast to Figure 1 not schematically summarized, but directly transcribed.