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## *Introduction: The evolution of discursive psychology: From Classic to contemporary themes*

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## Introduction

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This is a book about the evolution, contribution and impact of the body of work known as Discursive Psychology (DP). Beginning in psychology, over the past twenty-five years DP has developed into a massively influential field with trajectories throughout the range of academic disciplines and substantial national and international impact on how we understand and study psychology and particularly how we conceptualize language and social action.

From its 'undisciplined beginnings' (Billig, 2012) DP developed into an original and innovative program of research into the "normative order of everyday life" (Edwards, 2012, p. 434). DP's early eclecticism has sprung into a systematic approach to all things social – from everyday interactional encounters to institutional settings and the analysis of wider social issues and social problems.

To define DP, we borrow one from one of its founders and main proponents, Derek Edwards. To do DP "is to do something that psychology has not already done in any systematic, empirical, and principled way, which is to examine how psychological concepts (memory, thought, emotion, etc.) are shaped for the functions they serve, in and for the nexus of social practices in which we use language" (Edwards, 2012, p. 427). This volume takes DP's *respecification* of these concepts as its subject matter and is designed to give the reader an enriched understanding of the particular background of discursive psychology. The main aim of this volume is to invite a clearer recognition of, and engagement with, the early intellectual debates, origin stories, that have driven

the discursive psychological project forward. It also aims to give the first systematic representation of its contemporary intellectual image.

We have collected in this volume commentaries and reflections on key ideas of the discursive project in social psychology found in 'classic studies' written by current and former members of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group at Loughborough University: Charles Antaki, Michael Billig, Susan Condor, Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell. The commentators are a mixture of both younger and established, internationally renowned, scholars, whose own work has been inspired and driven by ideas in these foundational texts. These classic studies have played a key role in the emergence of DP; that is, they are not only highly cited, but have defined the shape that discursive psychology takes today. Most of the studies were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s but we have also included some more recent papers written after 2000. The various ways in which DP has developed its concepts, methodological apparatus, and so on, can be traced back to a number of such studies. DP's main theoretical and methodological tenets have been explained and illustrated in various edited collections and special issues (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007; te Molder & Potter, 2005; Wiggins & Potter, 2008; Augoustinos & Tileagă, 2012). However, there is no collection of systematic and critical appraisal of its foundational, 'key' or classic studies.

### **What makes a DP 'classic'?**

The papers we included here are highly cited, but, paradoxically, have not been the concern of direct exegesis. Although they are discussed in some introductory textbooks (e.g., McKinlay & McVittie, 2008), with very few exceptions, they have

not been, routinely, subjected to critical scrutiny. We selected the papers as part of what we are defining as DP's received canon. In asking our contributors to engage critically and reflectively with them, we wanted to recuperate their value for discursive psychology's project, and also make their argument more accessible to a larger audience. Our aim is to remind both colleagues and critics of the value of critical engagement with discursive psychology's received canon. The studies are not classics because of their age. Although some of the earlier papers have aged well, retaining their relevance, it is their significance to a new discursive psychology public that guided our selection. They are papers that, in some cases, contain guidelines for doing DP but, more often, DP's commitment to following analytic recipes is downplayed. They are consciously not concerned with guidelines, but with providing a grounding for a certain philosophy, orientation, to researching social life. The studies explored in this book are challenging psychology's received ideas about epistemology, theory, method, etc. They are concerned with human accountability, human affairs in a general sense, in and as part of everyday and institutional practices.

In our selection we wanted to capture what we think is particular and original about discursive psychology: its diversity. Contrary to superficial impressions, DP is a diverse field of enquiry. This is a book that emphasizes the diversity of topics, issues, variety and breadth of assumptions, and their place in the discursive psychology project. It is the first anthology to address DP as an established field of study, which is developing an original and critical understanding of the role of discourse and social practices for the study of social and psychological phenomena and social issues. Although some caricature DP as ignoring issues of power, politics, social problems, etc. DP engages directly with

such issues as both resource and topic. The example of numerous applied interventions designed around researching and unpacking interactional practices (Stokoe et al., 2012) as well as the example of research studies using interviews or public texts to explore the reproduction of inequality and unequal power relations (Tileagă, 2005; Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2011), are all examples of DP in the service of some particular critical agenda.

This book is therefore intended both as an introduction to discursive psychology for scholars new to the field, as well as more advanced intellectual tool for those who wish to understand discursive psychology in more depth. The chapters are retrospective, looking back at the innovations made in the papers under discussion, but also prospective, tracking the impact on, trajectory of, and contribution to subsequent work. The book asks what can still be gained from a dialogue with these classic studies, and which epistemological and methodological debates are still running, or are worth resurrecting. What remains of the challenges set out by seminal texts and debates they have engendered? How can DP inspire a new generation of (social) psychologists to conduct innovative and groundbreaking studies looking at practical problems in the real world? What are some of the intellectual threads that can push DP into the future? The upshot is to promote new ways of thinking about the epistemological and methodological *grounds* of what discursive psychologists do, the ideas they explore, the critiques they develop, the research avenues they take, the impact that some of their ideas have (or might have in the future). We are extremely grateful to colleagues that have responded so positively to this project.

## **Understanding the particular background of discursive psychology**

The term 'discursive psychology' was first coined by Edwards and Potter (1992) in their book of the same title. DP's roots lie in a variety of theoretical-philosophical and empirical traditions. In addition to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, these include the language philosophy of Wittgenstein (1958) and Austin (1962), constructivist approaches to human development (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978), and social studies of science (e.g. Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984).

DP's original goal was to unpack, critique and 'respecify' (Button, 1991) the topics of social, developmental and cognitive psychology, and their methods of investigation (Edwards & Potter, 2001). It therefore aimed to challenge mainstream psychology in much the same way that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis challenged mainstream sociology (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). DP comprises a fundamental shift from treating psychological states (e.g. anger, intention, identity) as operating behind talk, causing people to say the things they do. In this way, DP challenges the traditional psychological treatment of language as a channel to underlying mental processes, and the experimental study of those processes. Instead, it studies how commonsense psychological concepts are deployed in, oriented to and handled in the talk and texts that comprise social life. Thus language is not treated as an externalization of underlying thoughts, motivations, memories or attitudes, but as *performative* of them. Note that these are not *ontological* claims about the status of 'inner minds' or 'external realities'. The external world, or people's traits and dispositions, are treated by speakers as common sense evidential resources for making inferences, building descriptions, resisting accusations of interest, and so on.

DP understands discourse as *action oriented*, whereby actions are to be analysed in their situated context rather than as discrete units of activity (Potter, 2003). Discourse is both *constructed*: people talk by deploying the resources (words, categories, commonsense ideas) available to them, and *constructive*: people build social worlds through descriptions and accounts thereof (Wetherell, 2001). DP therefore examines members' *situated* descriptions of persons, categories, events and objects, drawing heavily on conversation analysis for its analytic method. It investigates, for example, how 'factual' descriptions are produced in order to undermine alternative versions, to appear objective and reasonable or weak and biased, and deal with the speaker's and others' motives, desires, intentions and interests (Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Since its inception in the late 80s and early 90s, DP has developed along two main trajectories. DP's original engagement with ethnomethodology and conversation analysis substantially influenced the evolution of its methods and analytic focus and, in recent years, has, in turn, influenced many in conversation analysis, particularly with regards to debates about action description (e.g., Edwards, 2005) and cognition (see the special issue of *Discourse Studies*, 2006). A second, 'critical' DP strand is more closely aligned to post-structuralism, with approaches to analysis combining attention to conversational detail with wider macro structures and cultural-historical contexts (Wetherell, 1998). The two trajectories, and the classic 'debate' between Wetherell and one of the founders of conversation analysis, Emanuel Schegloff, is revisited in Chapter one of this book.

The two traditions have resulted in quite distinct bodies of empirical work. On one hand, CA-aligned DP focused studies on understanding the way

psychological matters, understood as oriented-to issues in interaction, impact on the design and organization of everyday and institutional encounters, from child protection helplines (e.g., Hepburn & Potter, 2012) to police interviews with suspects (e.g., Stokoe & Edwards, 2007), and from interaction in care homes for disabled persons (e.g., Antaki, 2013) to investigating psychiatric assessments of different patient groups (e.g., Speer & McPhillips, 2013). On the other hand, DP studies of how interaction, conversation and texts operate within wider social, cultural and political contexts (Tileagă, 2011; Augoustinos et al., 2011),

It is perhaps appropriate to note that most of the misunderstandings of the discursive psychology project are, arguably, misunderstandings of its particular background and subsequent trajectory. Novices sometimes find the landscape of DP bewildering. There are at least three important characteristics that should find their way in any description of DP. These deal with what DP is not.

First, as Potter argues, “DA/DP is neither a self-contained paradigm nor a stand-alone method that can be easily mix-and-matched with others” (2003, p. 787). Edwards notes that DP “rests upon a very different, and non-causal conception of what makes social actions orderly and intelligible. Rather than conceiving of people’s thoughts and actions as resulting from the interplay of a range of causal variables, DP approaches them as things done and understood with regard to an empirically and conceptually tractable normative order.” (Edwards, 2012, p. 432).

Second, DP is not a universal approach to discourse, talk-in-interaction, or ideology, but is concerned with particular claims in particular settings that have particular consequences. DP offers particularistic answers to general questions



and reframes debates around psychology's central quandaries (experience, mind-body, the nature of self and identity, categorization, prejudice, and so on). We argue that it is DP's particularism that constitutes DP's original contribution to psychology and the social sciences. Those who equate DP's particularism with reductionism routinely miss its central epistemological thrust and theoretical, and empirical, diversity.

Third, there is a tendency to pigeonhole DP among qualitative approaches. Although it can be broadly situated within 'qualitative psychology', it does not share its overall ontological and epistemological orientation. Neither does it share its methods; the main proponents of DP study the world using what Stokoe (2012) describes as 'designedly large-scale' qualitative data; that is, databases of hundreds of instances of recorded encounters, rather than small-scale interview studies of talk generated through a researcher. This does not mean, however, that DP cannot and does not enter into a constructive dialogue with the different/various branches of qualitative inquiry such as action research, narrative research, ethnography, and other styles of doing discourse analysis.

## **Outline of chapters**

Each chapter offers a critical reflection of a foundational text using a similar structure which includes a) summarizing the paper, and locating it in its academic context - identifying the concerns that motivated the author/s, and the particular perspective that informed their thinking; b) identifying the main empirical, theoretical or methodological contribution of the paper and its impact on subsequent work in DP, including the author's own work; and c) concluding with a critical consideration of how DP can continue to develop. Chapters can be read in the order suggested in the outline. However, most chapters can be read (and used) on their own by researchers with specific interests. The book is divided into four sections: Epistemology and method; Cognition, emotion and the psychological thesaurus; Social categories, identity and memory; and Prejudice, racism and nationalism. These sections unite several threads that run through this volume.

The first section, Epistemology and method, focuses on discursive psychology's concern with, and debate over, the context of discursive analyses of talk and text, the realism/relativism controversy, and the production and analysis of 'naturalistic' data. The chapter by Ann Weatherall, discusses the legacy of Margaret Wetherell's work, and revisits the (Wetherell-Schegloff) debate between poststructuralism and conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998). In her rereading of this seminal debate, Weatherall argues that what is key is to keep 'live, political matters in systematic and grounded analyses of texts and talk.' She argues that advancing critical agendas is not the sole prerogative of critical discursive approaches (in the Wetherell lineage). Weatherall uses the example of feminist conversation analysis to illustrate how

this too can advance various critical agendas. In the next chapter, Clara Iversen offers a cogent rereading of the realism/relativism debate in Edwards et al. (1995). Iversen urges discursive psychologists not to abandon or paper over 'old' debates and consider carefully some of the new epistemological assumptions that have replaced them. Like Weatherall, Iversen points to the value of taking relativism seriously without compromising critical agendas and/or cumulative research programs. Next, Alexandra Kent revisits an early account of the relevance of conversation analysis for discursive psychology. She identifies the key epistemological and methodological features of conversation analysis that have contributed to the development of discursive psychology. She argues that the contemporary reliance on the apparatus of conversation analysis for the study of socialization practices, social categories, intersubjectivity, and so on, is grounded in a series of principles derived from conversation analysis's cumulative research program. The cumulative findings of CA are a good basis for any discursive analysis, especially when what is at stake is demonstrating the pervasiveness of social order 'at all points' (as Sacks would argue). Given the continuous relevance of conversation analysis in discursive psychology researchers ought to discuss more directly not only the advantages, but also some of the challenges brought about by using conversation analysis in their work.

In the next chapter, Simon Goodman and Susan Speer, address the distinction between naturally occurring and contrived data drawing on the work of Jonathan Potter. They argue against viewing naturally occurring and so called 'contrived' data as discrete 'types'. They contend that research using contrived data (data from interviews or focus groups) can also yield productive findings.

By considering carefully the relationship between method, context and source of data discursive psychologists can offer more insightful analyses into situated discursive and social practices. Overestimating the primacy of the naturalistic record risks losing sight of other ways of producing data, which can still be considered 'natural'. Chapter five, by Tim Rapley, also engages with questions and arguments around context, method and nature of data, when assessing what can be gained from treating interviews as both topic and resource.

The second section, Cognition, emotion and the psychological thesaurus, deals with papers that are core in DP's challenge to psychology's conventional way of dealing with notions such as cognition, thought, understanding, attitudes, emotion, as products of individual mental states. Chapters in this section discuss and illustrate DP's concerted attempt at the respecification of psychology's traditional thesaurus as situated discursive practices. Hedwig te Molder revisits discursive psychology's post-cognitive aspiration, and offers a commentary on the status assigned to cognition in the analysis of interaction. te Molder argues that the flourishing, and promise, of post-cognitive interaction research lies in careful analysis of participants' situated practices rather than 'real' thinking and underlying, putative, cognitions.

The chapter by Sally Wiggins offers critical reading of how discursive psychology is challenging social psychologists' understandings of the concept of 'attitudes'. Wiggins charts the move from attitudes to evaluations by focusing on two substantive aspects raised in the work of Jonathan Potter: the subtle and contingent variation of evaluative practices in social interaction, and the need for attending to subject-object relations. Discursive psychologists should not

abandon the concept of 'attitudes' but instead provide a more refined description of actual evaluative practices people use in their everyday lives.

Carrie Childs and Alexa Hepburn explore the legacy of DP's respecification of emotion taking as their starting point Derek Edwards's work on 'emotion discourse'. The discursive psychology of emotion is presented as an enterprise that treats emotions as something that can be 'invoked, described and made accountable for the purposes of actions in talk.' Childs and Hepburn give numerous examples of interactive uses of emotion terms, and discuss the various interactional consequences of avowing or ascribing emotions in everyday and institutional settings. Childs and Hepburn identify new avenues for a discursive psychology of emotion: the study of empathy, emotion and experience, etc. Carly Butler offers a contemporary exegesis of Derek Edwards's work on DP and developmental issues. She considers thought and understanding in children's talk as situated discursive practice, and argues that developmental psychology and discursive psychology could benefit from a more systematic dialogue and interdisciplinary ethos. In a similar vein, Karin Osvaldsson addresses the critique of 'theory of mind' found in a seminal paper written by Charles Antaki. She uses the example of child development and the measurement of children's competence to make the case that psychological models based on putative inner mental states and capabilities cannot account satisfactorily for the relationship between social interaction, development and issues of cognitive competence. In her view discursive psychology plays a crucial role in illuminating the contextually bound ways in which thinking and understanding is displayed in social interaction, 'the steps and actions that people take to make themselves understandable to each other.' A shift from perceptual-realism to rhetoric and

situated interaction is also to be found in discursive work on script formulations. Neill Korobov argues that this shift is paramount in understanding how one can analyze in non-cognitive terms psychological notions (like scripts) that are traditionally described in cognitive terms.

The third section examines DP's core writing in the areas of Social categories, identity and memory. This is, of course, not removed from DP's respecification project, and attends to the nature and uses of social categories and identities, interactional dimensions of memory and remembering, script formulations, as well as DP's engagement with studying mediated discourses of various kinds. In their respective chapters, Richard Fitzgerald and Sean Rintel, and Sue Widdicombe, take up the issue of categorization as something 'we do things with', and expand it to a series of fresh insights for researching social categories and identities in talk and text. Fitzgerald and Rintel use the example of affinities between discursive psychology and membership categorisation analysis to call for a reorientation towards researching categories as members' phenomena. Widdicombe's exegesis brings the question of why, how and when categories become relevant to bear upon traditional social psychological work in social identity and self-categorization theories. She argues that researcher-generated questions can be profitably replaced or complemented with questions that arise from the careful appraisal of 'identity categories in everyday contexts, as used and oriented to by participants.' Both chapters argue against an *a priori* notion of social categories and identities. Both argue that starting with participants' orientations is crucial to 'an understanding of society and its categories through interactions of members.' Whereas traditional social psychological approaches propose a perceptual-realist take on categories and

identities, discursive approaches emphasize the situated – rhetorical and interactional – nature of categories and identities. The topic of early work on interactional remembering, and contemporary reverberations is discussed by Steve Brown and Paula Reavey. Although they are in broad agreement with the basic assumptions of a discursive psychology of remembering they argue that the full potential of a discursive psychology of memory is not fulfilled without the acknowledgment and inclusion of what authors call ‘extra-discursive matters’, issues of embodied action, mediated communication, temporality, biography, morality, and so on. Frederick Attenborough is showing how DP can be used to recontextualise and redescribe mediated communication in the public sphere. DP is not antinomial to a project of charting the rhetorical, interactive, situated communications of the media; quite the contrary – with an analytic apparatus attuned to the various uses and functions of common sense psychological thesaurus, and sensitivity to analysing descriptions/accounts DP is perfectly positioned to contribute to a systematic project of analysing media in action.

The final section, Prejudice, racism and nationalism, deals with DP’s longstanding concern with ideology, and questions of context(s) that move the analysis beyond the mechanics and pragmatics of moment-by-moment turn-taking. DP has a long tradition of what Jonathan Potter has recently called ‘more ideological streams of discourse work’ (2012, p. 437). The papers chosen for this section are only a few, illustrious, early examples of this trend in researching prejudice, racism, nationalism. The commentators are the exponents of an established strand of discourse work that engages more closely with the findings and insights of mainstream (social) psychology, and urges discursive psychology

to include in their analyses issues such rhetoric, embodied verbal and non-verbal practices, material and extra-discursive environments, mediated communication, wider power dynamics at societal level.

Martha Augoustinos revisits the story of the significance of the rhetorical turn in social psychology for the study of prejudice, and how this opened a new and original way to examine the language of prejudice in text and talk. The quandaries of everyday and institutional prejudice can be more confidently approached and analysed by using discursive and rhetorical methods. Kevin Durrheim offers a commentary on Condor's classic critique of race stereotypes in social psychology. Durrheim credits Condor's work as the first systematic attempt at highlighting that stereotyping and prejudice originate in the interactional context between people. Yet, as Durrheim argues, race stereotypes are not only constructed linguistically but also, in contradictory and ambivalent ways, in discourses and social practices (including those of researchers) that support or critique inequality and dominance. In developing an argument around stereotyping and prejudice, Durrheim also points to some of the limits of discursive analysis of stereotyping and prejudice.

In their rereading of the Potter and Wetherell 1988 classic John Dixon and Stephanie Taylor make a case for researching racist evaluations by establishing (necessary) links between the physical environments in which evaluations are constructed and wider power struggles within a society. They show how a critique of the traditional concept of 'attitude' does not have to be limited to the primacy of linguistic constructions. Treating racial evaluations as more than linguistic evaluations, and understanding the relationship between discursive practices and what they call 'embodied practices of social evaluation' is as



important. Stephen Gibson engages with Billig's 'banal nationalism' thesis as an illustration of ideological analysis of broader ideological themes. He shows how Billig's critique of Rorty proceeds by uncovering unstated assumptions and hidden ideological themes. Gibson argues that ideological analysis should retain its place in discursive psychology as a driver for critical agendas – not only in identifying and analyzing broader societal ideological themes but also as a tool against the increasingly conventional and conventionalized academic capitalism.

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Over the course of more than twenty-five years, DP has developed, and transformed, into an original and innovative program of research with far-reaching impact for both psychology and for many other disciplines. Researchers have been drawn to its radically reversed understanding of language as an action-oriented, world-building resource, rather than a tool of transmission and straightforward communication from one mind to another. They have also been drawn to its methods for understanding social life and its rejection of more traditional, researcher-driven (whether qualitative or quantitative) ways to understand human sociality. As Loughborough DARG members ourselves, we are very proud to work in the traditions built by our colleagues and are passionate about its contribution to psychology and beyond, as well as to its comprehensibility. We hope that this book contributes to make DP's transformation, and DP's particularism, understandable, and hope that it works to dismiss what are often caricatured misunderstandings of its broader aims and vision as well as local practices for empirical working. We also hope it will help foster more critical perspectives upon DP's intellectual and empirical agenda.

Discursive psychology is, and can continue to be, an intellectual home for any researcher that takes seriously the study of situated social practices.

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