A discursive psychological perspective on theoretical matters of identity.

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This essay will begin by locating discursive psychology within psychology as a discipline and describing some of the tensions that exist within it. It will subsequently introduce the concept of identity and attempt to elucidate some of the different perspectives that currently exist within the discursive psychology field pertaining to how it should be conceptualised. The focus of the essay will then be directed towards the extent to which identity is socially or personally constructed. Consideration will then be taken over the extent to which a psychoanalytic standpoint and an integrative approach can contribute towards our understanding of the issues raised.

At the close of the 20th century, in the context of an emerging critical psychology movement, a ‘discursive psychology’ was also beginning to amass support, within social psychology in particular. Like critical psychology, the discursive psychology movement developed in opposition to mainstream social psychology of a cognitive and experimental nature. Additionally, however, it sought to reorient the discipline to make the study of discourse its primary focus. Furthermore, the movement advocates a shift from quantitative to qualitative research (Billig, 2009). At the same time, within qualitative research more generally, a so-called ‘turn to narrative’ was developing amongst researchers allied to a range of different disciplines (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Narrative psychology can be viewed as a branch within discursive psychology that is specifically focused on one form of discourse, personal biography. In other words, its aim is to analyse the stories we construct about our lives. From within this humanistic approach, an important metaphor emerged, ‘life as narrative’, one that emphasises the way in which the stories we tell, shape our worlds as we perceive them (Bruner, 1986).
Discourse analysis is a methodology with interdisciplinary appeal that is concerned with the specifics of what people say, in terms of word selection and how their sentences and accounts are structured (Potter & Edwards, 2001). The version of discourse analysis adopted by discursive psychology is applied to fundamental social psychological issues. Moreover, it assigns equivalent importance to what people say, as well as how they say it and what is left unsaid (Forrester, 2010). The implications are also explored of selecting certain accounts over others – for what purpose do people construct their accounts in the way that they do? As mentioned previously, a critique of mainstream psychology methodology is a primary focus point of discursive psychology (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005) and this encompasses a rejection of a cognitive concept of language (Billig, 2009). A central assumption in cognitive psychology is that the mind is, essentially, an information processor, dependent on internal representations of the external environment (Branquinho, 2001). For those in cognitive psychology or psycho-linguistics, language is an abstract and rule-based system that can offer a means to indirectly observe, and thus draw conclusions about, the inner structures and workings of the mind (Wetherell, 2007). For example, language studies have been employed to elucidate the workings of ‘articulatory loops’ (Baddeley and Hitch, 1974) or infer the way in which stimuli are mentally processed and categorised according to a speaker’s choice of language category (Rosch, 1975). Similarly, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) assert that use of a certain metaphor is indicative of a certain psychological experience that is attributable to a common cognitive schema amongst users. By contrast, as Harré (2002) asserted, discursive psychology sees little utility in applying empirical experimental procedures that look at language behaviour, only in order to investigate the inherently unobservable, entities that can only be examined indirectly. A further criticism of mainstream psychology is that it is vulnerable to the limitations that arise from carrying out research in artificial experimental settings. Investigations of human behaviour in this context, is constrained by external validity issues and ethical restrictions. Most importantly, however, cognitive psychology is distracted from the intricacies of language and the value of studying how it is used from day to day to engage in complicated social practices (Billig, 2009). In this way, it fails to acknowledge, or exploit, a vast and valuable resource that is the primary component of everyday social life – discourse.

On the other hand, for discursive psychologists, naturally occurring talk and text is the principle source of data and the unit of analysis is not the individual but ‘discursive practices’. Moreover, discursive psychology rejects the reductionist notion that language-behaviour is simply a reflection of the computational processes that produced it (Edwards, 1997). Instead, it concerns itself with language as a performance, it is viewed as an activity in itself and it is generated for a purpose (Harré, 1994). As a result, discursive psychologists ask what discourse can be seen to be ‘doing’ in different settings, rather than what it is communicating about internal states (Wittgenstein, 1980). Wittgenstein
pioneered the argument that the phrases within psychological language, mental predicates such as ‘I think’, ‘I believe’, ‘I feel’ etc., do not represent physical internal processes. Instead, they are derived from, and exist purely within, social communicative practice in the context of a publicly acknowledged framework of grammar and meaning. Despite its merits however, qualitative research of a discursive nature is too often conducted in a manner that attracts criticism pertaining to its lack of analytical rigour. These criticisms are levied from both quantitative experimental psychologists, and from discursive researchers commenting on the quality of analysis within their own field. Wetherell (2007) describes the explicit motivation that exists within psychological discourse studies to advance qualitative discourse analytic methodology in general, in order to develop a more systematic, analytic approach to tackling talk and text. The progress the field is making in this regard, however, is decidedly mixed. Antaki et al., (2003), for example, to aid new discursive researchers and help quell criticisms of the field, carried out an evaluation of the shortcomings prevalent in discourse analysis within psychology – treatment of transcribed talk or text that falls short of researchers actually analysing their data. Common examples include researchers merely summarising transcripts, over-quoting in attempted explanation and simply justifying a speaker’s perspective. Other such instances involve researchers engaging in a circular attribution of mental constructs and discourses, feature spotting or extrapolating the use of discourses by certain categories of speaker to universal categories. Significant variation in quality of research is present within the field and unfortunately detracts from the true potential of discourse analysis and the insight it can offer.

Up until this point, discursive psychology has been presented as a coherent psychological perspective. Only the common ground, a focus on the practicalities of language and a fundamental anti-cognitivist impetus, has been discussed. In reality, discursive psychology is a fractionated discipline encompassing multiple and varying discursive approaches (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). One primary source of division, as described by Billig (2009), is the degree of consideration for ideological matters and social theory that approaches see fit to employ in their analysis of discourse. Consequently, four major strands (amongst others), defined as conversation analysis, rhetorical psychology, an ethogenic approach and critical discourse analysis, can also be regarded as sitting on a continuum that ranges from a micro to macro analytic approach (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). In relation to the role that social theory has within discursive psychology, micro-level conversation analysts oppose the application of discourse analysis to any matter that extends beyond the discourse transcribed (Edwards, 1997). Making psychological assumptions about the speaker, aside from those explicitly divulged by the speaker themselves, offends conversation analysts in a way that results in accusations of researchers unjustly imposing their own viewpoints onto those of the speaker. Researchers are thought to have no business analysing discourse in relation to their own
theoretically based interpretations. For example, a feminist reading of a certain interaction might recognise an imbalance in gender power in the way speakers respond to each other. However, if this isn’t explicitly alluded to by the speakers themselves, it isn’t a valid form of analysis: the way participants in an interaction have understood what has transpired, is the way in which it should be analysed (Schlegoff, 1997).

In contrast to the analytic restrictions proposed by conversation analysts, it can be claimed that a consideration of social theory is in fact necessary to understand and analyse the ideological characteristics of discourse (Wetherell, 1998). Ignoring these characteristics, arguably results in a particularly narrow view on the data analysed without consideration of context. A slightly different argument is put forward by Billig (1999), a proponent of rhetorical discursive psychology, who claims that these types of ideological or socio-cultural assumptions are inescapable. Through a discursive analysis of the academic writing in conversation analytic studies, he suggests that conversation analysis itself involves implicit assumptions about the way of the world. In not delving into the wider context of people’s social positions for example, it assumes equal rights of speakership in what Billig (1999, p.543) terms a ‘participatory view of the world’. At the furthest, ‘macro’ end of the spectrum, critical discourse analysis employs a concept of discourse inspired by the philosophy of Foucault. Whereas other perspectives primarily concern themselves with what a speaker is doing through language in specific discursive contexts, Foucauldian or critical discourse analysis, takes it a step further and looks to describe a framework of discursive practices that, crucially, is situated within a socio-historical context (Parker, 2002). As a result, however, this type of approach has attracted criticism that it presents an overly abstract and idealised notion of discourse (Billig, 2009). Critical discourse analysis is also most likely to be the approach used within a socio-political arena to advance political arguments and ideals. In reaction to this assumption, a number of conversation analysts have strived to demonstrate that a purely conversation analytic approach can equally be applied in this respect where others have doubted its utility. Kitzinger and Frith (1999) for instance, demonstrated that analysis of how people actually communicate refusals and how they are perceived in the context of sexual consent interactions, can yield empirical results of value for refusal skills interventions and rape prevention.

In terms of a discursive approach to identity, Wetherell (2007) is among those who believe that discourse psychology can offer a new theoretical language and novel conceptual frameworks for addressing age old psychological issues. Similarly, Frosh et al., (2003) assert that describing the way in which people locate themselves within a socially and culturally defined spectrum of identity positions, fashioned from historically established discourses, is a principle contribution of discursive psychology as a field. Given the variety of discourse analytic research, it isn’t surprising that there also exists a multitude of
different perspectives, within discursive psychology, on exactly what ‘identity’ refers to, its properties and the approach that should be adopted in studying them (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). It is perhaps prudent therefore to begin with a broad and flexible definition of identity before entering into the specifics of how it is conceptualised within different discursive approaches. Thus, identity, in its most general sense, can be understood in terms of our sense of self, sense of belonging and how we perceive ourselves in relation to others. Furthermore, from a discursive psychological perspective each of these has language at its centre (Joseph, 2010).

Studies of identity in a range of different disciplines have yielded a number of divisive questions - is there one or many? Are they stable? Are they relational, individual or collective? (Vignoles et al., 2011). An advocate of a long held view on identity, Edwards (2009) argues that the word ‘identity’ originates from the Latin word idem meaning the same, and claimed that similarity is the essence of identity, in the sense that it is indicative of traits that remain the same over time. Within discursive psychology, however, one area of relatively common ground is that identity is no longer interpreted as a stable, overarching property that is inherent within an individual and that determines our action and our language. Alternatively, identity is viewed as an emergent and fluid product of social behaviour, in particular, language. Moreover, identities are not seen to be governed by the normative categories people are assigned. Evidence for this is especially apparent in studies of transgender identities (Barret, 1999) or where there is conflict between national identities and ethnicity (Rampton, 1995). Equally, discursive psychology has conceptualised multiple identities or different facets of identity that can both be in conflict and held simultaneously (Bucholtz and Hall, 2010; Frosh, 2002; Spencer and Taylor, 2004). Our primary identities - gender, ethnic, religious and national identities (Edwards, 2009) - together with a host of identities on a more local scale, are profoundly linked with language and text. That all speakers of the same language do not sound the same is evidence of the fact that the function of language is significantly more complex than simple communication. On the contrary, dialects specific to class and region for example, can denote social belonging. Equally, the specifics of word selection or intonation signify our purpose of communication, e.g. ridicule or praise, as well as a huge number of personal traits, life experience and future hopes. Many of these things that are signalled are also instantly interpreted and understood by those with whom we are interacting (Joseph, 2010). In this way, identity is clearly communicated through language but the case has also been made within discursive psychology that identities are constructed through discourse (McInnes and Corlett, 2012).

This question of whether identities are ‘constructed’ is particularly divisive across multidisciplinary studies of identity and a is source of debate which will now be explored in greater detail. One view suggests that there is a real or true nature to ‘the self’, that
identity is inherent within a person and exists before it is revealed through self-discovery (Waterman, 1986). By contrast, discursive psychology primarily lends itself to a constructionist view whereby identities, from the starting point of a fresh canvas, are cultivated rather than ever-present or assigned. Within discursive psychology however, opinion diverges according to the extent that identities are personally or socially constructed. A post-structuralist perspective regards people and their identities as wholly embedded in a social relational world. This perspective is prevalent within critical discourse analysis, widely adopted by those who draw upon a priori theoretical standpoints in their exploration of macro-level phenomena such as sexuality or gender. There is no element of personal construction and experiences and interiority are seen as irrelevant. Instead, there is a socially and culturally determined set of identities or ‘discursive resources' from which people draw to fashion their sense of self. In this way, identities, the individual and all else belonging to the psychological domain are seen as inseparable from the socio-cultural framework within which we exist (Gergen, 2001).

As mentioned previously, the study of biographies or life narratives can be seen as a sub-domain within discursive psychology. Within narrative psychology, the degree that identities are personally or culturally constructed is largely bound up in the debate concerning the relationship between identity and narrative (Smith and Sparkes, 2006). A view sympathetic with post-structuralist ideals would argue that narrative, constructed from culturally available resources, is identity. The inner life stories that we create are seen to be the essence of who we are and these narratives are updated and retold throughout our lives (Randell, 2001). The inseparable nature of narrative and identity is also apparent in another, slightly nuanced version of this argument. Kelly and Dickinson (1997) assert that there is no such thing as ‘identity’ prior to its constitution through narrative. However, this arguably extreme theoretical stance poses a number of justified concerns for other narrative researchers and has been labelled by some as a form of social reductionism or linguistic determinism (Crossley, 2003; Neisser, 1994). Whilst fully endorsing the important contribution that narrative makes to the construction and preservation of our perception of identity, for many narrative psychologists, the notion that everything we believe ourselves to be can be reduced to the stories we tell, is an overestimation of narrative significance. Such a view critically overlooks personal inner experience of a psychological, neural, cultural and social nature (Eakin, 1999). It is the question of how people come to choose different discursive resources to construct their narratives or sense of self, that is comparatively less explored in post-structuralist research and indeed it poses one of the greatest challenges to it (Frosh et al., 2003). This issue of choice seems to implicate the individual in the process. Post-structuralist perspectives would argue that specific contextual constraints determine investment in a particular discursive resource thus eliciting one facet of identity over another (Taylor and Littleton, 2006). However, this type of view constitutes a deterministic portrayal of human agents.
whereby people, their mental states and their psychological processes cannot be seen, whatsoever, to explain or be the basis for their actions.

A counter argument to the post-structuralist perspective that narrative is identity comes from an approach to narrative that employs a psychoanalytic understanding (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). Such a perspective asserts that the narratives people construct for themselves to make sense of their worlds are inevitably influenced by their emotions. As a result, for the purposes of defence or self-preservation, narratives are likely superficial, shallow or idealised versions of a truer and perhaps more uncomfortable sense of self (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Rather than explicitly reflect a person’s identity or sense of self, narratives act as a veil to what is perhaps more uncomfortable. Consequently, the view that the self is merely ‘an effect of language’ appears overly simplified and even counter-intuitive given the discrepancy between what people say and what they actually feel (Craib, 2000). Discursive psychological perspectives on identity influenced by psychoanalysis distinguish between the cultural and personal aspect of identity and deems there is an over-emphasis in constructionist thought on the extent to which cultural meaning constitutes subjectivity (Chodorow, 1999).

Hollway and Jefferson (2005) are proponents of a psychosocial perspective whereby they recognise the part that the socio-cultural has to play in how a person constructs their sense of self, yet maintain that it is not entirely reducible to the social. As a result, this view avoids the portrayal of an entirely passive subject (McNay, 2000). As is common throughout discursive psychology, they identify the way that social and culturally specific discourses produce a variety of subject positions. Crucially, however, they give credence to, and attempt to understand the effects of, the unconscious dynamics at play when ‘investing in’ these discursive resources or identities. Hollway and Jefferson, warn against talking of ‘choice’ on account of its connotations of a rational subject who’s decision making could conform to an information processing model of an individual, one that could function without consideration of the social. In this way, they also steer clear from a cognitive-based mentalist account, of a reductionist nature, as has previously been described. Instead, it is beneficial to talk about people’s ‘investment’ in any of the available discursive positions which importantly removes the reflexive, conscious nature of their selection. Thus, a psychoanalytic influence is apparent in the resulting view that human agency is determined through unconscious processes (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005).

The very notion of employing an explanation for identity that evokes the unobservable ‘unconscious’ seems at odds with their emphasis on studying language as an observable process. However, it has also been argued that the unconscious, like identity, is similarly discursively constructed. Billig (1997) uses the specific example of the discursive construction of repression for which the argument runs as follows. Through learning what
is acceptable and polite in language, children also learn what not to say. As something that is prohibited, the things that are not supposed to be said become inherently desirable and it is therefore necessary to constantly divert them from our awareness, or in other words, repress them. Consequently, we also learn how to direct our inner thoughts given that we accept the argument that our inner thoughts are created modelled with respect to external discursive activity, which can now be seen as the basis for the act of repression. By extension, this argument can be seen to demonstrate how our unconscious is itself a product of socially and culturally relevant discourses as well as playing a role in fashioning our sense of self. Indeed, Billig (2006) has proposed a psychoanalytic discursive psychology which recognises the role of the individual and the unconscious and still avoids the mentally reductionist outlook that describes everything in terms of hidden mental states that are unquantifiable.

Similarly, Vignoles et al. (2011) set out an integrative approach that suggests there is an interplay between the social and personal construction of identities. Through investigating the extent to which both play a part, it is possible to recognise the circumstances that will determine the likelihood of a person internalising or challenging the socially constructed categories of identity. In this way, Vignoles et al. (2011) propose a view with a useful social application. To illustrate the way in which personal and social aspects both play a part, they ask a reader to imagine a person of ethnic minority who aspires to be a doctor. Due to her ethnic background and the sociocultural stereotypes attached she is demonstrating agency in acting against cultural constraints that apply to her ethnic identity and might ordinarily act to prevent such aspiration. Yet at the same time it is argued they still exist and just by being aware of them they exert an influence. Going further than this, there are those who have argued that there is room for reconciliation even between the two very different conceptualisations of an identity that is inherent and to be discovered and identity as something that is discursively constructed. Schwartz (2002) claims that the act of identity construction may operate as a route to identity discovery. Put differently, personally constructing an identity can be seen as a process that is necessary in order to realise your innate identity potential. There is also an argument for an integrative approach in terms of the different levels of analysis that exist within discursive psychology as discussed previously. A case can be made that they each address the different levels of demographic, cultural and temporally specific identity categories, and that to produce a complete and coherent picture it is perhaps advantageous to study these different facets from a range of analytic perspectives (Bulcholtz and Hall, 2010). Wetherell et al., (2007) for instance advocated an approach to identity that combines a Foucauldian, conversation analytic and Bhatkin inspired outlook to overcome the disadvantages of each. In terms of the different perspectives and theoretical standpoints, it is worth noting that the degree to which some of these different strands are discrete and fixed is perhaps overemphasized.
In reality, the boundaries present between them are by no means clear cut and nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive (Smith and Sparkes, 2008).

In conclusion, this essay has situated the discursive movement within psychology as a discipline and subsequently described the various positions that exist in relation to conceptions of identity within discursive psychology. In particular, the relative contributions to identity from the individual and from a socially defined set of discursive identity positions have been examined. Within the discursive field there has been a relatively sparse contribution of work that attempts to directly chart the diverging conceptualisations about the extent to which identity is personally or socially constructed. These endeavours, however, are exactly what are needed to develop an improved understanding of the nature of identity by initiating a dialogue between different perspectives (Berger & Quinney, 2005). This will also prove advantageous for developing an integrative perspective of identity which, as suggested, may prove to be an optimum approach.


