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Disciplinary and the application of social research response

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Disciplinary and the application of social research

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Abstract

This response to Corcoran (2010) and Abell and Walton (2010) is organized around four key issues. 1. *Disciplinarity*: against a focus on the standard disciplinary boundaries of social psychology, and the conventional qualitative/quantitative division, it highlights meta-theoretical, theoretical and empirical disagreement over the object of analysis. 2. *Social cognition*: doubts about a suggested overlap between the concerns and methods of social cognition and discursive psychology are outlined. 3. *Naturalistic data*: the virtues of working with records of people living their lives outside of the narrow situations got up by social researchers are reiterated. 4. *Application*: the applied success of discursive psychological research is illustrated.

Disciplinarity and the application of social research

Tim Corcoran (2010) and Jackie Abell and Chris Walton (2010) have paid me the best of academic compliments by developing some thoughtful points in response to Potter (2010). These points raise profound issues for the nature of the discipline of social psychology and the broader enterprise of social research. I am not going to address them all. In particular, I will leave the reader to judge the success of Corcoran's proposed alternative form of discourse work and whether his favoured collection of theorists and approaches coheres together into something new. With respect to concrete research examples, Corcoran (2003) is very much in the mould of Critical Discourse Analysis. Discursive psychologists have typically been sympathetic to the political concerns of CDA yet sceptical of its conceptualization of discourse practices and its cognitivist assumptions (Wooffitt, 2005). Corcoran (2005) is an illustration rather than a study, so it is difficult to assess as part of a realised programme of research.

What I propose to do in this reply is speak to some of the broader points raised by both commentaries with the hope that this will interest a wider audience. I will focus on four themes: disciplinarity, the status of discourse in social cognition, the importance of naturalistic data, and the way discursive psychology (DP) can sustain different forms of application. Again, I should emphasise that this is a personal view; I am not speaking for all the different researchers who style themselves as discursive psychologists.

Disciplinarity

This debate has hopefully thrown interesting light onto the vibrant nature of contemporary social psychology. However, the social psychological framing also provides a

distortion to those of us who spend much of our time working with a more interdisciplinary canvas, publishing in sociology or discourse journals as well as psychology ones, and going to a range of conferences that cut across the social sciences. We have had intriguingly different debates with colleagues in sociology for example (e.g. see Edwards, Hepburn & Potter, 2009). Disciplines are increasingly organizational frames that provide their own powerful influences on the content of scientific thinking, which are not precisely separate from, yet are not precisely equivalent to, direct academic and empirical concerns.

In the current era, scientific fields such as psychology or social psychology are subject to multiple forms of surveillance. Professional organizations, benchmarking, the UK Research Excellence Framework, *Harzing's Publish or Perish* citation metrics, all provide their own way of defining and indexing quality, and thereby having a direct impact on the flow of resources. Whatever else Foucault's work is useful for, his understanding of the disciplinary role of surveillance has massive contemporary relevance in the area of science disciplines. Some time ago (before Web of Science, or indeed any web at all) Diana Hicks and I wrote that citation analysis can be viewed:

as a disciplinary and interpretative practice which, through its activities, renders scientific activity as a particular kind of object. And the notion of (a) 'discipline' is especially apposite here, as it operates in three senses: as a scientific specialty; a training where the mind is disciplined; and as an institution (subjective and objective) of correction and control. 'Bibliometric data' may become the touchstone of promotion, research funding, the closure of telescopes and the award of stars for excellence.

Citation counting also can become a new arena of self-observation and self-regulation for scientists (Hicks & Potter, 1991).

Similar arguments could be made about British Psychological Society Benchmarking or the Research Excellence Framework. The key point is that these forms of surveillance can pull in very different directions to developments in theory and method, and the accumulation of

findings. The organizational 'push' of social psychology may be relatively benign, but it is still exerting a continued effect on the content of what is published and the policing of boundaries.

Abell and Walton (2010) provide a useful service with their survey of empirical qualitative research in the BJSP. They are right to highlight the plurality of what has been published – including different variants of discourse work: conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, discursive psychology, classic discourse analysis and post structuralist work – alongside interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory work and plain thematic analysis. There is always a tension with academic categories such as these between their role as names for collections of people and as labels that collect together different sorts of assumptions, methods and values. Both uses of categories tend to be flexible and rhetorical (Potter, 1988) such that we should be cautious not to infer too much on the basis of surveys of this kind. It is important to maintain a sophisticated critical frame when considering the various meta-descriptions used by psychologists and other social researchers.

There are different ways of dividing up research fields which highlight key theoretical and analytic bifurcations. Again, I am emphasising ways of organizing our understanding of work that flow from arguments rather than from organizational names. One argument central to many discursive psychologists focuses on the way different areas of work reproduce perceptual-cognitivist meta-theory in their research practices. When we wrote *Discursive Psychology* in the early 1990s, Derek Edwards and I introduced it as 'an extended argument with perceptual-cognitivism in the guise of memory research and the social psychology of causal attribution' (1992: 2). That is, we highlighted the way a large swathe of research in psychology starts with the perceptual-cognitivist picture of the individual

information processor managing incoming perceptual information in various modalities (for a full explication see Edwards, 1997). This picture is supported by, and supports, particular kinds of methodological practices. The classic social cognition experiment manipulates perceptual input in some way and then uses the output to build a picture of cognitive processes and structures. Strikingly, much alternative qualitative research also works with a version of this picture. In this work open ended interviews are used to get at subjective structures (of consciousness in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, of mentally encoded discourses in important strands of Critical Discourse Analysis). The point I am making is that the methodological choices, including the choice of data to collect, are connected to the position the researcher takes (mostly as a taken for granted background assumption) on perceptual-cognitivism.

Social Cognition

In this section I want to sketch some doubts about the possible merging of research topics and methods between social cognitive and discursive work. When Abell and Walton (2010) highlight research in 'mainstream' social psychology that recognises that cognition and culture are interrelated or that language shapes how we relate to one another they are missing the basic conceptualization of language as a practical and situated medium. DP has a longstanding critical relationship to social representations theory, for example (Potter & Edwards, 1999). Social representations theory sometimes uses qualitative methods such as ethnography and emphasizes the constructive role of shared mental representations; but this does not, in itself, make it closer to DP than, say, experimental work in social cognition. The division of psychology into qualitative and quantitative camps has in many ways, been enormously intellectually destructive. The key point for DP is whether any research

approach includes an adequate account of language and social practice. The DP critique all along has been that much psychological work fails to take seriously (at the level of theory, but crucially in the concrete particulars of research practice) the practical and radically situated nature of language.

Abell and Walton (2010) propose Livingstone, Spears and Manstead (2009) as an example of new work from the social cognition tradition that offers an indication of possible rapprochement and even integration of different traditions. Let me spend a moment on this. It is an interesting and original study. However, its use of 'thematic textual analysis' applied to speeches and interviews, with the aim of revealing the way the goals and interests of social groups are contested, does not *itself* demonstrate a radical departure from perceptual-cognitivism nor a deep rapprochement with DP. Indeed, one of the great undeclared virtues of performing thematic analysis of speeches and interviews for perceptual-cognitivist researchers is that it provides them with enormous interpretative licence. This can be exploited to allow them to furnish the heads of participants with all sorts of cognitive processes and mechanisms.

Take Livingstone, Spears and Manstead's (2009) use of political speeches. These have been typically treated in social research as decontextualized texts that are composed of arguments or rhetorical tropes rather than situated and interactional occasions. These arguments and tropes can easily be, and often are, related directly to putative underlying cognitive or ideological structures. The level of decontextualization becomes clear when the researchers make no distinction in the paper between a speech as a prepared script and as an actually delivered interactional occasion. Readers of this paper are simply not told whether the authors used a pre-circulated and embargoed press script or a video or audio recording of the actual delivery. The transcription certainly provides no encoding of

prosody, timing or other features of delivery so it is probably the pre-circulated printed script. This important distinction is not encoded in the paper as something relevant for research. Its lack of relevance follows from perceptual-cognitivism; for the kind of interactional tradition of which DP is part, the situated delivery is crucial.

In a parallel way, Livingstone, Spears and Manstead (2009) pay no attention to the open ended research interview as a powerful interactional occasion in its own right. As Potter and Hepburn (2005, 2007, in press; see also Rapley, 2001) highlight with qualitative interviews across the social sciences, it wipes out the role of the interviewer by: (a) avoiding any representation of the interview set up, and in particular what the participants were told when they were recruited; (b) reporting only extracts from interviewees' answers with no reporting of interviewer's questions; and (c) turning the interviewee's talk into play script that avoids any attention to prosody, overlap, delay, emphasis and so on.

Put differently, there is no opportunity for readers to engage with these interviews as interactional occasions and to assess how the interviewee's talk may be responsive in different ways to the interviewer's question design and delivery. Conversation analysts have highlighted the powerful operation of topic and action agendas, prefaces and presuppositions, preference organizations and different forms of interactional constraints when questions are built, as well as identifying the way answerers can manage those constraints, resisting preferences and agendas, and reworking the presuppositions (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Raymond, 2003; see papers in Freed & Ehrlich, 2010). Laid out very simply, then, the analytic machinery here works to wipe out consideration of the sorts of actual practices that are a major topic of DP research. More broadly, the argument with experimental social cognition is not a methodological one as such, to be softened when the experimentalists leaven their programmes with some open-ended interviews; the argument

is about the status of the cognitive as a motor for human behaviour and the conceptualization of human practices. DP has systematic meta-theoretical, theoretical, analytic and empirical grounds for being opposed to this when it is instantiated in experiments, when it appears in a wide range of ways of generating and analysing interviews, and when it is played out in perspectives such as interpretative phenomenological analysis or grounded theory. The risk is that Abell and Walton's (2010) vision of an integrated social psychology, attractive though it is in many ways, will obscure profound intellectual conflicts to the detriment of clarity and to the impediment of progress.

Abell and Walton (2010) suggest that DP has worked with a straw man version of social cognition. This is intriguing as nearly 20 years ago the book *Discursive Psychology* tackled this very complaint head on in *Box 1 Straw men and corn dollies*, which discusses the rhetoric of straw man accusations such as this one (1992: 22). Mindful of this, and somewhat unusually in psychology as a discipline, DP has been developed partly through demonstrations that engage with the detail of particular studies. That is, it has built a critical practice which engages with actual disciplinary examples rather than a straw version of the discipline!

In the original book Derek Edwards and I chose classic studies in memory and attribution. Other DP work has engaged with the language categorization model of attribution (Edwards & Potter, 1993, 1999), with social representations theory (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter & Edwards, 1999). And see Charles Antaki and colleagues on the Theory of Mind (Antaki, 2004, 2006) and Michael Billig and others on attitudes (Billig, 1991; Billig et al. 1988) and Edwards (1997) on scripts and schemata, categories, knowledge and emotion. Indeed, the very textual organization of Potter and

Wetherell (1987) as it laid out the programme of discourse analysis for social psychology reflected its deep engagement with the concrete particulars of social psychological studies, and particularly their methodic basis, in the area of attitudes, rules, categorization and social representations. The key argument all along has been that these areas of research are limited in important ways by their failure to engage with the practical and performative nature of language use. Often this kind of careful engagement is able to show how the claims of, say, the language category model for causal attribution, are methodological artefacts of this failure. The argument has been somewhat repetitive, but it clearly still needs to be repeated. There is little evidence that social cognition researchers are willing or interested in taking seriously criticisms from beyond their paradigm (see Douglas & Sutton, 2006 for a use of the language category model which both cites and ignores the long expressed DP critique).

Naturalistic data

Like Corcoran (2010) I believe it is important reflexively to consider the form that social psychological research takes. DP has developed a literary form that is designed to make crucial features of its analytic process inspectable and auditable in a way that is rare in other traditions of qualitative research. When Harvey Sacks (1992) was putting together the basic features of conversation analysis he proposed the goal that the presentation of the research should, as far as possible, put the reader in the same position as the analyst with respect to specific analytic claims being made about the data. DP research takes this aspiration very seriously.

Corcoran is doubtful about the virtues of studying records of people living their lives in everyday and institutional settings. However, this focus is not just an arbitrary one. The

choice to study naturalistic data flows from the recognition of the complex performative nature of talk. This focus is important not just because it provides a form of direct empiricism that is missing in other quantitative and qualitative traditions in social psychology but also because it provides an environment for accessing the *practical* orientations and understandings of participants. These are very difficult to recover from experimental and interview settings. Yet they are a profound resource for testing and grounding analytic claims (for recent expositions of this, see Potter, in press a,b).

Corcoran expresses concerns about the reactivity of naturalistic data and the importance of highlighting the researcher's involvement in its production. This is indeed an important point to address. Discourse and conversation analysts have considered this in different ways, including studying participants' orientations to being recorded (Speer & Hutchby, 2003; Stokoe, 2009). One of the features of working with naturalistic material is that reactivity is something that is analytically tractable.

Corcoran's argument is odd and disingenuous. The material that discourse researchers work with is *massively* less subject to reactivity than experiments or interviews. Both of these procedures are flooded with social science agendas in their questions, vignettes and manipulations and in a wide range of unrecorded and therefore impossible to inspect backstage conversations where participants are recruited, briefed, rejected, and processed in different ways. Discourse researchers have a long tradition of engagement with sociology of scientific knowledge and are sophisticated and realistic in their use of empiricism.

Application

Abell and Walton (2010) and Corcoran (2010) are right to emphasise the importance of application. All too often, however, social psychologists of all persuasions have been able to talk a good story about application, which does not stand up when looked at closely. Indeed, the rhetoric of application in social psychology was one of the earliest topics in the emerging programme of discourse analytic work (Potter, 1982; Potter & Mulvey, 1982).

One of the features of working with records of people living their lives is that participants can be directly addressed in their own terms. There is a direct mapping between their practices and many of the claims made by researchers. Ironically some of the things that are picked out as getting in the way of this, such as the close interactional focus and the Jeffersonian transcription, can actually support such engagement. Two complementary volumes of interactional research illustrate a range of applied possibilities (Antaki, in press; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007). Let me briefly discuss two illustrative examples from contemporary discourse research.

Carly Butler and colleagues (2010) worked with Kids Helpline, which is a national Australian service that offers telephone counselling to children and young people. The research was focused on various aspects of how the helpline does its work. One topic of particular interest was how it achieves its mission of empowering children and developing child-centred practice while at the same time avoiding advice giving. The study identified a practice that was highly suited to delivering such empowerment. This involved the counsellors using interrogatives that implicated advice. Callers were asked about actions that they had made, or would make in the future, that were relevant to resolving their problems. The virtue of working in this way is that callers are able to draw their own conclusions on the basis of their own superior knowledge of their situation and their own

capacities within it. Heritage and Sefi (1992) and Silverman (1997) have shown that standard advice giving is strongly normative and marks an epistemic asymmetry between advisor and advisee. Interrogatives can be used to soften both of these features.

Take the illustrative (and analytically simplified) example below. A client has called and reported that a friend has threatened to ‘bash her’ unless she gives her 15 dollars for losing her eyeliner. Note the way the counsellor builds the interrogative focusing on possible future courses of action on lines 15-17.

9.1.8 Give me some advice

01 **Caller:** >An er< s:sh:she reckons that <I owe her fifteen> dollar:s,

02 because the eyeliner (0.4) costed (0.2) fifteen dollar:s,

03 [(1.0)]

04 **Caller:** [((Chewing noises))] and (1.4) uh:m (0.3) tk now she

05 reckons tha' she's gunna put me in hospital?=like bash me

06 up?

07 (0.7)

08 **Couns:** Ao:h:.=o:ka:y,

09 [(1.0)]

10 **Caller:** [((Chewing noises))]

11 **Couns:** HHhh e-She's really a:ngry isn't she.

12 **Caller:** Yeh ah know. An ah don't know what to do.

13 **Couns:** N:y:eah:..

14 (0.2)

15 **Couns:** .Hhh (0.7) Is there any way that- (0.7) dthat you can:

16 uhm: maybe replace it with an eyeliner th't (.) you

17 can affor:d?

18 (0.7)

19 **Caller:** I doh' have any money.

20 (0.2)

The client's assertion that they do not know what to do is hearable, and heard by the counsellor, as an appeal for help. With the interrogative on 15-17 she identifies a possible course of action that might manage the problem. Note that this form of delivery softens the normative force of advice – there is no 'you *should* do X'. Note also that the interrogative form counters the standard epistemic asymmetry in advice sequences by treating the caller as knowing more (e.g. about what they can afford, what the contingencies effecting this course of action might be).

The client's claim that she does not 'know what to do' (line 12) works as an appeal for help from the counsellor as to how she might address her problem. The counsellor's subsequent interrogative (lines 15-17) can be heard sequentially, and substantively, as responsive to this request for help, as advice. With the interrogative, the counsellor forwards a particular course of action that the client might take to address her problem - replacing the eyeliner with one the client 'can afford'. A question that enquires about the client's capacities is thus used as a vehicle to propose a specific course of future action for the client and, in this respect, is 'doing a suggestion'. As Butler et al. put it:

Rather than assert that the client 'could' replace the eyeliner, the interrogative package downgrades the potential prescriptiveness of the course of future action proposed. The client is invited to respond in terms of her understandings of her own capacities, which attends to her epistemic authority with regards to her lifeworld. The potential prescriptiveness of the reference to a course of future action is thus minimised through softening the asymmetry between counsellor and client. The delays and 'maybe' further mitigate the directiveness of the utterance (2010: 8).

The wider point here is that the analysis captures a recurrent pattern in practices of advice giving – the way client-centred counselling is delivered – and makes sense of what seems a somewhat odd injunction for the helpline counsellors to avoid giving advice. Their counselling is precisely organized to allow the clients to build appropriate and highly

targeted courses of action out of it, drawing on their own authoritative understanding of their situation rather than having to defer to the understandings of the counsellor. Butler and colleagues hope that this will be an important resource for training and quality control. Crucially it is a resource that is based in an explication of the actual practices taking place in the setting itself rather than the normative assumptions that are common in the counselling literature, or findings garnered through simulation or role acting.

There is still a question of how this training can be best delivered. Working within the cluster of ethnomethodological, conversational analytic and discursive psychology approaches Elizabeth Stokoe (2010) has shown us how. In collaboration with Derek Edwards she has produced a series of studies of the practices of mediation, particularly in the context of neighbour disputes (Edwards and Stokoe, 2007; Stokoe, 2010; Stokoe & Edwards, 2010). This work highlights a range of difficulties and dilemmas as mediators manage not just the process of mediation but explicate the 'unknown institution' of mediation to potential clients.

Stokoe has transformed this understanding into a package that can be explored in workshops with mediators and police officers, as a contrast to traditional simulated role-play (she calls this the 'Conversation Analytic Role-play Method' or CARM). Rather than just deliver the research story, the workshops work through direct engagement with recordings and transcripts of actual mediation sessions. The participants work in small chunks through key sections of the interaction. This will be delivered line by line with the transcript synchronized with the digital recording. This is then stopped and the workshop participants have to use their participant skills to conceive of what should come next and why it should come next.

The set up pulls the participants right into the situation where they are highly skilled actors. And yet it also provides an environment for reflexive commentary with peers and an expert interaction researcher. The movement through examples is combined with training in the transcription symbols and (non-technical versions of) various interactional phenomena. Stokoe notes that the participants quickly pick up these technicalities and see its benefits as it helps to get at what is going on from the perspective they have when they are actually doing their job. It highlights precisely the participants' orientations that are relevant to the work of mediating. This model can help explicate a range of features of the practice of mediation from describing what it offers to clients clearly through to the potentially very delicate issue of dealing with possibly racist callers.

The key feature of this set up is that it draws on the long established effectiveness of role play but combines it with, on the one hand, the analytic sophistication in explicating what is going on that comes from interactional research, and, on the other, with high quality records of actual examples of the job being done. Stokoe reports very positive response from mediator groups to these workshops. I have experienced this first hand. I recently attended a 'knowledge transfer' workshop in Edinburgh that brought together interaction analysts and different kinds of practitioners involved in medical support, helplines and mediation. The response to Stokoe's presentation was extraordinary and it is clear that this form of evidence-based training is both powerful and unique. As Stokoe reports on the basis of a series of intensive sessions:

participants quickly saw the value of being able to study talk, in slow motion, in a way that included every pause, perturbation and precise formulation. Indeed several participants described seeing such materials as something of a revelation, and as providing them with some tools that would enable

them to cash out their intuitions about 'how' and 'where' things 'go wrong' in their calls with clients (2010; **).

This applied approach is described in detail in Stokoe's (2010) paper, which also overviews a range of other applications of interaction analysis.

Final thoughts

Abell and Walton (2010) emphasise the commonality between different strands of social psychology. It is indeed important to keep what is shared in mind. Nevertheless, as Popper (1963) and Billig (1987) claim in different ways, it is important to recognise the fundamental role of argument in the development of clear and powerful scientific positions. The shared purpose and the openness to others' ideas are vital; but so is the clarity and rigour that comes from testing claims fully and having a coherent grounding for research. These are profound issues that social psychologists need to grapple with as their discipline develops and as it is positioned in different ways in relation to other social sciences. Part of what is at stake is the very nature of the enterprise of social psychology and the profound, systematic and empirically progressive reconfiguration that discursive psychology offers.

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