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# 6 Constructing Subjects, Producing Subjectivities: Developing Analytic Needs in Discursive Psychology

JEAN McAVOY

## **Introduction**

The publication of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) blueprint for a discursive social psychology was a pivotal moment in the discursive turn in psychology. That transformational text went on to underpin much contemporary discursive psychology; paving the way for what has become an enriching range of analytic approaches, and epistemological and ontological arguments (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001a; 2001b). Twenty years on, and as discursive psychology continues to develop, the approaches it encompasses are becoming more vibrantly contested and a range of positions are forming around what one might appropriately designate a discursive psychology, and what form that discursive psychology should take (Wetherell, forthcoming, 2007).

In this exploratory paper I pursue some of these debates insofar as they offer analytic resources for my PhD study of women's accounts of success and failure. I outline two different strands in discursive psychology; an epistemological constructionism concerned with how meaning is established in interaction; and an ontological constructionism, which takes this somewhat further by looking at the implications of constructions for subjects and subjectivity. I consider a range of resources available for a discursive psychology attentive to the everyday practices of lived lives, to the intersubjective production of meanings and to the theorisation of individual history and individual differences. As part of this, I explore the potential contribution of a psycho-social discursive psychology, significant for the inextricable connection it makes between individual and society, and for how it might inform notions of a dynamic, acting, individual. In this, however, I query whether a discursive psycho-social psychology must necessarily draw upon traditional psychoanalytic architectures.

### **The Empirical Challenge**

The empirical grounding for the work lies in women's talk of success and failure, of being, or not being, 'good-enough'. It is concerned with the intersubjective and reflexive performance and understanding the Self and Other. It explores a subject and a subjectivity loaded with values and moral orders. It explores the discursive positions privileged and the moral orders invoked. Because it assumes that these moral orders entail practices of power, practices which constrain and regulate behaviour, it takes a critical reading of the topic (Henriques, Hollway, Unwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1984; Skeggs, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993).

The following extract is illustrative of the topic. It is presented here to show some of the rich puzzles of subject and subjectivity for which this study is seeking insights; and some of the challenges that analysis will be tackling. This fragment comes from an interview with Louisa, who works in child protection. She has been describing a case where she was successfully involved in removing a child from prostitution. During the case her own life had been threatened on more than one occasion. Louisa went to see her doctor to ask for sleeping pills.

Louisa: [The doctor said] I'm not giving you sleeping pills I am signing you off and all that. Oh-oh, the time of year it was, it was not long before Christmas and he said I am signing you off and he signed me off for five weeks, and I have never ever in my entire working life had more than two weeks off sick, ever, you know so that is the thing about do you equate with coping and I said ooh I've got work and he said we've never given you a sick note here I think. Anyway I said oh no I've too much and he said look, if you have two weeks, you'll come back just before Christmas which, I know what will happen, they'll immediately put you on a duty rota because everybody has Christmas off or people phone in sick. So I know in fact, so it's an issue that I really struggled, I thought an abject failure being off sick at that time.

Jean: Really?

Louisa: Yes, I absolutely really, I just thought it was my, initially, I thought I can't go off sick. It's bloody stupid. It's not as if you have got a broken leg and you are off ice skating, you're being signed off sick as a direct result of the sort of work that you're doing y'know. He was right. The battle was I told my manager five weeks, he wanted me to go back and review it with him and I said no five weeks it is, so we will have it. So five weeks sickness. But I think that I had to adjust to it, in the end, but that was an abject failure for me being off that time, it really was.

Jean: Do you still now?

Louisa: Yes, it's still an issue for me.

Jean: How long ago was this?

Louisa: About three years back.

### **Analytic Choices**

First, why does this need a discursive psychology as a framework for investigation and analysis? The study begins with the premise that post-structuralist theories of language and meaning making provide an important means of understanding human behaviour (Hall, 1997). Both micro and macro discursive formations of language construct lived lives, lived worlds (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001a). The 'success and failure' project is concerned with subjectification, and with subjectivity; with what is done, with what is accomplished in talk. That crucial notion, language as situated social action, is a fundamental principle of discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992) and a fundamental issue for this project examining women's stories. It aims to show some of the discourses available, the subject positions constructed in those discourses, and the conflicts and tensions in those discourses and through this offer some empirical and theoretical illumination of subjectivities and experiences.

The conversation with Louisa then, is going to be analysed via a discursive psychology. This means it privileges the intrinsic importance of language as the primary system of human meaning making. It is attentive to function in language, to its action. It is concerned with the interpretative repertoires which construct and frame meaning. It is concerned with positioning in talk, both in terms of the possible subject spaces made available, and in the placing of selves and others in those discursive spaces. It is concerned with intersubjectivity, the negotiation of meaning in interaction. It attends to the social order in language-in-use. In short, it is concerned with how language is used, with the ethno methods of lived lives, with the business that is done in language-in-use.

However, within discursive psychology interests have carved out quite different lines (Wetherell, 1998; forthcoming, 2007; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001a; 2001b), and has created a range of analytic options. One broad stream draws on conversation analysis (see Schegloff, 1999a; 1999b) and in psychology is developed in the work of Edwards and Potter, for example (Edwards and Potter, 1993; Edwards, 1997; 2006). Here, discursive psychology is presented as a theory of language, rather than a theory of everything psychological. It is epistemological constructionism, concerned with how people do things, with the business of social action, with how people manage accusations, justifications, stake, and so on; with how meaning-making is practised in interaction. By way of example then, in the extract above one feature of interest might be the work done by the interviewer's 'Really?'. Analysis can explore what this particular utterance in this particular place gives rise to; in this instance it appears to elicit elaboration, for example. Analysis would of course show much more. This approach focuses on the text, and the turn-taking. It is agnostic as to inner processes, and to experience. Some might

argue therefore, that it is agnostic to the 'essence' of psychology and question to what extent this conversation analysis version of discursive psychology, informative and productive as it certainly can be, is actually a 'psychology' at all.

A second and quite different approach takes up an ontological constructionism. This also takes up the study of language-in-use, but concerns itself with both micro and macro discursive formations (see Wetherell, 1998 and 2005a on the synthesis of micro and macro discourse). In this approach, the extract given above is understood to be embedded in a longer, broader body of discourse, extending beyond the interview and situated in a lived-life history. It aims to say something more about lived lives, about how minds are formed, about how 'the internal' works, how, and why certain patterns repeat; about what objects are constructed and constituted in language practices. It is illustrated in a broad range of work (see for example Billig, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; Gergen, 1999; Wetherell, 1998; 2003; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). This is the approach that I am borrowing from in my own study of women's accounts of success and failure: an ontological constructionism. It draws on Bakhtinian arguments of internalised heteroglossia, the multiplicity of voices which pre-exist us, into which we are inserted and through which thinking is not simply shaped, but is made possible (Billig, 1996; Maybin, 2001; Morson and Emerson, 1990).

The reason for favouring this choice comes out of a recognition of some of the key critiques of discursive psychology: how does it account for individual differences, the take up of one discourse rather than another, or contradictions in those discourses; how does it take into account personal history and how does it make space for experience, how might it explain emotions such as fear, or commitments, and so on (see for example, Frosh, 1999)? How does it explain Louisa's rich talk above, the privileging of this particular story, the taking on of 'failure', presented now as atypical but still significant three years on. In effect, this critique suggests that in the process of incorporating a recognition of language as situated, versioned, social activity; in making language the 'unit of analysis' (Edwards and Potter, 1992), discursive psychology loses sight of the person, would lose sight of Louisa.

Let me expand this critique slightly, in order to draw out some possible ways of addressing it. One argument suggests that a resolutely discursive approach simply cannot address this problem of the personal; that a resolutely discursive route over-privileges the external, the social, in its theorisation of the subject. Hollway takes this line for example (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005). Hollway argues that to understand why a particular person produces some particular talk rather than some other, one must look to people's dynamic defensive investment in accounts (Hollway, 1984). Her solution is to take a psychoanalytically informed route into a combined psycho-social account (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). There are other positions of course, but this

psychoanalytically informed psycho-social account is of particular interest to the study of women's accounts of success, failure, of being or not being good-enough, for two reasons. The first is that psychoanalytically informed analysis is one of the areas in psychology which has much to say about talk of success and failure, and what it means for the speaking subject (see for example Pappenheim's (2006) introduction to a special issue on 'fear of success'). The second, is that notions of what is *necessarily* implied, or *might* be implied in a psycho-social combination are central to much of what this study will go on to explore. First, though, a brief exploration of what is captured in Hollway's position.

This is a psychoanalytic theorisation of the person which is attuned to make space for subjectivity, for experience, for life history and for individual investments in particular discourses and subject positions (Hollway, 1984). But, it is also a psychoanalytic account which concerns itself with unconscious dynamics, with internal worlds, hidden motivations, with dynamically and systematically distorted internal representations of the external social world.

So, while this account takes the individual seriously, takes subjectivity and experience seriously, it has other challenges to address. For example, a critique from a discursive approach would argue that its analyses are guilty of over-interpretation, of going beyond the text; and it is criticised for not adequately explaining the form and formation of the internal upon which its interpretations rely; it is accused of over-privileging the psyche, failing to take full account of the social in its claim to a psycho-social account, of essentialising the subject, and overlooking or downplaying multiplicities in identity, in subjectivity, in discursive selection (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005; Spears 2005, Wetherell, 2005a; 2005b).

In contrast, discursive psychology has always been alert to the problem of the discursive selection: why this utterance here? (Wetherell, 1998). This is typified in its attention to functionality, to the social business accomplished in talk. Indeed, multiplicity of identity, that quality of being in the world whereby we are not consistent and fixed across all situations, where our sense of our selves and others shifts from context to context (Davies and Harré, 1990; Wetherell, 2005a) is a problem for any essentialising approach: variability and flexibility would escape account there.

What is being suggested here is that the critique of discursive psychology is almost entirely fair, in that individual differences are not yet adequately explained in discursive theory. There is indeed an issue here, of the need to theorise a connection between the sayer and the said. But, the argument here, is that while that connection to the personal is needed, a psychoanalytic framework may not be the only, or best, way to deliver this. Instead, it may be that a discursive psychology which looks beyond the micro to encompass the macro and the historical can offer a rich theorisation of a reflexive, acting,

discursively constituted individual (Wetherell, 1998; 2003; forthcoming, 2007).

So, the approach adopted for this study follows an ontological constructionism, a synthesised micro and macro account, a discursive psychology which makes space for the subject.

There are many well established theoretical and conceptual routes into this discursive reading of the subject. These include of course interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edley, 2001), the sayings and themes that are repeated in our patterns of speech, that give us a sense of the frameworks for 'thinking'. Also, notions of dilemmatic thinking, the conflicts and therefore the rhetorical choices to be made in accounts (Billig et al., 1988; Billig, 1991). In addition, Billig's work on discursive repression (Billig, 1999c) is useful in any exploration of a discursive psycho-social because it points to what *language* represses rather than to some internalised mechanism of the unconscious.

Conversation analysis of course provides a set of tools, in its elaboration of patterns in talk such as repairs, refusals, preferred and dispreferred responses etc. (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). These are the approaches of the epistemological discursive psychology, agnostic as to experience. Nevertheless, these resources can take us further. There is material here to inform our understanding of participant subjectivity; these patterns all imply tellings that matter to participants in particular ways. Consider, for example, Potter's notion of stake, the interest speakers have in the way words reflect back on themselves (Potter, 1996). Consider this alongside Davies and Harré (1990) on positioning, our ways of representing ourselves or others as certain sorts of people. Stake inoculation statements, such as 'some of my best friend are...', tell us something not just about discursive positioning, but also the subjectivity of the participant in regard to those sorts of positionings. This is not to claim that the practice of stake inoculation inevitably provides a transparent window to subjectivity, but it does provide us with a recognisable resource for thinking about a reflexive and a dialogic internal world.

A crucial point though, is that this reflexive dialogic world is steeped and shaped in intersectional histories, that is, in the configuration of different social groupings, such as ethnicity, class, or gender, etc. across time as well as in the moment (Phoenix and Frosh, 2001; Wetherell, 2005a). This lived life history provides us with an alternative route into thinking about commitments to particular discourses without invoking essential internal mechanisms. My own project on women and accounts of success and failure is in its infancy and I am not yet in a position to make claims about what a discursive approach to constructions of 'successes and failures' shows us about different subjects and subjectivities. But, I envisage an argument that 'success', or 'failure', such as Louisa's 'failure' in taking sick leave, has particular meaning when it is embedded in lived life history, aligned with certain sorts of social values and

certain sorts of moral orders; moral orders formed and reproduced in our discursive practices, evident in the struggles to negotiate meaning, in the way particular positions are negotiated in our language in use, in our institutions and our technologies (Billig et al., 1988; Rose, 1996; 1999; Skeggs, 1997).

These macro discourses draw on Foucauldian notions of disciplinary practices and power relations (1976), and to Bakhtinian concepts of internalised heteroglossia, that quality of language which makes it a site of struggle (op. cit.). Also, this macroanalytic examination can call on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) relevant here because of its interest in theorising the internalisation of social relations (Noble and Watkins, 2003).

What I am trying to show here is what rich fields these are for discursive psychologists (see Billig, 1996; 1999c; Wetherell, 2003; 2005a; forthcoming, 2007; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). They provide enormous resources for understanding what discourses may be available; for showing how and where and why they may be employed; for what sorts of subjects are produced and what sort of subjectivities. Through attention to micro and macro social orders and contexts, this synthesized discursive psychology can also begin to account for the so-called problem of individual differences.

## **Conclusion**

The argument has been this: a viable and productive analytic route is needed to understand human behaviour, and to use that understanding to bring about emancipatory change. Such a route might sensibly follow a properly psycho- and properly -social approach to understanding subjects and subjectivities. This needs to be one that does not inadvertently maintain a psycho, social, divide; nor one that essentialises or fixes the person; nor one that loses sight of the person. A discursive psychology with a broad gaze offers an analytic route that captures these requirements, that opens up the theorisation of the constructed subject.



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