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Discursive Psychology and Feminism
Ann Weatherall
School of Psychology
Victoria University of Wellington
P.O. Box 600
Wellington
New Zealand

e-mail: Ann.Weatherall@vuw.ac.nz

phone: +64 4 463 5211

fax: +64 4 463 5402

Abstract

This appraisal highlights the productive engagement between feminism and Discursive Psychology (henceforth DP)¹. It discusses some of the confluence and tensions between DP and feminism. The two share critical perspectives on science and psychology, a concern with prejudice and have ideas in common about the constructed nature of social categories, such as gender. One difficulty arises from the relativism associated with the post-structural theoretical underpinnings of DP, which can be understood as politically paralysing. Another problem comes from an endorsement of a conversation analytic mentality where identity categories such as gender can only be legitimately used in an analysis when participants' orient to their relevance. The high profile debates and literature in DP shows it has made a notable contribution to social psychology and its influence can also be found in other areas. A particular influence of DP highlighted in the present appraisal is on gender and language research.

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Discursive Psychology and Feminism

This critical appraisal begins with a report of the beginnings of my academic life and how it was shaped by the ideas and debates that developed into Discursive Psychology (henceforth DP)². My experience points to how limited the social psychology of twenty-five years ago was and the significance of DP in expanding the disciplinary boundaries. For me, part of the attraction and excitement of ‘the turn to language’ was its confluences with the critical project of feminism. At one point, discourse analysis in psychology was viewed as virtually synonymous with critical or feminist research (Burman & Parker 1983; also see Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1995) so my account of being shaped by DP highlights how it engaged feminism and the concerns of Feminist Psychology. The connections include a critical perspective on science and psychology, a concern with prejudice and ideas about social identity categories as products of language and discourse.

Notwithstanding the positive engagement between feminism and DP, there have also been significant feminist critiques. Some of those theoretical and methodological matters will be raised in what follows, albeit in a necessarily cursory manner. Edley and Wetherell (2008) described DP and the study of gender as a contested space that has catalysed a process of division and creation. Perhaps that productive and creative process is nowhere more evident than in the area of gender and language research where dialogue between advocates of feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis and feminist conversation analysis clarify and contest what is at stake (see Weatherall et al 2010).

Working in New Zealand means being geographically far removed from the academic home-land of Discursive Psychology. So part of being shaped and perhaps shaping DP is an intellectual Australasian community that supports local and international scholarship on discursive matters. Feminist psychology in New Zealand draws heavily on discursive approaches, so the links between feminism and discursive work are further strengthened here (see Gavey, Lapsley & Cram 2001). A contribution Australasian-based research makes to DP is its demonstrations of general tendencies within idiosyncratic cultural and political contexts. That is, to show how traditional social psychological notions such as racist attitudes and prejudice are actions accomplished through local and occasioned category descriptions in talk and texts. For example, Augoustinos and Every (2010) furthered Wetherell and Potter’s

² ‘Discursive Psychology’ was the title of Edwards and Potter’s (1992) book that reframed psychological topics as social practices in language. I use the term quite loosely to refer to the general theories and methods that shaped DP as well as to point to what has been constituted as ‘Loughborough’s DP’, for the purposes of this special issue.

(1992) work on racism by documenting the discursive and rhetorical properties of contemporary race discourse within the Australian cultural and political context. However, twenty-five years ago an Australasian community of researchers in Feminist Psychology and DP had yet to be established, which is where this narrative begins.

Engaging Feminism

The late 1980s and early 1990s were intellectually exciting times for me. Feminist Psychology and DP were emerging and I was enrolled for a PhD in social psychology, gender and language at the University of Lancaster. During my undergraduate student years at Otago University (New Zealand), my engagements with feminism were limited to extracurricular activities – protesting beauty pageants and pornography, volunteering for Rape Crisis and lobbying for the establishment of Women’s Studies. Gender, let alone feminism, was largely absent from available programmes of study. One of the few opportunities in that area arose in an advanced social psychology class - a group-project option on ‘sexist language’. Reading on that topic led to my fourth year dissertation – an experimental study on gender biases in word meanings (see Ng, Kam Kuen, Weatherall & Moody 1993) and inspired me to further study at postgraduate level.

So, I arrived in Britain at the end of the 1980s seeking feminist intellectual engagement and looking for new direction on how best to examine the relationships between psychology, language and gender³. New and stimulating ideas abounded, almost all of which challenged the psychology I knew of. Ideas that were seminal to DP were being discussed (i.e. Billig 1987; Billig et al 1988; Potter & Wetherell 1987). Other landmark volumes I was reading that were part of the broader turn to discourse and the critical commentary on psychology included Henrique et al’s (1984) ‘Changing the Subject’, Parker’s (1989) ‘The Crisis in Modern Psychology’ and Wilkinson’s (1986) edited volume entitled ‘Feminist Social Psychology: Developing Theory and Practice’. The promise of discourse analysis as a critical, empirical but non-experimental research approach was becoming evident from studies of texts and talk as sites for the production of meanings and forms of power (see Burman & Parker 1993).

During my PhD, I was an active member of the Social Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and a post-graduate representative on the then newly

³ I would like to acknowledge my PhD supervisors Susan Condor and Charles Antaki for their guidance, support and patience with the challenges, for me, in understanding the significance of the discursive turn to what I understood about psychology.

established, Psychology of Women Section. I felt swept up in an intellectual movement where my interests in feminism, gender and language were taking centre stage. The excitement and on-going academic challenges stemming from that time has propelled and sustained me through my scholarly career to date. Developing an understanding and feminist position on a complex array of theoretical and analytic matters has been, and continues to be a thoroughly engaging process.

A compelling aspect of the discursive turn was its confluence with feminist critiques of science (e.g., Harding 1986) and of psychology (e.g., Wilkinson 1986). Consider, for example, the discursive and feminist critiques of science. Potter & Wetherell (1987) highlighted that a finite range of rhetorical resources can be routinely used to legitimate scientific views and practices. In a more feminist vein, Harding showed how descriptions of science obscure it as a system of knowledge production that is deeply gendered. In feminist psychology, value neutrality in research was being dispelled as a myth by showing how disciplinary knowledge about women was predicated on beliefs about their inherent inferiority to men (see Wilkinson 1986). The influence on my work of the discursive and feminist critiques of science was to consider new ways of doing research ethically, for example by using a teaching/research nexus as a feminist method (Weatherall 1999) and by being reflexive about dilemmas arising out of analysing women's words discursively (Weatherall, Gavey & Potts 2002).

A discourse analytic concern with prejudice was another feature attractive to feminists. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) discursive reformulation of attitudes importantly showed how language simultaneously constructs and evaluates the objects it describes. A related insight was common-sense descriptions become rhetorical resources for justifying and perpetuating dominant social and moral orders. For example, Billig et al (1988) illustrated how the contradictory notions of gender as a social identity category and individual differences were variably used to explain a lack of women and science. So, generalisations about the characteristics associated with men and women were used to account for unequal representation in science and the idiosyncrasies of individual women used to explain exceptions. A new and subtle form of sexism was documented in this kind of research – where common-sense notions such as choice, gender difference, tradition and practical considerations were rhetorical resources that provided for both the acknowledgement and denial of prejudice (also see Gill 1993; Riley 2002; Wetherell, Stiven & Potter 1987). The ideas that descriptions are built variably out of a finite set of interpretative resources (Potter

& Wetherell 1987) and that everyday understandings are rhetorical and ideological (Billig et al 1988) have shaped my own empirical investigations. One focus of my work has been to document how descriptions and explanations regarding women's issues effectively perpetuate their social disadvantage. Common-sense descriptions shape and reproduce inequality in diverse areas of social life including include motherhood (Ulrich & Weatherall 2000; Sheriff & Weatherall 2009), romantic relationships (Walton, Weatherall & Jackson, 2002) and sex work (Weatherall & Priestley 2001).

Another important confluence of discursive and feminist ideas was the idea that identity categories such as gender could be understood as social constructions. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) critique of traditional categorisation work in psychology drew upon ethnomethodological work on gender. They described, for example Garfinkel's (1967) landmark case study of Agnes and his view that gender could be understood not just as a biological reality but also as an interactional accomplishment. In feminist language research, an analogous notion – that of performativity - has been used to challenge gender essentialism (see Weatherall 2002). Understandings of gender as something produced in interactions have stimulated on-going feminist debates about how to legitimate the relevance of gender at any particular moment – an issue described in a bit more detail below.

Feminist Critiques and Pragmatic Solutions

A central legacy of DP has been to move the study of cognition and other psychological matters into the domains of language and social interaction. Feminist engagement with DP has focused investigations into the production of gender and sexuality in texts and talk. One debate emerging from that engagement has been whether DP and other discursive approaches can support a goal central to feminism - that of making differences that might improve the conditions of women's lives. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) endorsement of the ideas associated with post-structuralism – the constituting nature of discourse and the multiple and contradictory meanings it produces – were seen as potentially antithetical to politicising practice such as advocated by feminism. For example, Burman & Parker (1993) addressed the problem of relativism as one associated with discourse analytic approaches informed by post-structuralism. If knowledge and truth are products of socio-historical meaning systems and not fixed, then there is no stable basis for claiming men's power and women's oppression. The reality of women's disadvantage is, of course, the spring board for feminist action. One solution offered to the problem of relativism was effectively a pragmatic one – feminist

research inspired by post-structuralism should be not be assessed on the grounds of revealing truths about women's lives but whether they are useful for achieving relevant political goals. By a utility yardstick much feminist post-structural discourse analytic work in psychology passes because it points to the complex, contradictory, changing and paradoxical ways in which gender inequalities persist (see Gavey 1989; Gill 1995).

Pragmatism offered a solution to the problem of relativism and secured feminist post-structural discourse analysis as a legitimate albeit value laden research approach to studying gender and power. Feminist or critical post-structural discourse analysis was one research approach that was engaging with the emerging DP. Over the past 15 years, conversation analysis has become the established method for investigating gender and social life in DP and elsewhere (see for example Speer & Stokoe, 2011; Stokoe & Weatherall 2002). A controversial aspect of conversation analysis is not its relativism but its own kind of realism. That is, its insistent methodological focus on grounding analyses in participants' observed or 'real' orientations of what is relevant to them in interaction. Such an insistence, from a feminist post-structural position, makes conversation analysis unsuitable for, or even incompatible with, critical feminist research where gendered power relations form part of the discursive backdrop of all interactions (see Weatherall et al 2010; Wetherell 1998).

Pragmatism also effectively counters the feminist post-structural position questioning of the compatibility of conversation analysis with feminism – that its narrow analytic mentality misses the gender as a pervasive discursive backdrop to social life. In the process of actually doing Conversation Analysis, theoretical machinations such as those around the realism/relativism and macro/micro debates can be bracketed off (see for example, Speer 2000). The products of empirical investigations themselves are the proof that Conversation Analysis is a fruitful feminist research approach. A wave of research into the mundane ways gender and sexuality are reproduced in talk points to an emerging Feminist Conversation Analysis (see Kitzinger 2007a). A double strength of Feminist Conversation Analysis is that it develops feminist research practices (such as privileging participants' orientations and providing participants feedback on their interactional practices) and also offers original insights into the ways gender and sexuality structure talk-in- interaction (see Kitzinger 2008).

DP and Gender and Language Research

While feminists in psychology have had a long history of contributing to research on gender and language (see Stokoe 1998; Weatherall 2002), it is the widespread practice of

conversation analysis that has stimulated new debates and further research innovation (see Stokoe & Weatherall 2002; Speer & Stokoe 2011). One of the early contributions of DP was to offer a different perspective on the relationship between gender, language and power than previous work had taken. Instead of asking the ever alluring question about sex differences in language use or interactional style, studies using DP were asking about the ways people use gender in talk and how sexism is accounted for. The subtle rhetorical management of talk about inequality was one important finding already mentioned - bias was denied and non-action typically endorsed (Gill 1993; Riley 2002; Wetherell, Stiven & Potter 1987). By taking a rhetorical approach, the studies avoided reifying gender stereotypes, which had been a well-documented pitfall of research on women's language (see Weatherall 2002). Documenting the discursive and rhetorical properties of contemporary gender relations is an important and on-going feminist project.

By focusing on rhetorical descriptions a discursive approach supported theorizing about gender in non-essentialist ways, which made it conceptually compatible with a general constructionist orientation that has, over the years, become widespread in the gender and language field (although not without its complications, caricatures and misunderstandings – see Stokoe, 2008). Instead of considering gender as an individual's identification that is expressed in language, it became viewed as an accomplishment or performance. For instance, Butler and Weatherall (2011) showed how person reference practices and knowledge claims were amongst the methods used by a small group of children to produce a temporary cross-gender category membership for one of them. So, approaching gender as something that is done can be analytically productive. However, a problem identified with some empirical translations gender performativity is that stereotypes of gender are reified by assuming, for example, that men 'do' displays of masculinity and women 'do' femininity (Stokoe & Weatherall 2002).

A distinctive albeit controversial solution to the problem of gender stereotype reification is to take the conversation analytic position mentioned above, as originally advocated by Schegloff (1997). That view is to rely on participants' own displayed orientations to the salience of gender for it to be relevant to an analysis. As already noted, from a feminist post-structural perspective Schegloff's position is untenable - because gendered power relations are the discursive backdrop to all meaning making and action (see Weatherall et al 2010). However, even if one concurs with Schegloff, the thorny matter of what 'counts' as a participants' orientation to gender remains. One proposal has been to

focus on the occasioned use of gender categories in talk (see for example, Stokoe 2004). Although it has been shown not all categorical references to gender are orientations to its relevance (Kitzinger 2007b), the potential of the Stokoe's proposal is one of the area that is perhaps yet to fully prove its promise (but see Speer and Stokoe 2011; Stokoe 2010; Weatherall 2007).

Concluding Comment

I began this appraisal by describing myself as an undergraduate student who was deprived of opportunities to engage intellectually with feminism and non-experimental, qualitative research methods. Social Psychology has changed enough so that a student would be unlikely to have a similar experience today – courses in feminist and discursive research are offered in many Australasian psychology departments. Established literatures now exist that document feminist research and qualitative approaches in psychology which includes discursive, narrative and conversation analytic methods. Furthermore, the influence of DP extends beyond Social Psychology into other fields including conversation analysis and gender and language as discussed above.

The positivist, quantitative boundaries that defined and limited Psychology in the past have been expanded but they still exist and serve to normatively define the discipline. So, if a researcher is categorised as a 'psychology academic' they will be associated, I suggest, within the discipline as having particular normative attributes – all of which are associated with the theories and methods that constitute 'traditional' psychology. If that person contravenes those attributes – as someone interested in feminism, discourse and/or social interaction from a non-quantitative view is – then they are classed as different or defective members of that category (see Schegloff, 2007). It is this feature of categories – their protection against induction – that means that knowledge about what counts as psychology is not easily revised. Rather 'deviant' members are regarded as illegitimate or re-categorised. So being in DP remains a marginalised position if one is within psychology – the alternative is to recategorise – that is to move into a different field of study such as media studies for feminist post-structural discursive analysis or sociology for feminist conversation analysts. DP has successfully established a coherent theoretical and analytic framework for studying social life that continues to engage me as a feminist researcher in social psychology. I suggest on-going engagements between DP, Social Psychology and Feminist Psychology will continue to innovate the study of human sociality.

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