

To what extent are  
our selves  
constructed through  
language and  
discourse essay sa...



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Attitude research and discursive psychology have each adopted different goals and methods in attempting to understand the “ expression of opinions”. Discursive psychology emerges from a social constructionist perspective, which views the self “ as continually shaped and reshaped through interactions with others” (Wetherell, 2003, pg. 220). Attitude research is part of the experimental perspective, which places an emphasis “ on measurement, on reliability and on objectivity”(Lalljee, 2003, pg. 3).

This essay will explore the goals and methods of each approach and the advantages and disadvantages of its application in attempting to make sense of the social world. This paper will demonstrate that discursive psychology provides the most substantial and sustainable account of the expression of opinions and is therefore the most useful.

This will be particularly highlighted in light of an interview with Mrs. Gascoigne (Hello Magazine. P. 6-75, 2004) where discursive psychology is the most effective in the quest to get to the heart of the expression of her opinions. Attitude research “ can be seen as an attempt to specify and measure what we commonly think of as people’s views or preferences” (Potter, 2003, pg. 213). The aim of attitude research is to predict behaviours by identifying peoples’ underlying attitudes. This is very common for commercial purposes where researchers endeavour to modify or change consumers’ attitudes.

The usual method for attitude researchers is a questionnaire, based on the Likert scale expressing a preference measured from 1 to 5, a continuum of preference generating measurable scores (ibid). Despite the fact that one’s

attitudes are thought to have considerable influence over one's actions, LaPiere's (1934, pg. 127) study showed that stated attitudes of racism (92% against Chinese people) against minority groups did not occur in practice. Corey (1937, pg. 129) also found that students' attitudes towards cheating and the practice of it were again totally unrelated.

Wicker (1971, pg. 29) considered the findings of 31 separate studies on various topics and concluded that "attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviours", which suggests that attitude research, is not very successful at accurately predicting behaviour. After further investigations in this field, Myers (1993, pg. 129) refined the theoretical frameworks of attitude research. He claimed that attitude research could make more effective behaviour predictions under certain conditions.

Fishbein and Azjen (1975, pg. 132) took it a step further and developed a theoretical model known as the 'theory of planned behaviour' (Potter, 2003, pg. 32). This model claims that people's overt behaviour is because of "considering their own views, the views and expectations of significant others and their own capacities" (Potter, 2003, pg. 132). A study conducted by Giles and Cairns (1995, pg. 134) supported this 'theory of planned behaviour'. Using this theory, their study found that the theory could account for 61% of the variance in blood donation (ibid). Overall, attitude research must be commended for attempting the difficult task of bringing a scientific, measurable and exact influence to a subject, which is very difficult to reduce or pin down.

However, the expression of opinions does not exist in an empty vacuum. There are infinite reasons and motivations lurking behind them. Hence, attitudes and expressions of opinions are by their nature very vague and the actions to achieve satisfaction of attitudes are too numerous to assimilate into a statistical equation (ibid). The experimental approach of attitude research has validity problems as viewing the person as a cognitive machine that will behave exactly as outlined by a stated expression of opinion does not hold for all people and does not do justice to the socially complex world in which people exist.

Discursive psychology is an approach, which ascertains how events are constructed in the social and cultural world. Its basic elements are construction, action and rhetoric. Its focus is on everyday interaction, talk and discourse and the activities that people use and perform to make sense of the social world. In the discursive approach, the concern is how people construct versions of the world in the course of daily interactions and the ways in which these interactions are established. In doing so, the person is also seen to be constructing versions of the self.

In an argument, for example, discursive psychologists would claim that “ people are constructing versions, in the performance of actions, and these actions relate to, and often rhetorically undermine, alternative constructions” (Potter, 2003, pg. 152). Take a school example where two children who were fighting, are presenting their account of the event to the teacher. The children construct their version, using language to characterise the situation (action) and to undermine the version presented by their interlocutor (rhetoric).

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Discursive psychology is concerned with the way these constructed accounts become real and free of the speaker. Discursive psychologists are also interested in the practices that occur in evaluative discourse. Pomerantz (1984, pg. 154) demonstrated in her 'naturalistic' study, how everyday evaluative assessments are parts of interaction. She was also able to show a regular organisation of our assessments. For instance, in a conversation, Pomerantz (1984, pg. 154) noted that after someone had made an evaluative remark, their interlocutor inevitably reciprocated with their own assessment.

This pattern is also evident in public speaking, when the audience agree with the speaker they clap enthusiastically or cheer. Discursive psychologists maintain that by considering the practices that people utilize when they are making evaluations in their interactions a more in depth understanding of attitudes will be obtained. The methodological approach used in discursive psychology has been criticised for its absence of significant tests and randomisation. As stated by Abrams and Hogg (1990, p. 167), this type of analytical approach is an interpretative band without a significant and robust testing procedure.

It merely opens up "an abyss of alternative interpretations of texts and transcripts" (ibid) and therefore provides little opportunity of choosing which one is accurate. Discursive psychologists argue that it is not possible to reduce attitudes to measurable manageable components. They do not occur in a social vacuum, infinite reasons and causes exist behind them. However, it is through the consideration and interpretation of the practices people

utilize when they are making evaluations in their interactions, that a more in depth understanding of attitudes can be obtained (Potter, 2003, pg. 167).

This paper argues that it is this interpretative nature, which essentially enriches this approach as behaviour attitudes, thoughts and opinions are of a complex, dynamic and interactive nature that seldom can be correctly reduced to one exact explanation or interpretation. The interview with Sheryl Gascoigne in Hello magazine July 2004 (c/f Appendix 1) provides a great insight into Sheryl's life and provides some very deep material. From a discursive psychology viewpoint, Sheryl is constructing an image not only of herself but also of her husband Paul (Gazza) and their relationship. " He and I know he hasn't told the whole story.

He is benefiting from a catalogue of half truths". This statement is two-folded in the sense that firstly she is accusing Gazza of deliberately not writing a total upfront and honest account of his life in his biography and bemoans the fact that he will earn a profitable sum of money on it. Secondly, it shows her motive in this interview is to defend and construct a counter image of herself as opposed to the one given by Gazza. Furthermore, it rhetorically undermines her husband's aim in his autobiography, " to record everything, however bad, as truthfully as possible" (Gascoigne, P. , 2004, pg. " Gazza - My Story").

The words " he and I know" makes this statement more resilient to being discounted than if she wrote ' He didn't tell the whole story'. She constructs herself as a sympathetic, caring and compassionate person helping a pitiful but potentially destructive man, " I am the one he called on when he was in

trouble, so when he had no where else to go, I felt I had to help him despite the huge uproar and upset he had caused in the past". This evaluative discourse also portrays herself as the stable reliable person in the relationship whereas her husband was the opposite, always in trouble.

She described herself as " a constant support to Paul throughout the years, I would be the first to hope that his darkest moments are behind him". Such stake inoculation makes her account even more believable. Gazza describes himself " as always fun" (Ibid pg. 4) and capable of being " very entertaining" (ibid pg. 354). However, Sheryl dismisses and contradicts this vision of Gazza, " We rarely knew the Gazza that he talks about; the Gazza that is lots of fun". Again the word " we" removes the statement from herself and makes it more resistant to being discredited.

Sheryl's evaluative statements are constructed in an attempt to persuade others to empathise with her. It is apparent that discourse carries actions in their own right i. e. actions to lie, undermine, blame, accuse and so forth, and in the midst of these actions the building blocks of the self are being laid down. It provides a deep insight into how a person's motives emerge from interaction and are constructed in the social realm. It also considers the significance of conflict, which is largely underestimated by attitude research.

Had an attitude researcher conducted research on Sheryl Gascoigne, it would have honed in on a particular aspect or dimension of her social world in order to produce given laws about behaviour in a certain situation. It may for example have looked at her attitude regarding abusive husbands or being a footballer's wife. In doing so, only data in relation to the quest of the

research would be considered. Thus, the data gathered would be two-dimensional and all other data would be lost to interpretation.

Moreover, their preferred method of a questionnaire may prove inadequate to explore what she really thinks of her husband, their relationship, and the effects of this abusive relationship on her sense of self and her life. Such questionnaires may ask the wrong questions or fail to provide adequate response options and therefore failing to highlight the richness and contradictory nature of her experience. These are not issues, which should be manipulated and reduced in such a way to fit a piece of research.

The whole essence of these issues would be lost in the abyss of taking a scientific, nomothetic approach in order to produce a robust finished and exact piece of research. Very little is black and white and the nuances of complicated daily life may not be captured by attitude research. Attitudes vary from one person to the next and may benefit more from a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. Therefore, one could argue that an attitude scientific based research process would lose the richness of data, which dutifully corresponds to the interpretation of the discursive approach.

Also, due to their methodological and theoretical approach attitude researchers fail to address the significance of evaluative discourse.

Discursive psychologists view these evaluative statements as actions in their own right. As this extract is absent of discourse features such as pauses, questions, delays and intonations that are analytically valuable in a proper transcript, it is only possible to offer a speculative alternative interpretation.



In order to conduct a more thorough analysis, an interview with Sheryl Gascoigne could be conducted with these analytical features recorded.

Sacks (1992, pg. 66) emphasised that “ every feature of interaction, including hesitations, pauses, corrections, is potentially relevant to the activities being done by talk”. There are many aspects of research that would be lost to the methods of attitude research. Interactions and aspects of natural interaction such as evaluative discourse and stake inoculation would be unaccounted for. In addition, it would fail to capture the dynamic emergent qualities of an individual. Moreover, the reductionist method of attitude research does not deal with the expression of attitudes of the individual in their own right.

Alternatively, the discursive approach accounts for these aspects and also provides a versatile means of capturing the dynamic and interpersonal features of the individual in any given moment whilst interacting. As a result, it opens up a myriad of data, which can be delved into to produce an array of interpretations to account for the expression of opinions. Hence, this paper views discursive psychology as the most useful approach in the exploration of the expression of opinions.