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On living social discourse, embodiment and culture: the potential of a broadened conception of discursive psychology

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Abstract

In reply to Cresswell’s article, I will comment on his suggestion to broaden discursive psychology studies on refugees, race, and ethnicity by a) an ethnomethodological perspective including broader social discourses and b) a phenomenological perspective including immediate experience. I will argue how such a dialogical approach is crucial for the understanding of human psychological functioning and can also be fruitfully applied to other areas of psychology such as early child development.

Keywords: discursive psychology, Bakhtin, embodiment, culture, child development
Cresswell addresses two concerns with regard to discursive psychology (DP) research on refugees, racism and ethnicity: (1) the focus on in situ construction of accounts leading to a neglect of wider social discourses that constrain and enable these constructions and (2) the focus on discourse and rhetoric construction of accounts ignoring the role of phenomenological immediate experience. In order to overcome these shortcomings, he suggests broadening current approaches of DP by using technical procedures of ethnomethodologically driven conversation analysis (CA) and by integrating the early work of Bakhtin on phenomenological immediate experience.

I fully agree with Cresswell that in situ interactions are always inextricably intertwined with broader cultural discourses and that we therefore need to take into account the socio-cultural situatedness of discursive practices. Cresswell draws on Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology in order to explain the interplay between in situ interaction and broader communal practices. He convincingly argues that in in situ interactions people follow tacit culturally shared rules. What people accomplish in an immediate interaction is unique on the one hand, but a communal practice on the other. He suggests using ethnomethodologically informed CA in order to lay open the culturally shared tacit rules of interaction. While DP stresses that discursive practices are sequentially, rhetorically and institutionally situated (e.g., Potter 2005), it appears to put less emphasis on the socio-cultural and socio-historical embeddedness of discursive practices. This dialogical interplay between local in situ construction and socially shared discursive practices is also a central part of Bakhtin’s theorizing and has received increasing attention in cultural developmental psychology over recent years (Demuth, 2008, 2011; Miller, Cho & Bracey 2005, Miller et al. 2000, Ochs, Capps 2001). The tension between locally situated discursive construction and more stable patterns of discourse is also addressed in Bamberg’s approach to discursive psychology (e.g., Bamberg 2010) that stresses the dynamic navigation between constancy and change in discursive constructions of identity: by drawing on culturally available discourses which are
flexible and subject to change on the one hand, and by repeatedly using specific narrative practices over time we manage to establish a relative constancy of self-construction and to experience oneself as remaining the same person while constantly changing.

Cresswell makes a valuable contribution in showing how such a dialogical approach to discourse analysis can be applied to studies on refugees, racism, and ethnicity. To illustrate the difference between a ‘traditional’ DP approach and a CA/Bakhtinian inspired approach to analyzing social interaction Cresswell contrasts two alternative interpretations of an interview excerpt from a study on Chinese ethnicity including a Canadian researcher (himself) with two people from a Chinese immigrant background. He argues (p. 18) that “The understanding that discourse analysis offers is that the participants have a stake/interest in their rhetorical construction being established as true. What is bypassed by this approach is an understanding of how such a stake/interest could come to be relevant” (my emphasis). A CA/Bakhtinian inspired approach, in contrast offers additional insights into the embeddedness of the in situ interaction in broader social discourses and into the participants’ immediate experience which is socio-linguistically constituted and hence allows for an improved understanding of issues like refugees, racism, and ethnicity. I very much agree that this is an important point if we want to understand social interaction more fully. Cresswell goes on and argues that by taking a closer look at the sequential organization and turn-taking construction, analysis reveals how two different classes of participants are co-constructed by the participants: both the interviewer by addressing one person (Linda) more often than the other, and the interviewee by using pre-sequences which entail the interviewer inviting her to provide more details, thereby constructing Linda as an expert. It is through this kind of analysis, he further argues that we gain insights into broader social discourses, in this case the co-construction of first generation Chinese immigrant Linda as an expert compared to Paul who was born in Canada.

Although I think that it is also possible to conceive of Paul’s response in line 38 as evidence that Paul understood Jim’s utterance in line 37 as invitation to comment on Linda’s
account - and hence positions him as ‘evaluator’ of Linda’s account (Ochs, Taylor 1995) - rather than a call for an account of himself as Cresswell suggests, his argumentation of how a CA approach can further contribute to enhancing discursive studies is convincing.

While it becomes clear that different interpretations result from different methodological approaches I would, however, not necessarily consider this as evidence for the shortcoming of DP. Applying different methodological approaches to the analysis of an interaction will naturally bring about different findings. Rather, which methodological procedures we choose very much depends on the research question we want to focus on. Also, Potter (e.g., Potter, 2010:660; 2005) has pointed out that there have been various strands of DP over the years and newer developments in DP do reflect a continuing and deeper engagement with conversation analysis and draw on technical procedures of CA. So, isn’t it maybe more a matter of different research perspectives? Rather than seeing the two ways of analyzing this interview transcript as ‘contradicting’ each other I suggest to seeing them as complementary in the sense of a triangulation (Flick 2004) of perspectives that contributes to a more encompassing understanding of the phenomena under study.

In addition, as yet another perspective that might help to understand the embeddedness of the interaction in broader cultural discourses I suggest that one could also look at cultural orientations that become evident in the interaction in a third way: In Linda’s case, for instance, what emerges is an orientation towards filiality to one’s cultural roots. This orientation also becomes evident in the way she defends (line 20 to 24) what Jim (line 19) challenges as non-filiality on her sons’ part. In DP terms, this could be considered as one ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Wetherell, Potter 1988) that reflects cultural orientations of a group of people. From a Bakhtinian and cultural psychology perspective it would be interesting to investigate whether filiality is rooted in broader cultural discourses within Linda’s cultural background, i.e., in other discourses of the everyday interactions she has participated in during the course of her socialization. Paul, who apparently was born in Canada and who in
the course of his socialization has been engaged in both “Chinese” discursive practices at home and “Canadian” discursive practices in his social environment, is likely to show different cultural orientations. We see this in his account in which he positions himself as similar to Linda’s sons (line 38-40), and his parents as being similar to Linda (line 42-44). One could further analyse whether the notion of filiality is also found in other first generation Chinese immigrants’ accounts and compare it to a group of second generation immigrants, for instance. This would be in line with Bakhtin’s notion of speech genres as relatively stable histories of language use that help participants derive meaning in interactions and that are inextricably interwoven with the ideologies of a cultural community (see Cresswell, Teucher 2010).

Overall, Cresswell convincingly demonstrates how a CA/Bakhtinian-informed approach to DP is a very promising road to studying the cultural embeddedness of in situ discursive co-constructions and human functioning.

There exist in fact a number of studies in the field of developmental cultural psychology that draw on such a CA-informed DP approach to studying socialization practices in diverse cultural contexts. I have used such an approach to study cultural orientations in mother-infant interactions comparing Cameroonian Nso farmers with middle class families in the North German city of Muenster (Demuth 2008, 2011, Demuth, Keller & Yovsi Prepublished April, 23, 2011). Cultural orientations towards obedience, decency, rapport and rhythmicity became evident in the way the Nso mothers co-constructed their interactions with their three months old infants whereas cultural orientations towards co-determination, individuality, time management and autobiographical narration became evident in the Muenster interactions. These cultural orientations were in line with other studies on broader cultural discourses in these two communities. So, while the interactions were certainly locally co-constructed in the ongoing interaction, they were also interrelated with broader communal discourses on childcare.
Likewise, a number of studies could demonstrate how children are socialized into cultural understanding of norms and transgressions (Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi 2001, Sterponi 2009), of family time (Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante & Fasulo 2008), a culturally appropriate sense of self and identity (Forrester 2002, Miller et al. 1997), taste preferences (Ochs, Pontecorvo & Fasulo 1996), autonomy and relatedness (Fasulo, Loyd & Padiglione 2007, Sirota 2006), based on parents’ discursive practices with their children.

Another very similar – however, within the Anglo-American literature less prominent – approach to discourse analysis is the documentary method (e.g., Bohnsack, Pfaff & Weller 2010) rooted in Mannheim’s (1952) sociology of knowledge. Similar to ethnomethodology, Mannheim conceived of social behaviour and communication practices as ‘pointing to’, ‘standing on behalf of’, or ‘documenting’ a presupposed underlying cultural pattern of social reality or cultural meaning systems that has been acquired through socialization. These cultural patterns or ‘frames of orientation’ are the result of habitualisation through milieu-, or culture-specific collectively shared experiences and constitute the ‘conjunctive realm of experience’. While remaining mostly non-conscious and intuitive to the individual, tacit cultural knowledge is ‘action-guiding’ (“handlungsleitend”) and hence will bring about concrete behaviour (praxeologies) that feels “natural” rather than “cultural” to the individual of a given culture. Garfinkel, (1967), actually refers to Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, however, did not systematically include it in his methodology. Documentary method aims at identifying homologous patterns in a whole sequence of observed discursive practices that point to shared cultural knowledge (“cultural frames of orientation”). In this sense, it is similar to DP’s identification of interpretative repertoires and also to the approach suggested by Cresswell (see also Demuth, 2008).

Cresswell’s suggestion of drawing on ethnomethodology-informed CA and Bakhtinian theorizing hence falls nicely in line with existing approaches that address a dialogical understanding of discursive practices, self, and culture.
What these approaches do not address, however, – and what I see as a particularly new and original contribution by Cresswell – is his suggestion of including the notion of immediate experience and accordingly a phenomenological approach to discourse analysis (see also Cresswell, Teucher 2010). I very much appreciate Cresswell’s argument that accounts experientially matter and cannot only be something that is rhetorically constructed in situ (p. 23). The notion of immediate phenomenological experience being inextricably intertwined with language is an important contribution to the understanding of human functioning. Cresswell – drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of speech genres - further stresses that when people engage in social interaction both language and experience are dialogically interrelated with and rooted in living life with others. Likewise, Brockmeier (2005) argues that there is no consciousness (“Bewusstsein”) separated from narrative practices and that hence our mind is a text interwoven with the fabric of culture. In a similar vein, Csordas (1993) states that embodied experience is the existential condition in which culture and self are grounded. Ontogenetically, this means that a DP approach that addresses both the broader social discursive practices of a community and the immediate embodied experience is crucial for understanding human development. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Forrester (2006) argues that already in early infancy, embodied knowledge is possible through immediate sensu-motoric experience. I have demonstrated elsewhere (Demuth, 2008, 2011) how such a dialogical approach to DP can be applied even to the study of interactions with very young infants.

Again, however, I suggest that this approach to discourse might not necessarily be in direct opposition to DP but rather broadens existing versions of DP by adding a further perspective to the phenomenon under study. To my understanding DP does not deny the role of immediate experience just as it does not deny the existence of cognition (as I understand DP it rejects viewing language as a referential expression of cognition and feelings but not the existence of cognition itself). The analytical focus is on language as co-oriented to action and
on how people rhetorically construct accounts of their experience. This implies embodiment
in terms of gesture, gaze orientation, and body torque as consequential for the ongoing
interaction (Potter, 2010:663). While DP also considers embodiment in their analysis,
Cresswell’s approach is different, however, insofar as it conceives of embodiment as “bodily
experience” in a phenomenological sense, i.e., in terms of immediate experience. In that sense
Cresswell’s proposed approach goes beyond current discourse studies and contributes to
advancing and broadening the scope of current DP approaches.

He suggests that the analysis of breaches and repairs as well as of the interlocutors’
attempts to establish co-constituted experience offers insight into “embodied dispositions as
to how life should unfold and what certain terms mean” (p. 30). I certainly agree that we see
coop-constitution of experience in this interaction in the sense of achieving intersubjectivity. I
am not quite sure, however, whether this kind of analysis really provides access to a person’s
experience in a phenomenological sense or whether it is more an analysis of the interlocutors’
attempts to reach shared meaning. We do, for instance, not gain any insight into whether the
participants feel comfortable, stressed, under pressure etc. in the situation. It is this part of
immediate experience that cannot be addressed through this (and possibly any) kind of
analysis.

Nevertheless, Cresswell offers a highly valuable proposal of a more encompassing DP
approach to the study of social interaction. There has been an increasing recognition of the
dialogical relationship between culture, discursive practices and the self (Brockmeier 2005,
Harré, Gillett 1994) and also an increasing recognition of the role of embodiment within
Cresswell fruitfully integrated these various strands of theorizing and provides a more specific
outline of how this dialogical relationship can be methodologically analysed in in situ
interactions. This innovative approach can certainly not only be applied to studying refugee
experience, racism, and ethnicity, but also to other areas of research such as early child
development, as I have argued earlier. I personally look forward to seeing more of this kind of work in the future!

Demuth, C. 2008, Talking to infants: how culture is instantiated in early mother-infant interactions. The case of Cameroonian farming Nso and North German middle-class families, University of Osnabrueck. Available at: http://repositorium.uni-osnabrueck.de/handle/urn:nbn:de:gbv:700-2009030626


