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# discursive psychology: mind and reality in practice

jonathan potter and alexa hepburn

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This chapter will introduce the perspective of discursive psychology. It will introduce its basic theoretical and methodological features, and then flesh them out using a series of recent studies of a child protection helpline. Discursive psychology will be used to make sense of a range of features of what happens on the helpline. In turn, the analysis of the helpline will be used to illuminate the nature of discursive psychology (henceforth DP).

DP is a perspective that starts with the psychological phenomena as things that are constructed, attended to, and understood in interaction. Its focus is on the ways descriptions can implicate psychological matters, on the ways psychological states are displayed in talk, and on the way people are responded to as upset, devious, knowledgeable or whatever. It thus starts with a view of psychology that is fundamentally social, relational and interactional. It is not just psychology as it appears *in* interaction; rather, it understands much of our psychological language, and broader 'mental practices', as organized *for* action and interaction. It is a specifically *discursive* psychology because discourse – talk and texts – is the primary medium for social action.

Most research in modern cognitive and social psychology takes as its central topic mental entities, representations or broad processing systems. Entities such as scripts, schemata, attitudes, attention, theory of mind, perception, memory, and attribution heuristics figure large in such research. DP is not a direct counter to such research (although, as we will show, it raises a range of questions with how such things are theorized and operationalized). Its aim is rather different. Rather than trying to get inside people's heads to get at these entities the focus is on

discourse: talk and texts in social practices. It looks for psychology in a completely different place.

Take the central and traditional social-psychological notion of attitudes for example. Rather than considering attitudes as mental entities that drive behaviour (as they are conceptualized in social cognition, such as in Ajzen's, 1991, well-known theory of planned behaviour), in DP they are respecified in terms of a broader concern with the *construction* of evaluations and what evaluations are used to *do*. For instance, in DP research has examined the way food evaluations figure as part of the activity of complimenting the cook, as inducements to an adolescent girl to eat, or as the building blocks of a complaint about child abuse (Wiggins & Hepburn, in press; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Conversely, DP work has studied how the *absence* of evaluation, and specifically the absence of an individual's attitude, is constructed, such as when making negative comments about minority groups (Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). So in environments where issues of prejudice and discrimination are live it can be important *not* to have a (negative) attitude, but merely to be objectively describing the world (including any putative negative characteristics of minority groups). Indeed, in DP the whole distinction between what is subjective (psychological) and objective (real, in the world) is seen as something that is constructed, attended to and reworked in discourse (Edwards, in press; Potter, 1996).

Put briefly, DP treats discourse as having three key characteristics. First, it is *action-oriented*. Discourse is recognized to be primarily a practical medium and the primary medium for action. Second it is *situated*. It is organized sequentially, such that the primary environment for what is said is, typically, what was said just previously. What is said sets up, but does not determine, what will be said immediately following it. It is situated institutionally in the sense that it is embedded in, and often constitutive of, practices such as news interviews, relationship conflicts or air traffic control instructions. It is situated rhetorically in the sense that constructions may be oriented to counter relevant alternatives. Third, it is both *constructed* and *constructive*. It is *constructed* in the sense that discourse is put together from different elements such as words, categories, commonplaces, interpretative repertoires and other elements. It is *constructive* in the sense that versions of the world, of actions and events, of mental life and furniture are put together and stabilized in talk.

Methodologically, discursive psychology uses careful and systemic analysis of discourse to reveal phenomena of this kind. DP is a package – its topic, discourse, requires an analytic approach that can do justice to the nature of discourse. Discourse works neither in the manner of

a mechanical system of weights and pulleys, nor in the manner of a linguistic grammar book with formal rules. The traditional psychological tools of experiment and survey are not tuned for this job. In this chapter we will not say much about methodological issues, although they may become apparent as we describe the development of research. For more elaborate coverage of methodological issues in DP see Potter (2003a,b, 2004) and Wood and Kroger (2000). But first some context and history.

### **a brief history of discursive psychology**

Discursive psychology emerged out of the specific strand of discourse analysis that developed in social psychology in the 1980s. This in turn had its somewhat convoluted roots in the sociology of scientific knowledge, post-structuralism, linguistic philosophy, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Let us briefly sketch the outlines of this early work, starting with Potter and Wetherell (1987) which is probably the work that did most to establish the power and nature of a discourse approach to psychological issues.

This book laid out a discourse analytic approach to the psychological topics familiar from traditional social psychology textbooks, such as attitudes, accounts, the self, categories and representations. In each case the focus was on the way these entities figured in interaction. For example, it drew on Harvey Sacks' (1992) work on membership categories to offer a critique of the standard treatment of categories as mental entities that organize (and distort) perception. Thus, this book offers one of the first attempts to apply conversation analysis to a social psychological topic in its critical consideration of the literature on accounts.

One of the central analytic notions of Potter and Wetherell (1987) was that of interpretative repertoires; that is, interrelated sets of terms, used with some stylistic coherence and often organized around particular tropes or metaphors. This notion comes from Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) study of the different repertoires that scientists use to construct their social world when they are arguing with one another. It was developed in Wetherell and Potter (1992), which studied the way Pakeha New Zealanders constructed versions of social conflict and social organizations to legitimate particular versions of relations between groups. Much of the interest was in ideological questions of how the organization of accounts, and the resources used in those accounts, could be used to help understand the reproduction of broad patterns of inequality and privilege.

This work also drew on Billig's (1986[1987]) rhetorical psychological notions, including the idea of a rhetorical commonplace. Billig suggested

that for any culture at any time in history there will be certain phrases or sayings that have a familiar or taken-for-granted quality. Wetherell and Potter (1992) showed how Pakeha New Zealanders draw on a contradictory weave of commonplaces to construct arguments against social change and critique. Billig (1992) also used the notions of rhetorical commonplaces and interpretative repertoires in his study of the way ordinary British people talk about the Royal Family. He showed the way these linguistic resources were fundamental for reproducing certain assumptions about nationality, privilege, equality and change. He suggested that participants are performing 'acts of settlement' in their talk, settling 'ordinary people down into their place within the imagined national community' (Billig, 1992, p.22). For an overview of these major early studies see Hepburn (2003, ch.7).

While these studies are commonly described as discourse *analysis* Edwards and Potter (1992) laid out the basics of a more distinctive discursive *psychology*. Part of the reason for this naming was simply to provide a more clear-cut differentiation from the confusing range of approaches dubbed discourse analysis from across the social sciences (see Jaworski & Coupland, 1999; Wetherell et al., 2001). *Discursive Psychology* was distinctive in applying ideas from discourse analysis specifically to psychological issues. It took as its topic memory and attribution and offered a respecification of both topics in terms of discourse practices. Rather than considering them as mental entities and processes, it treated remembering in terms of situated descriptions and attribution in terms of the way descriptions are organized to manage speaker accountability and to assign blame. A central feature of the work involved taking research in memory and attribution which either used natural interaction or addressed linguistic issues, and showing how its conclusions were distorted by its failure to address the practical nature of language use.

This strand of work was developed more fully in two subsequent works. Potter (1996) offered a systematic rethink of constructionism. This was organized around a consideration of the way descriptions are constructed from different resources (words, membership categories, commonplaces, interpretative repertoires, etc.) and the way these descriptions are organized to perform particular actions. Moreover, it focused on the procedures through which versions of events and actions are produced as literal, credible and independent of the speaker; that is, how they manage the 'dilemma of stake' (Edwards & Potter, 1992) that means all discourse can potentially be treated as motivated or interested in some way.

Edwards (1997) is the other major work. It too considered the role of descriptions. However, its particular focus was on the way descriptions

of mental life (categories, emotions, and so on) in all their different forms become parts of particular practices. For example, Edwards noted that when describing actions there are a range of different options. One form of description presents them as tied to the speaker and her or his dispositions. Yet another common form of description presents actions as standard or regular. Both are often highly indirect. Edwards called such descriptions 'script formulations' (1994, 1997). A key feature of such descriptions is that they manage accountability (or 'attribution' in traditional social psychological language). Presenting an action as scripted presents it as not requiring an explanation making reference to the speaker; however, if an action is presented as deviating from script in some way this can be produced as dispositional, and therefore to be explained by reference to the actor. Moreover, Edwards argued that cognitive psychology approaches that look for mental scripts (as frames for information processing) can easily miss the performative nature of the script talk that appears in research materials.

It is notable that as DP developed out of a rather broader discourse analytic approach, there has been much less of an emphasis on the analysis of qualitative interviews. Although such work can still be pertinent and address important issues (Edwards, 2003; Lawes, 1999; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), its limitations have been increasingly apparent (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). At the same time, if records of natural interaction can be analysed so effectively, the reasons for using a research procedure which embodies a range of troubles become less telling.

### **the disciplinary context of discursive psychology**

It is worth briefly distinguishing DP from approaches with which it shares some similarities and differences. In particular, we will consider sociolinguistics, social psychology of language and conversation analysis (henceforth CA). Let us start with sociolinguistics and the social psychology of language. One simple way of separating these approaches is to consider the different ways that they conceptualize language. In much sociolinguistics language appears as a dependent variable. Some feature of language, such as lexical choice or accent, is associated with a variable of interest, such as gender, social groups, status, class or something similar. Social psychology also often treats features of language as dependent variables. For example, work in the 'communication accommodation' tradition has studied the way speakers' accents modify according to the group membership of the addressee, modelling this according to a social psychological process model (see Watson & Gallois, and Giles et al., this

volume). Work in both traditions often assumes a telemental view of language, in which it provides a medium for transferring thoughts from one mind to another (Harris, 1988), and such work often assumes that words are associated with mentally encoded categories or concepts.

Discursive psychology does not start out by rejecting such views (although there are pertinent philosophical and sociological critiques – Wittgenstein, 1953; Coulter, 2005). Rather, it brackets issues of cognitive process and reference off, so that it can start somewhere different. Its focus is squarely on language *use* – hence *discursive* psychology rather than psychology *of language* or something similar. In particular, its focus is on discourse practices that are involved in psychological orientations and constructions, or draw on psychological terms. It is important to note, however, that DP provides a sideways respecification and reworking of the whole domain of the psychological, which simultaneously expands it and shrinks it, and questions the very idea that there is a clearly bounded class of psychological terms. For extended overviews of the difference between DP and sociolinguistics see Potter & Edwards (2001a); and for DP and social psychology of language see Edwards & Potter (1993), Potter & Edwards (2001b), and the debate between Schmid & Fiedler (1999) and Edwards & Potter (1999).

DP's relation to CA is a complex one. CA currently offers the most developed and sophisticated approach available to what would traditionally have been called linguistic performance. DP draws heavily on both the analytic tradition of CA and its specific findings. Sacks' (1992) foundational work on CA also offers a sophisticated approach to psychological explanations and language (see Potter & te Molder, 2005, for overview). However, there are at two significant areas where there is a difference in emphasis and even potential tension.

First, DP has built a systematic approach to relating the construction of descriptions to the actions that they are involved in. For example, it has studied the way constructions of emotions such as anger in relationship counselling can be part of assigning problems to individuals, nominating them as the party requiring change (Edwards, 1995, 1997). Note that such constructions are mutually inferential – people construct versions of their own thoughts, memories, feelings and so on as part of establishing versions of events or settings and vice versa. This constructionist theme is much less central in CA compared to DP. Moreover, DP draws on the rhetorical tradition of Billig (1996). This highlights the way descriptions are assembled in ways that counter actual or potential alternatives versions. DP is distinct from other constructionist traditions

in its focus on the business of constructing versions in talk and texts, and its emphasis on the way constructions are parts of situated practices.

Second, DP is a systematically non-cognitive approach. That is, it brackets off questions about the existence (or not) of cognitive entities and processes, whether they are part of one of the range of *technical* perspectives that make up modern psychology or are part of the *lay* ontologies of mind that are embedded in particular cultures. Its focus is squarely on cognitive entities as they are constructed in and for public, interactional practices. Note that this includes studying the way practices such as therapy or parenting may draw upon basic cognitivist or psychological distinctions, such as between surface and depth, or between public and private. For the most part, CA too has been a non-cognitivist enterprise. However, CA researchers have a more ambivalent approach to cognition, sometimes attempting to connect interactional phenomena to what they understand as cognitive phenomena (for an overview of these issues see papers in de Molder & Potter, 2005, and the debate between Coulter, 1999, and Potter & Edwards, 2003).

So far we have overviewed general features of DP. We now want to go on and illustrate its operation through specific analyses of particular topics.

### **discursive psychology and child protection**

We will base our discussion on a programme of work conducted with the UK NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children). We will focus in particular on studies that can be used to show the contrasting treatment offered to classic psychological concepts: *cognition* (knowledge, attitude), *perception*, and *emotion*. The aim in each case will be to show how a very different understanding is provided by starting with how these things arise in discourse as practical issues to be addressed by participants. Note that we have deliberately selected notions such as emotion and perception that are often treated as prior to, and separate from, what would traditionally be understood as linguistic phenomena. These are 'hard cases' for an approach that focuses on talk and text.

The NSPCC is the major child protection charity in the UK. Central to their work is a 24 hour National Child Protection Helpline that receives several hundred thousand calls each year. This is legally required to pass credible reports of abuse to either social services or the police, whether the caller wishes it or not. The helpline also provides free counselling, information and advice to anyone concerned about a child at risk of ill treatment or abuse, or to children themselves who may be at risk. It is

staffed by trained social workers with at least three years field experience of working in child protection; they work under the title Child Protection Officer (henceforth CPO).

Our research is based mainly at the NSPCC's London centre. Calls are highly varied. They come from adults, young people, grandparents, parents and neighbours, from people of different social class and ethnic backgrounds from all over Britain. They can be asking for advice, reporting abuse, or requiring counselling. Issues are varied in severity. Calls average something over 15 minutes although some last for as long as an hour. Where serious abuse is suspected the CPO will follow the call directly with a call to the relevant police force, or, more often, Social Services.

Calls were recorded on minidisk and then digitized for transcription and analysis. All participants to the study consented to their calls being recorded for research and training purposes. CPOs only recorded the call if they were satisfied that informed consent had been given. The calls were transcribed initially by a transcription service. These transcripts were refined using the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004) for particular research studies by the second author. Analysis worked with the combination of digitized recording and transcript. The corpus is continually developing but contained more than 250 calls at the time of writing. For more details on methodological, applied or political aspects of the project see Hepburn ([in press](#)), and Hepburn and Potter (2003). We will describe further relevant details as we go along.



### **cognition: knowledge and attitude**

Psychologists are often interested in what people know, and what their attitudes are to things. And they have developed a range of more or less sophisticated procedures for testing knowledge and assessing attitudes. For discursive psychologists, in contrast, the starting place is not what people do or do not know and what attitudes they do or do not have, but how knowledge and attitude figure in interaction in particular settings; that is, what kind of things are these for the participants and how are they relevant, or not, to some activities. We will clarify these issues by describing a study of the opening activities in a corpus of the calls (Potter & Hepburn, 2003). Let us emphasize that we have not started with these psychological notions; rather we have started with an attempt to explicate what is going on in the interaction.


For this analysis we worked initially with a corpus of 40 call openings. These were refined from the full collection because they included the



core NSPCC practice of reporting abuse. We eliminated calls asking for counselling, offering to donate money, and passing information between different NSPCC sites, and focused only on callers ringing about suspected abuse to a third party.

There is a lot of complexity in the early actions performed in calls; we will focus on an element we have called a C-construction. C-constructions often involve what might loosely be called 'expressions of concern' (hence C-construction). Let us start with an example to help make sense of what they are doing and how they relate to these questions of knowledge and attitude. The following extract comes from the start of a call reporting abuse – the C-constructions are arrowed. The ethics exchange has been removed to save space. The transcription conventions are provided in the Appendix of this volume.

#### extract 1: LB neighbour concern



```

01          ((phone rings))
02 CPO:      Hello NSPCC Helpline can I help you:?
03 Caller:   Good after[ noon >I wonder if y'
04 CPO:      [((clears throat))1]
05          could< .hhh
06 CPO:      [ Ye:s certainly:, 1]
07 Caller:   [I'm concerned about-1] ←1
08          (0.2)
09 CPO:      Yeh,
10          (0.2)
11          .h
12 Caller:   about a child that lives next
13          door to me.
14 CPO:      Tk.h ri::ght, could- before you go on
15          ((ethics exchange))
16 CPO:      O`kay: fine yeh go on:, sorry to stop you,
17 Caller:   Yeah I'm- I'm concerned about °h° (0.2) ←2
18          my next door neighbours an they got a
19          little girl about six. an she's
20          always cry:in',
21          (0.2)
22          .Hh
23 CPO:      R[i:ght,1]
24 Caller:   [I can1] hear them through the wa:ll now
25          an mum's shoutin at 'er like anything.
26          (0.7)
27          Tk `I don't want to see you get away from
28          me:,' an (0.3) °.hh° an I mean it's
29          really loud.=huh
30          (0.3)
31 CPO:      Ri::ght.

```

32 **Caller:** I mean I didn' 'ave a too brilliant  
 33 upbringin so I w'd know what it's li:ke  
 34 so. Hh  
 35 (0.4)  
 36 **CPO:** Ye- ri:ght yeah:=an this: is: something  
 37 that you've >been worried about for a<  
 38 whi:le [have you?]  
 39 **Caller:** [It has ] yes I've got a friend  
 40 who works in child protection and she's  
 41 told me to ri- if I'm worried, ring in.  
 42

We will start with a number of observations about this extract.

First note that at line 14 the CPS says 'before you go on', thereby treating the caller as having more to say and being about to go on to say it. This directly follows the first C-construction and so treats it as incomplete. The CPO's 'sorry to stop you' (line 16) treats the caller as having been stopped from something. Second, note the CPO's 'right' on 14 and again on line 23. Of particular interest for us is what these turns are *not* doing. They are not assessments of the prior turn, nor are they moves to new business. They are simply acknowledgement tokens (Schegloff, 1982). Taken together, these things show that the CPO is treating the C-construction as the *start* of something rather than something that is complete.

The third point to note is that after the intrusion of the ethics exchange the caller resumes with a further C-construction. This suggests that the C-construction is structurally important for the early activities of the call. After the intrusion the activities are restarted with the C-construction. The fourth point to note is that the caller continues after the CPO's acknowledgement token (line 23) with a range of descriptions that suggest violence and abuse, and attend to his knowledge of events and motive for calling.

Let us try and specify more precisely what the C-constructions are doing, and therefore why they are important for the unfolding of the call.

1. *C-constructions are prefacing moves.* As we have noted, C-constructions are hearably incomplete. They are treated by both caller and CPO as elements of talk that project a possibly extended set of turns. The CPO's acknowledgement tokens treat these turns as, at least potentially, appropriate to the institutionally relevant issues.

2. *C-constructions project collaborative unpacking of the abuse description.* C-constructions project collaborative unpacking by not starting with a definitive claim about the status of the abuse. Instead, they operate by invoking a concern (or similar 'psychological' item), which can be

worked up as more (or less) definitive in the course of conversation with the CPO. The caller starts with a stance that is open with respect to what actions the NSPCC will respond with.

3. *C-constructions display the caller's (appropriate) stance.* C-constructions display the caller's 'attitude' toward the object of the call, typically some kind of abuse. The topic is treated as serious, potentially damaging or upsetting. Conversely, and relevantly here, this object is not treated as something that the caller feels good about, is entertained by, or gets pleasure or sexual excitement from. The C-construction is the caller's first opportunity to establish appropriate motivations for making the call.

4. *C-constructions manage knowledge asymmetry.* Constructions orient to, and manage, a basic asymmetry. The caller is treated by both parties as knowing about the particular events and actions that they are calling about. The CPO is treated by both parties as knowing about the procedures of child protection work, the policies of the NSPCC, and what reports should be acted on. This is similar to the situation in medical consultations where patients are treated as knowing about their particular symptoms and doctors are treated as knowing about medicine (Gill, 1998). The C-construction is a terrific way of managing the potential difficulties that the asymmetry throws up. In projecting the unpacking of concerns the caller allows the child protection status of the report to be decided by the CPO. In doing acknowledgement tokens (e.g. line 31) and follow-up questions (e.g. lines 36–38).

In terms of attitude and knowledge we can see how both of these things appear as participants' issues and constructions. Attitude is displayed with a C-construction, and it is embedded as a practical part of the interaction. It is locally relevant rather than something that the speaker necessarily carries around as a fully formed mental object. Its production is fitted to the task at hand, of reporting abuse. Likewise with knowledge, differences are a practical issue to be managed in the interaction, and the C-construction is one effective way of doing this. Again, we should not confuse the local construction of, and management of, knowledge with the idea that these participants have particular cognitive states or entities in any simple way. Attitude and knowledge are important, but right here, right now, for the specifics of the interaction.

Note also that the C-construction itself has an interesting mind/reality tension built in. It simultaneously invokes mental or psychological states, and also the states of affairs in the world that generate those states. In effect, it wires in the basic mutual inference feature that is part of DP's topic. Although the word 'concern' is an item that does this job very effectively, in our analysis we found a range of other psychological objects



that could be used instead. For example, the word ‘worried’ could be used to do this job, as could an idiom such as ‘I’m going out of my bleeding head’ or ‘gut feeling’ (see Potter, 2005).

We can see in this example the way psychological matters are bound up with the practical and institutional business of the helpline. We need to understand attitude and knowledge as matters of participant concern that are produced and attended to for their local relevance. Likewise C-constructions such as ‘I’m a bit concerned’ and ‘it’s a gut feeling’ have a subtle institutional job of managing the caller’s appropriate stance and the speakers’ knowledge asymmetries, as well as projecting collaborative unfolding of the report.

### perception: noise and hearing

A central feature of cognitive psychology is that the person is seen to be receiving information through the perceptual system, and this information is then processed. Perception is seen as something fundamental, often bound up with physiology and mechanical processes. Although there has been a tradition of social perception for many years, this has typically been conceptualized in terms of ‘higher level’ cognitive processes acting on perceptual ‘input’ when other people or social groups are the ‘stimulus material’ (Zebrowitz, 1990).

Since the early 1990s there has been a rather different tradition of work that has considered ‘perception’ as a feature of situated practices. For example, Goodwin and Goodwin have studied situations where airline workers, say, or oceanographers ‘see’ particular planes or features of the ocean floor (Goodwin, 1995; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Goodwin suggests that ‘seeing’ involves a range of criteria, and is oriented to particular local practices. Picking up from this alternative tradition, Stokoe and Hepburn (in press) worked with a corpus of the NSPCC materials that included references to noise. Rather like Goodwin’s studies of seeing, the aim was to study hearing. In this case, however, the topic was not professional hearers (audiometrists, say, or musicians) but the constructions of sounds in the reporting of abuse.

Let us illustrate this with an example. The extract below starts immediately after the caller has been taken through the ethics exchange.

#### extract 2: AD neighbour worried

01 **CPO:** So how can I help yo(h)u °hheh°=  
 02 **Caller:** =Well I’m- (0.6) hhh (0.6) I’ve  
 03 just moved into a new hou:se.=





04 oo a[bout (.) th]ree months ago.  
 05 CPO: [ M ↓m :, j  
 06 (0.4)  
 07 Caller: .Hh and they're: (0.3) terraced  
 08 houses.  
 09 (0.2)  
 10 Caller: With quite thin wall:s. Hh  
 11 (0.3)  
 12 CPO: R:right.  
 13 Caller: And you can hear a lot through the  
 14 wa:lls: an: what I ↑seem to be  
 15 hearing quite\* a lot of is children  
 16 screaming and crying.  
 17 CPO: R[i : : g h t. ]  
 18 Caller: [the neighbour]s.  
 19 (0.2)  
 20 CPO: Ri [ : : g h t. j  
 21 Caller: [An I'm gettin] a bit c(h)onc(h)erned.  
 22 (0.4)  
 23 CPO: R[i: g h t.]  
 24 Caller: [I dowanna] make a big dea:l out of  
 25 it but I've just- (0.2) >ye know I'm  
 26 sittin 'ere in the livin r'm< (.) .hh  
 27 an I've just hear:d\* 'please don't do:  
 28 that. please don't do: that. dad. dad.'  
 29 (0.3)  
 30 Caller: °.Hh°  
 31 CPO: R:i:gh[t.]

Let us offer a number of observations about this extract and how the various noise constructions are operating.

By describing her house as 'terraced' and having 'thin walls' (lines 7 and 10) the caller starts to manage both the epistemic status of her reports and her identity as a listener. She then spells out the implications with 'you can hear a lot through the walls' (lines 13–14). Note here the way this is constructed: 'you can hear', not 'I can hear', 'I am able to hear', 'if I am really quiet I can pick up...'. The construction presents the hearing in scripted terms (see above, and Edwards, 1997). This presents it as an anybody hearing. Put another way, it heads off the idea that she spends time carefully trying to listen to what is going on; she is not a busybody.

The first specific noise construction is done cautiously:

what I ↑seem to be hearing quite\* a lot of is children screaming and crying.

The 'seem to be hearing' displays the caller as not rushing to conclusions and allows any confirmation of NSPCC relevance to be arrived at collaboratively. The construction 'screaming and crying' is also interesting, as in other data sets examined the construction 'crying and screaming' was much more common (see Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005). It is possible that more common 'crying and screaming' would make available the inference that what is heard is a problem child. However, 'screaming' followed by 'crying' makes available the inference that they have been first frightened or hurt and then responding to this event with tears.

The second noise construction also attends to the passivity of the hearing. The caller is not trying hard to hear what is going on next door, as a 'nosey neighbour' might. Rather she is 'sitting here in my living room' (lines 25–26). She constructs herself as doing what an ordinary person would do. Note the importance that this is treated as having for the narrative, because the caller breaks off what would probably have been 'just heard' (line 25) and inserts the living room description. In the actual noise description the caller reports direct speech: 'please don't do: that. please don't do: that. dad. dad.' (lines 27–28). This does a number of things. First, reporting speech like this as if verbatim (we have no record, of course), manages the objectivity of the caller. They are not going beyond what they have heard. The rather flat 'as if read out' delivery further contributes to this sense of being objective. Second, the words present a puzzle. What would make a child say those particular words? One solution to the puzzle is that the father is doing something abusive to the child. By offering the puzzle rather than the conclusion the caller further bolsters her status as a reliable witness, and allows the upshot to be a collaborative production with the CPO.

In their study Stokoe and Hepburn (2005) bring out an important further level of detail in the noise reporting by comparative analysis with a set of calls to a neighbour mediation service. There too, there are a large number of calls reporting noise from neighbours and children. However, calls to the mediation service typically construct what they can hear as noise, as well as being inappropriate (e.g., over loud or very late at night). Such reports are systematically different from the NSPCC abuse reports. In the NSPCC calls the callers are not complaining – they are concerned (note the C-construction in line 21) about the child, not bothered for their own comfort. Their motives are produced, in the detail of the noise reporting, as altruistic rather than selfish.

What we see in this study is the way aspects of perception – sound, things that are heard – are constructed in specific ways as parts of the discrete conversational practices. There are subtle but systematic

differences when calling a child protection helpline and calling a neighbour mediation line. These reflect the hearing of 'indications of child abuse' or 'unwarranted disturbance'. In this setting hearing is public and interactional. This shows how 'perception', whatever its biological underpinning, is inextricably bound up with practices of interaction.

### **emotion: crying and empathy**

Emotion is a theoretically interesting topic for discursive research as it too is something of a 'hard case'. That is, it is often treated as something close to biology, something lying underneath language and maybe even culture. Often in social psychology emotion is treated as a causal variable that exerts a distorting effect on cognition (Park & Banaji, 2000). However, Edwards (1997) has suggested that the very category 'emotion' needs to be treated cautiously. The boundaries and contrasts of what makes up 'emotion' are different across cultures and settings. Indeed the category 'emotion' itself is a feature of a particular modern and Western idea of the person. As Edwards (1999, p.273) suggests:

Emotions are not only *contrasted* with cognitions (whether rational or not), both in 'folk' and in professional psychology, but there are also cognitive theories *of* emotions, and indeed cognitive models that virtually do away with, or explain away, emotion categories altogether. But there are also emotion-based explanations of cognition, of what people think, what they think about, and why they think one thing rather than another (because of envy, jealousy, prejudice, obsession, etc.).

Edwards has used ideas from conversation analysis, cultural anthropology and constructionism, as the basis for a respecification that focuses research on: (a) the use of 'emotion' categories; (b) orientations to objects and actions as 'emotional'; and (c) displays of 'emotion'. Some of these features appear in a further development of our child protection project where callers' crying and CPO's responses to crying are the topic of analysis (Hepburn, 2004).

One of the features of psychological work on crying is that it has overwhelmingly worked with participants' reports of crying (in questionnaires or rating scales). There is no work that uses direct observation, or attempts to provide situated descriptions of crying. This meant that one of the early research tasks was to develop an extension to the Jeffersonian transcription scheme (Jefferson, 2004) that would represent different

features of crying such as sobs, whispers, wet sniffs and wobbly voice (Hepburn, 2004). Again, a list of the transcription symbols used can be found in the Appendix of this volume. This fine-grained description of crying provides a way of seeing how the different activities in crying and crying reciprocity are organized together. We can illustrate this with the following extract. Various characteristic elements of crying on the helpline are highlighted, such as caller apologies (A), and CPO actions such as ‘right-thing’ descriptions (RT), ‘take-your-times’ (TYT) and what we have termed ‘empathic receipts’ (ER).

### extract 3: JK distraught dad

01 **Caller:** >.Hhiih .hhiihh<  
 02 **CPO:** D’y<sup>o</sup>u want- d’y<sup>o</sup> wann’ave [a break for a ]  
 moment.= ←TYT  
 03 **Caller:** [ Hhuhh >.hihh<]  
 04 =>hhuhh hhuhh<  
 05 (0.6)  
 06 **Caller:** .shih  
 07 (0.3)  
 08 **Caller:** °°k(hh)ay°°  
 09 (1.8)  
 10 **Caller:** .shih >hhuh hhuh[h]<  
 11 **CPO:** [S]’very har:d when ←ER  
 12 they’re not there with you isn’t it.= ←ER  
 13 and [you’re-] (.) you’re tal:kin about it. ←ER  
 14 **Caller:** [>.hhiih<]  
 15 (0.8)  
 16 **Caller:** >.Hhuh .HHuh<  
 17 (2.1)  
 18 **Caller:** .shih  
 19 (0.2)  
 20 **Caller:** °.shih° (.) °°(Need) hhel(h)°°  
 21 (2.5)  
 22 **Caller:** .HHiihh°hh°  
 23 (0.5)  
 24 **Caller:** HHhuhh >.hih .hih<  
 25 (0.7)  
 26 **CPO:** .Htk.hh Well you’re doing what you can now to←RT  
 27 actually offer them protection and help  
 though ←RT  
 28 are:n’t you. ←RT  
 29 **Caller:** .Skuh (.) Huhhhh  
 30 (0.5)  
 31 **Caller:** °°I:’m not the(hehheh)re. Hh°°  
 32 (3.2)  
 33 **Caller:** .Shih  
 34 (0.4)



35 **Caller:** ~↑I'm ↑sorry.~ ←A  
 36 **CPO:** An they als- well E-E-Eddie obviously al-  
 thought ←RT  
 37 you were the person to contact to get he:lp. ←RT  
 38 **Caller:** Yeh. hh  
 39 **CPO:** F'which (.) ye know he turned to you: .hh ←RT  
 40 (0.7)  
 41 **Caller:** .Hh[h°hhh° ]  
 42 **CPO:** [I'help 'im.]=didn't he. ←RT  
 43 **Caller:** °°Yhhehhh°°  
 44 **CPO:** So 'e saw you as a person who could help in  
 this ←RT  
 situa[tion ] for him:.. ←RT  
 46 **Caller:** [.Shih]  
 47 (0.9)  
 48 **Caller:** .Hdihhhh hhhuhh  
 49 (0.2)  
 50 **Caller:** H↑oh: s(h)orry. ←A  
 51 (0.4)  
 52 **CPO:** .Htk s'↑oka:y. kay.  
 53 (1.3)  
 54 **Caller:** .SKUH  
 55 (0.3)  
 56 **CPO:** It's distressing but it's also quite a shock ←ER  
 isn't it I guess [(for you)] ←ER  
 58 **Caller:** [.HHHHh<sup>h</sup>]h HHHhuhhhh  
 59 (1.7)  
 60 **Caller:** ((swallows)) °Hhhoh dhear.°

Once we have a description that allows this level of detail to be revealed we can start to observe a range of interesting features about the way the extract develops. First, note the way the take-your-time in line 2 is occasioned by the caller's sobbing that starts in line 1 and continues through to line 4. We can see how delicate the mutual attention in this interaction is as, despite the sobbing, the caller responds to the take-your-time with a whispered 'khhay' (line 8).

Second, note further on in the sequence the caller's wobbly voiced apology (line 35). We might think that the caller is apologizing for the transgressive nature of sobbing with a stranger or something similar. However, a careful examination of where apologies appear in crying sequences suggests that they are more likely to be apologies for disruption of ongoing actions or failing to provide normatively expected contributions. That is, they are explicated better by understanding conversational organization. For example, in this case the CPO's assessment in 26–28 is followed by an extremely quiet and very disrupted second

assessment on 31 (the normatively expected turn). The following delay from the CPO would allow the turn to be recycled, and the apology could be specifically apologizing for the absence of this recycling.

Third, note the right-thing descriptions on 26–28 and through 36–45. These are constructed from information already provided by the caller, redescribed to present him having done the right thing. Such descriptions seem designed to reassure the caller and move him out of crying. These descriptions are often accompanied by tag questions (e.g. 28 and 42), which may be designed to move the caller out of crying by encouraging agreement with the right-thing description.

Finally let us consider the interesting topic of empathy. Recently some researchers have started to develop an interactional account of empathy (Pudlinski, 2005; Ruusuvuori, *in press*). We have marked segments of this extract where the CPO does ‘empathic receipts’. The category empathy comes from psychology rather than interaction analysis; however, there are a cluster of features that tend to go together in empathic receipts. Typically there is a formulation of the experience from the recipient’s point of view or of the recipient’s ‘mental state’. Thus on line 11 there is the formulation it’s ‘very hard’ and on line 56 the formulation ‘it’s distressing but it’s also quite a shock’. Interactional contributions such as this are potentially tricky as the speaker is offering a version of something that the recipient is normally expected to know best. Features such as the tag questions (12 and 57) and displays of epistemic caution (e.g. ‘I guess’ on 57) may be a way of managing this.

More generally, although emotion is often thought of as something that is beyond the purchase of DP, studies of this kind show the way that issues and actions which we understand as emotional can be tractable to interaction analysis. This is not surprising once we remind ourselves of the practical and communicative role that emotions play in social life (Planalp, 1999). DP offers the possibility of understanding the various phenomena loosely glossed as emotion in terms of what they are doing and where they appear in people’s lives.

### **discourse, psychology and interaction**

Work in contemporary DP is made up a number of closely related themes. These NSPCC studies illustrate a number of them:

- They are studies of the procedures through which the psychological implications of talk are managed.

- They consider the practical use of the mental thesaurus (terms such as ‘concern’, ‘hearing’, ‘screaming’), although it simultaneously makes problematic a simple distinction between a mental thesaurus and other terms.
- They are studies that respecify core theoretical notions from orthodox cognitive and social cognitive psychology (knowledge, attitudes, perception, emotions).
- They focus on the ‘embodiment’ of psychological states in displays, for example in the sobs and sniffs of crying.
- They address the relationship of psychological and institutional issues, exploring the way the business of the helpline (reporting abuse, orienting to expertise, and so on) is actively accomplished, in part by the use of psychological terms and practices.

There is another theme of DP research that is focused specifically on psychological research methods in practices. It studies both the interactional accomplishment of the method and the constitution of particular findings. There has not been space to overview this work here (but see Antaki, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2002; and, from a more specifically CA perspective, Schegloff, 1999).

In addition to these research themes there is a developing interest in the potential for DP doing practical or applied work. For a discussion of the problems and possibilities here see Hepburn (in press) as well as a range of the contributions to Hepburn and Wiggins (in press).

In general then, discursive psychology offers a way of theorizing and analysing psychology as a feature of people’s practices. It starts with records of what people actually do. In the examples discussed here we have focused on interaction on a helpline, but DP work has been done in a wide range of different settings, and the research is limited only by the imagination of the researcher and the possibility of gaining appropriate access. It offers a picture of psychology that is embedded in practices rather than abstracted from those practices.

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