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# **PREFACE TO CHINESE EDITION OF DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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## **PREFACE**

*Discourse and Social Psychology* has had a major success since its first publication in 1987. Its initial impact was in British, Australasian and European social psychology, yet it has since become influential in other areas of psychology and across the social sciences more broadly. It has been cited more than a thousand times in journal articles, and these were contributed by over a two hundred and fifty different journals in fields including: addiction, cognitive science, communication, counselling, criminology, cultural studies, discourse, education, family therapy, gender and feminism, geography, gerontology, health, information technology, media, nursing, organizational psychology, planning, policing, psychiatry, psychology, racism, social welfare, sociolinguistics, sociology, and work. Its impact goes across the social sciences and, if anything, has increased in the last few years (nearly half of its citations were in work published in the last 5 years). Part of the success of the book is probably due to its conventional format – it is organized around familiar social psychological categories such attitudes, categories and the self. It started as a discursive mirror of the standard text.

Both of us trained in mainstream psychology in the 1970s – one of us in Britain and the other in New Zealand. Both of us were excited by the possibilities of psychology and yet felt frustrated by the limitations of the approaches that dominated the discipline. At that time the many of the debates still revolved around disputes between behaviourism and cognitive psychology. We both felt that conceptions of persons were highly limited as were the sorts of research methods on offer. Social psychology was a particularly frustrating case. While it ought to have been an area where challenging issues could be raised about social problems much of it seemed superficial and naïve. We had different approaches to this. In his PhD, JP

engaged with philosophy, literary theory and sociology and worked on different ways of doing research. He started to use actual talk collected in natural settings as the topic for this research (on psychologists arguing with one another at conferences).

MW went to do her PhD at Bristol which, at the time, was probably the most exciting and creative place for doing social psychology in the world. It was a setting where Henri Tajfel, Howard Giles and John Turner were fashioning a distinctively European approach to the discipline. This adopted the experimental approach of North American social psychology, but merged it with an emphasis on social criticism and the primacy of group processes. The late 1970s were a period of extraordinary creativity at Bristol. Susan Condor, Michael Hogg, Penny Oakes, and Steve Reicher were doing their PhDs there and developing an intellectual momentum that would leave them all as important world figures two decades later. Michael Billig had just left, but his ideas were still a source of lively argument in pubs and at peoples' apartments. His book on intergroup relations (Billig, 1976) was informally voted the best in social psychology amongst the PhD students at Bristol, and there was a lot of excitement about his new work on fascists (Billig, 1978) although the break away from experimental was highly controversial in this largely experimental environment.

By the time we wrote *Discourse and Social Psychology* we were both lecturers at St Andrews University in Scotland, in a psychology department that specialized in studies of neuroscience and animal behaviour. Being away from mainstream, North American focused, experimental social psychology was liberating. It gave us the space to develop ideas that were challenging and unconventional. Ironically the neuroscientists were hardly fazed by our focus on qualitative studies and descriptive work because of their own interest in detailed individual case studies of brain injured

patients. The students were hungry for new ideas. It was an environment that was intellectually supportive in every way.

At in the early 1980s social psychology in the UK and North America was overwhelmingly based on either experimental or questionnaire studies. We felt this work was often simplistic, rarely addressed larger political questions, and was based on an image of science at odds with thinking in the new philosophy of science and the sociology of scientific knowledge that it spawned. There were hardly any general texts on the use of qualitative methods in social science generally, let alone psychology, and very little discussion on the use of open-ended interviews. We made much of that up as we went along.

In the 20 years since it was published *Discourse and Social Psychology* has helped establish discourse analysis (and subsequently discursive psychology) as a major strand of work in social psychology and social sciences more generally. It also helped establish the legitimacy of using qualitative methods in social psychology and developed new ways of using qualitative interviews and of studying recordings of interaction. It contributed to the climate in which new journals such as *Discourse & Society*, *Feminism & Psychology*, and *Theory & Psychology* came not only to exist but to thrive. The exception is North America. Although *Discourse and Social Psychology* was picked up in communication and sociology departments it has really failed to make any impression in psychology departments. Despite the time lapse, the social psychology produced now in such places looks surprisingly similar to what was produced in the mid 1980s. Overwhelmingly it is derived from experimental studies of cognitive processes that work with a restricted sense of social context. Where development has taken place it often comes from making connections to individual models of cognition and attempting to link cognitive processes to brain structures. The social in social psychology became thinner and thinner.

Social psychology in the mid 1980s as a whole was an insular discipline, with remarkably little interchange with what we now see as obviously cognate disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, communication and linguistics. One of the features of *Discourse and Social Psychology* is that it drew heavily on work on sociology, philosophy, anthropology, literary theory and linguistics. It treated the project of social psychology as one that would inevitably draw on theorizing, analytic tools and existing research from across the social and human sciences. Indeed, it made a point of resisting the idea common in North American research that adequate knowledge was to be found in just a small number of American Psychological Association journals that shared very similar presuppositions about the nature of adequate empirical research.

For the rest of this preface we will try to describe some of the context in which *Discourse and Social Psychology* was produced.

### **The context of *Discourse and Social Psychology***

Despite its originality, *Discourse and Social Psychology* did not arrive fully formed from outer space. It picked up from developments that were already underway, and responded to a range of positions. The social psychological context that it picked up from most directly was the so-called crisis in social psychology of the 1970s. The crisis can be seen as having three strands. First was a critique of individualism. This reacted against social psychology's increasing focus on individual cognitive explanations for a mixture of empirical, theoretical and political reasons. The second strand of the crisis was a critique of method. This was centred on a feeling of dissatisfaction with the narrowness of experimental work and its limitations for understanding human action. Third came a critique of theory, and particularly the failure of social psychological theory to address issues of social

organization and social structure. The backdrop to *Discourse and Social Psychology* was the 'climate of problematization' (Curt, 1994) generated by this crisis and the intellectual space cleared by thinkers such as Kenneth Gergen (1973), John Shotter (1977), and Rom Harré and Paul Secord (1972). The diagnosis and critique was brilliant in many ways and generated much debate. Yet it did not offer a fully realised research alternative to traditional approaches to social psychology. Harré's 'ethogenic' perspective came closest to this, but did not build a sustained body of research studies. One feature that helped *Discourse and Social Psychology* to its success was its novel vision of how research might be done.

More direct influences on *Discourse and Social Psychology* came from post-structuralism and literary theory (particularly the work of the French thinkers Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jaques Derrida). This work had been introduced into British psychology via the journal *Ideology and Consciousness* in the late 1970s and developed into a full perspective in the important and influential volume *Changing the Subject* (Henriques, et al., 1984/1998). However, our own engagement with post-structuralism came more directly when we were working on our earlier book *Social Texts and Contexts* (Potter, Stringer & Wetherell, 1984). This was a work which compared literary and social psychological constructions of human action. We found that thinking in post-structuralism provided a radically different vision of what was going on. It is notable, however, that we did not restrict ourselves to a specifically Foucaultian definition of discourse in *Discourse and Social Psychology*, preferring a more open notion that encompasses all different forms of talk and texts. In part that was because our recognition of the significance for psychological issues of the linguistic philosophy of Austin and Wittgenstein.

Another direct influence was work in the sociology of scientific knowledge, which itself had emerged out of issues in the (then) recent philosophy of science of

Kuhn, Popper and Feyerabend. We had both been immersed in this work by the time we were in St Andrews and the sociological developments immediately made sense. Indeed, the version of discourse analysis drawn on in *Discourse and Social Psychology* came not from linguistics (where there were already at least two analytic approaches called discourse analysis) but from sociology of scientific knowledge and Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkey's (1984) book *Opening Pandora's Box*. Those thinkers introduced the notion of an interpretative repertoire to describe the different kinds of accounts that scientists offered when they were justifying their own claims and explaining away the claims of competitors. This is, of course, drawn on extensively in Chapter 7 of *Discourse and Social Psychology*.

A major influence on the subsequent development of discourse analysis and discursive psychology only just starts to appear in *Discourse and Social Psychology*, and that is Michael Billig's rhetorical approach (1987/1996). This was inspired not by post-structuralism or sociology of science, but the very different perspective of ancient rhetoric. Although we had read, and been influenced by, his critique of the social cognition approach to prejudice (Billig, 1985) we only started to appreciate the broader rhetorical programme when we read the manuscript of his book *Arguing and Thinking* after we had written our first draft. The parallels were striking especially given its different roots, but we were able to make appropriate references.

## **Appreciation**

Since the mid 80s we moved on to new institutions – Social Sciences at Loughborough University and Psychology at the Open University. Both have provided wonderfully supportive environments for exploring new ideas with a range of stimulating colleagues in interdisciplinary research groups. There are too many people to thank individually. Nevertheless, the following friends and colleagues have

had a profound influence on our thinking: Charles Antaki, Malcolm Ashmore, Michael Billig, John Clarke, Nigel Edley, Derek Edwards, Stuart Hall, Alex Haslam, Alexa Hepburn, Wendy Hollway, Gail Lewis, Janet Maybin, Ann Phoenix, Claudia Puchta, Steve Reicher, Susan Speer, and Elizabeth Stokoe. Sage has continued to be a great publisher to us and something of a showcase of a range of discourse work, particularly in Britain and Europe. They have grown to be a major publishing force in the social sciences in the past 20 years. Our original editor was Farrell Burnett, who took the initial risk with a pair of very untried and untested researchers. Since then we have worked with a series of equally supportive figures, including Zyad Marar and most recently Michael Carmichael.

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