

3 Conversation analysis and discursive psychology

Taking up the challenge of Sacks' legacy

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Target article: Edwards, D. (1995) 'Sacks and psychology', *Theory & Psychology*, 5: 579–96.

The Edwards (1995) review essay '*Sacks and Psychology*' discussed the implications for psychology that he saw as arising from the definitive two-volume 1992 set of Harvey Sacks' '*Lectures on Conversation*'. Edwards (1995) highlighted how Sacks' approach to the study of social life (and language in particular) addressed key topics for psychology. In this chapter I examine how discursive psychologists have taken up Edwards' challenge to apply Sacks' foundational work in conversation analysis to topics of traditional psychological enquiry. I will revisit some of the topics addressed by Edwards and consider how the epistemological and methodological approach of conversation analysis has contributed to the development of discursive psychology as a discipline. I will conclude by considering what challenges discursive psychologists face when using conversation analysis for their research and how the two fields might engage with and inform each other moving forwards.

Between 1964 and 1972 Harvey Sacks routinely recorded the lectures he gave at the UCLA and Irvine campuses of the University of California. Some have subsequently appeared in publications (e.g., Sacks, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1987). However, in 1992, his *Lectures on Conversation* were made publicly available for the first time in a two-volume set edited by Gail Jefferson and introduced by Emmanuel Schegloff.

Edwards (1995) published an essay in *Theory and Psychology* reviewing Sacks' *Lectures on Conversation*. A review essay might seem like an unusual choice of paper to include in this collection of classic discursive psychology (DP) papers, but Edwards did far more than just review the lectures. Although Sacks addressed the bulk of his work to the social sciences, and sociology in particular, many of the core topics covered in his lectures speak to some of psychology's central interests. Edwards (1995) aimed to make explicit the implications of Sacks' work for psychology and demonstrate how work in discursive psychology could profitably build on Sacks' foundation. He states 'any analysis of how

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conversational interaction works has an immediate relevance for *social* psychology, and might be considered, without further comment, *as* social psychology' (Edwards, 1995: 580, emphasis in original). This provocative claim is one that discursive psychologists have been consistently arguing and presenting evidence for in the twenty years since Edwards (1995) published his review of Sacks' (1992) two-volume set of *Lectures on Conversation*.

Since Edwards wrote his review, both conversation analysis and discursive psychology have flourished and developed as scholarly fields of inquiry. Perhaps it is now worth pausing to take stock and reflect on the role conversation analysis has played in the development of DP as a discipline, and how the two fields might continue to influence each other moving forwards. How have discursive psychologists responded to the legacy left by Harvey Sacks?

CA's influences on DP

There can be no doubt that methodologically DP has been 'profoundly influenced by conversation analysis' (Potter, 2006: 132). Contemporary discursive psychology is 'keen to borrow CA methods where it can' (Antaki, 2004: 670). DP publications are increasingly drawing on conversation analytic literature to support their claims and provide methodological rigour to their analyses. Here I wish to highlight three key features of conversation analysis originating in Sacks' lectures that make it particularly useful (and consequentially influential) for discursive psychologists.

Formulating research questions

Sacks' Lecture 30 (Spring 1966) is mostly comprised of a Q&A session with his students. In answer to one student's question about whether an analyst can go looking for something in a conversation such as 'how attitudes to authority develop', Sacks (1992: 471) delivered a now-familiar rule that analysts should 'pose those problems that the data bears' rather than approaching the data with pre-conceived ideas about what one might find. This was a radical suggestion that ran contrary to the prevailing practices in Sacks' home discipline of sociology. Sacks encouraged his students to reframe traditional research questions in interactional terms. In fact he abandoned the concept of a predefined research question on the grounds that it brought analytic concepts and frameworks into the analysis that were not grounded in the participants' concerns.

True to Sacks' vision, both conversation analysis and discursive psychology are data-driven approaches to research. That is to say a researcher ideally begins with (naturally-occurring) data and generates the analysis in a 'bottom-up' approach in which the data determines the direction of the analysis rather than beginning with theory and testing the data from the top-down to see how well it fits theory-driven expectations.

Naturally occurring data

Sacks' use of naturally occurring data has become a defining characteristic for both CA and DP. Rather than assuming in advance what would be important and designing his research to generate that data,

Sacks' move . . . was to focus empirically on the specifics of his data; the data being whatever conversations and texts that he found in everyday and institutional settings, anywhere except his own interventions to make them happen.

(Edwards, 1995: 593)

The specifics of the data for Sacks included an appreciation of pervasiveness of social order 'at all points' (Lecture 33: 484). The task then became to discover and describe how normal everyday interaction operates.

Out of Sacks' early insights grew the principle of studying naturally occurring data, or at least treating the interaction as a social event unavoidably shaped by and for the context in which it occurs. Contemporary conversation analysis almost exclusively focuses (as the name suggests) on conversational interaction. However, as Edwards (1995: 583) comments, much of Sacks' early work dealt with 'textual materials drawn from a variety of sources, including some brilliant analyses of extracts from the Old Testament'. For discursive psychologists what matters is that the situated nature of the text or talk is preserved and recognised in the analysis. For example, Potter and Hepburn (2008: 276) state when DP does work with open-ended interviews, they 'will be treated as interactional events rather than as places where participants' views can be excavated'. On the situated nature of interviews see Puchta and Potter (2002), Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995), Potter and Hepburn (2012), Alby and Fatigante, (2014); see also Chapter 5 in this volume.

DP's interactionally grounded critique of the use of open-ended interviews as a research method marks an important milestone in the development of the discipline. Whereas conversation analysis used naturalistic data from the outset, discursive psychology emerged out of, and distinguished itself from, its earlier incarnation of discourse analysis by almost completely abandoning open-ended interviews as a research method (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007).

Participants' orientations

In addition to advocating the use of naturally occurring data and refraining from imposing analyst-driven questions, Sacks (1992, Lecture 8, Spring 1966) sets out the importance of considering participants' orientations within any analysis. For Schegloff (2007a: 476) this is a vital component of a robust analysis: 'there must be analysis to show the claim is grounded in the conduct of the parties, not in the beliefs of the writer'. Otherwise interpretive glosses and common-sense assumptions originating with the analyst rather than the participants can creep unexamined into the analysis and get reproduced in the conclusions. For

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any interactionally grounded analysis, including DP, ‘the key issue is not abstract descriptive adequacy, but practical relevance to the interactional business at hand’ (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007: 4).

Contemporary DP has embraced the importance of demonstrating the interactional relevance of a given object of analysis and grounding it in the moment-by-moment orientations of the participants. In preserving the primacy of the participants’ understandings of the interaction rather than imposing or importing preconceived theoretical constructs and subjective interpretations by the analyst, both CA and DP have succeeded in minimising the ‘interpretive gap’ between the research conclusions and the raw data on which they are based. Edwards (2012: 428) defines the interpretive gap as ‘the distance between the object under scrutiny and, via method, data processing, and inferences, what you eventually want to say about it’. In the case of Hepburn and Potter’s (2011) conversation analytically informed DP analysis of threats they were able to outline the basic structure of threats (and distinguish them from warnings and admonishments). They considered the response options made available by a threat (and how participants might evade standard response options). Finally, they discussed the implications of their analysis for social psychological discussion of power, resistance and asymmetry. This is an important example of how CA’s methodological rigour pays dividends for discursive psychologists, particularly when critiquing and re-specifying traditional psychology.

Despite working with the same types of data (naturally occurring interactions) and having a data-driven approach to analysis that is grounded in the participants’ orientations, CA and DP researchers have generated distinct bodies of work. Within CA the most sustained attention lies in its consideration of the structural organisation of talk-in-interaction. This has generated an impressive volume of empirical findings resulting in our current understanding of turn taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974); sequence organisation (Schegloff, 1968, 1972, 2007b); repair (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977) and so on. The programme of work advanced by conversation analysts over the past fifty years can now be characterised as ‘composing a body of theorizing about the organization of interaction’ (Schegloff, 2005: 456).

In contrast, ‘DP has tended to focus on participants’ formulations and categories, and had picked up on issues of turn organisation and sequential placements in a less thoroughgoing way’ (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007). In part this interest was certainly inspired by Sacks, for whom a key focus lay in the situated selection of categorical person references. Although Sacks’ work on membership categorisation has not remained a central concern for CA, it has important implications for discursive psychology (these are addressed in detail in Part 3 of this volume). Edwards (1995: 583) highlights several works, now considered to be forerunners of modern discursive psychology that resonate with and have been influenced by Sacks’ work on the construction and deployment of membership categories (e.g., Billig, 1987; Edwards, 1991; Edwards and Potter, 1992a, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990).

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Discursive psychologists have maintained a clear interest in the interactional relevance of descriptions, evaluations and categories in interaction. Such work continues to demonstrate the importance of situating descriptions and evaluations in their local context as social actions rather than assuming a priori that they unproblematically reflect an internal mental state. Importantly, contemporary DP work has built on CA findings to develop the sequential underpinning of the analyses of the situated and rhetorical purposes for which descriptions are designed and produced. A good example of the **products** of the increasing methodological synergy between CA and DP is Sally Wiggins' work on assessments and evaluations of food during mealtime conversations (Wiggins, 2001, 2002, 2004; Wiggins and Potter, 2003). In this way discursive psychologists have capitalised on the weight of empirical findings obtained using conversation analytic methods to advance their own research interests.

Both CA and DP commit to using naturalistic data, beginning the analysis with data rather than theory, and prioritising participants' orientations. Despite this, their respective literatures published over the past twenty-five years demonstrate that shared methodological principles are insufficient to capture and determine the unique interests and contributions to knowledge from the two approaches. For discursive psychologists, Edwards (1995: 594) proposes that 'the solution is to ask a different question, but still recognisably a psychological one, and, moreover, one that the data bears'. That is to say, to borrow the methodological approach from CA without abandoning a core interest in psychological matters.

DP and psychology

Initially 'the political impulse of . . . discursive work was to question psychology' (Parker, 2012: 472) and was primarily addressed as a critique of traditional research within psychology on topics such as attitudes, memory and cognition. The general goal was to reframe the terms of the debate within psychology and shift the research emphasis from what talk refers to (for instance, a mental state, emotion, belief, memory), to what talk does (the discursive practices through which such referents are invoked). However, contemporary DP has gone far beyond this original aspiration and 'is a programme of work that can, and these days largely does, go on with little or no reference to, nor critical engagement with, other kinds of psychology' (Edwards, 2012: 427).

Contemporary DP remains well positioned to engage with psychology, providing a distinct theoretical voice with a strong empirical base in which to substantiate its claims. A key insight from Sacks' lectures is that 'social life is organised so that people can take part in it, and learn to take part in it, via its publicly displayed nature' (Edwards, 1995: 589). As such DP is well placed to contribute to our understanding of socialisation processes and (drawing once again on insights from CA) is beginning to generate a growing body of empirical work. A developmental discursive psychology would entail,

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the study of how children come to be competent users of public forms of accountability – how they learn to talk and act in recognizable and accountable ways, which is to say, in ways describable and explicable as persons within some social order

(Edwards and Stokoe, 2004: 500)

Work by Wootton (1997) and Forrester (2002, Forrester and Reason, 2006; Forrester and Cherington, 2009) has demonstrated the importance of considering the issue of competent membership as a contingent and negotiable affair dependent on the moment-by-moment organization of talk. Increasingly, discursive psychologists are able to contribute to developmental psychology and offer descriptions of concrete practices through which we might observe the situated performance of abstract processes such as socialisation. For example, Sterponi (2009) examined socialisation practices and moral accountability during family conversations. She identified a practice used by parents for vicarious accounting ‘namely accounts, or explanations, provided by parents *for* a child’s misbehavior’ (2009: 441). Vicarious accounts could be used to support children in learning social acceptable practices for providing accounts. Recurrently the parent’s vicarious accounts ‘set up constraints on children’s autonomy of action, neutralizing more subversive and blameworthy interpretations of their problematic conduct’ (Sterponi, 2009: 441).

Certainly, since Edwards’ (1995) review of Sacks’ lecture was published, discursive psychology has undeniably moved methodologically closer to CA. (e.g., Edwards, 1995, 1997, 2000; Potter, 1997; Potter and Hepburn, 2003; Wiggins and Potter, 2003). Yet, at the same time (as this very volume shows), it has sought and developed a dialogue with approaches steeped in rhetorical, textual and ideological approaches (e.g., Augoustinos and de Garis, 2012; Tileagă, 2011) that advocate a more cautious relationship with conversation analysis (Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1999a, b). For a contemporary exegesis of debates around DP and CA see Chapter 1 in this book.

DP’s particularism

While DP researchers may increasingly be choosing to capitalise on the empirical rigour of conversation analysis, they have by no means relinquished DP’s own particular theoretical and epistemological background.

Constructionism

DP’s interest in categories reflects its constructivist epistemology in that ‘category description of persons, things or events are always ones that could have been otherwise, such that actually occurring descriptions are always contingent, particular and occasioned phenomena’ (Edwards, 1995: 580–1). As a consequence it highlights the situated nature of talk; a core analytic interest for discursive psychologists (Potter, 2005).

Almost all introductions to DP will emphasise its interest in the ‘constructed and constructive’ character of discourse (Kent and Potter, 2014: 295). DP’s approach to constructionism emerged through its engagement with the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g., Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984) and within the broader discourse analytic tradition within social psychology (e.g., Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The particular variant of constructionism advocated by discursive psychologists (outlined by Potter and Hepburn, 2008) is significant for its emphasis on performance rather than perception. This can be contrasted, for example, with the sense of linguistic constructionism associated with Benjamin Whorf (1956) in which ‘linguistic categories constructed the *perceptual* world for language users in a speech community’ (Potter and Hepburn, 2008: 278).

The ‘foregrounding of construction as an issue’ is one of the ways in which DP can be distinguished from CA as a separate intellectual endeavour (Potter and Hepburn, 2008: 276). DP researchers place a greater emphasis than CA researchers on understanding how participants produce, sustain and contest their social realities through discourse. This is particularly evident in the strands of discursive psychology that explore the ways in which interaction constructs broader cultural tropes (such as morality, ideology and prejudice). Part 4 of this book offers several examples of this kind of work.

The constructionist agenda of discursive psychology dictates its interest in how psychological and societal concepts such as ideology, morality, memory and emotion are produced through language. Engagement with Sacks’ work and conversation analysis in particular has focused discursive psychologists’ ability to make empirical claims about the actual practices through which accounts, evaluations and descriptions are produced in interaction and the purposes to which they are employed in situ (e.g., Tileagă’s 2005, 2010 work on moral accounting and prejudice). Although CA’s primary focus does not concern constructionist epistemological issues in the way that DP’s particular agenda does, it can nonetheless be used methodologically in the service of some constructionist projects.

Anti-cognitivism

When discussing the influence of Sacks work on contemporary DP it is without doubt necessary to consider that ‘probably the most salient characteristic of DP, at least at we practice it, [is] that it rejects the cognitivist assumption that minds are revealed or expressed in what people say’ (Edwards and Potter, 2005: 245). This position motivated early DP work such as Edwards’ (1994, 1995, 1999) work on script formulations, dispositions and emotion talk and Edwards and Potter’s (1992b) work on discursive remembering. It continues to exert a profound influence over contemporary DP studies.

DP focuses on the practical ways in which people deal with each others in terms of their ‘desires, motives, institutional allegiances, and so on’ (Potter, Edwards and Wetherell, 1993: 392). Instead of viewing bits of mental apparatus

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(e.g., motives) as ways of explaining social action, DP advocates an entirely different starting position for research; one in which the invocation of a purported mental states is treated as a topic for analysis in its own right to help explicate the social practice in which it is embedded. For example, Antaki and Horowitz (2000: 170) demonstrate that by invoking someone's motives by describing someone as having 'a personal stake in the matter, an interested party' you can undermine their position and effectively disqualify them from commentary on the topic under discussion.

Sacks' comments during his lectures indicate his view that the analysis of interaction could (in fact should) begin with performance rather than cognition. In Lecture 1 (1992: 11) he suggested that analysts need not be concerned with how fast people think or whether they are thinking at all, 'just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off'. This leads to the position that it is possible, indeed desirable, to study social action through people's talk without requiring reference to their internal mental states.

Edwards (1995) was keen to highlight the potential for a radically different understanding of the relationship between cognition and behaviour based on Sacks' insights. Sacks' work offered a profoundly new basis of assumption, that 'the orderliness of social life and its intelligibility stem not from a set of updated knowledge structures in a sense-making cognitive being, but from how social actions flexibly unfold as situated performances' (Edwards, 1995: 590).

DP's early work on cognitive phenomena have been profitably developed and enhanced through insights from conversation analysis. For example, Barnes and Moss (2007) analysed reports of 'private thoughts' (RPTs) across a range of interactional environments. They describe RPTs as 'objects people use in doing social life to communicate a thought or a feeling, specifically when speaker-feelers want to characterize "how it appeared to me then" for an overhearing audience or in appeals to shared experience' (Barnes and Moss, 2007: 141). They demonstrated that RPTs cannot be dismissed as a straightforward representation of what was actually thought or felt. They illustrated that through precisely co-ordinated moves in interaction, participants could use reports of their private thoughts or feeling as a tool for doing intersubjectivity work (Drew, 2003).

Similarly, in her analysis of 'I don't know' Weatherall (2011: 317) drew on CA's technical understanding of turn-construction units, pre-sequences and progressivity to demonstrate that instead of just reporting a cognitive absence of knowledge, '*I don't know*s function as a prepositioned hedge – a forward-looking stance marker displaying that the speaker is not fully committed to what follows in their turn of talk.' In this respect it is clear to see the analytic advantage for discursive psychologists to be gained by harnessing the empirical apparatus of conversation analysis in their research. It enables them to go beyond the now well-documented observations that talk is action and cannot be treated as a neutral reflection of the speaker's internal world. CA provides a technical language to describe the nature of the action being performed by referring to cognitive phenomena such as thoughts, feelings and memories.

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Although less explicitly concerned with cognitive matters, CA's methodological apparatus (specifically its requirement to ground analytic claims in the interactional relevance of the action for the participants) means that it has also tended to produce non-cognitive accounts of social action. Its focus on matters of sequential organisation has traditionally meant it has not focused extensively on what Potter (2005: 743) calls 'issues of mind'. However, recently that has begun to change.

An emerging strand of conversation analytic work investigates 'the social organization of cognitive displays and embodiments' (Kitzinger, 2006: 67). This line of work has begun to suggest that an analysis of the sequential organisation of talk can reveal whether cognitive shifts have actually occurred in the mind of the speaker or whether they were being employed for rhetorical purposes (Golato, 2010; Heritage, 2005; Maynard, 2003). For discursive psychologists, this move is seen as an attempt to link interactional phenomena to underlying cognitive states rather than investigating them on their own terms (Potter, 2005) and has generated some tension between the approaches (e.g., Drew, 2005; Potter, 2006; Kitzinger, 2006).

Sacks' (1992: 11) concluded his first lecture by telling his students 'don't worry about whether they're 'thinking'.' That is to say he suggested that an analysis of how people do what they do is sufficient in its own terms without recourse to an invisible set of abstract cognitive concepts. Much of the methodological rigour and empirical robustness of conversation analysis rests on its very tight focus on the demonstrable interactional relevance of target phenomena and the minimal interpretive gap between the data and the analytic claims being made (Edwards, 2012). Sacks' tenets to use naturalistic data, privilege participants' orientations and ask the questions that the data bears rather than imposing preconceived analyst understandings set the bar high for those attempting to analyse interaction, but they provide a deep integrity to the analysis that has stood the test of time (Schegloff, 2005). DP has taken Sacks' insights into a systematic programme of work that cautions researchers against the seductive nature of cognitive explanations for behaviour, and against inadvertently 'imposing cognitivist assumptions on conversational materials' (Potter, 2006: 131).

Summary

In his review, Edwards (1995) clearly identified strong points of contact between Sacks' work and the emerging fields of discursive psychology and conversation analysis. Here I have attempted to sketch out some of the ways in which Sacks' insights have contributed to the landscape of contemporary discursive psychology and influenced its relationship with conversation analysis. In the first section I outlined three key tenets of conversation analysis to emerge from Sacks' work. Each of these has exerted a powerful influence on the shape of contemporary discursive psychology.

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Pose the questions that the data bears

Sacks advocated a radical approach to research that dispensed with the traditional research question and instead started with close description of the data. On one level this prescription requires the analysis to adopt a data-driven approach to analysis, something that both CA and DP typically do. However, DP is also motivated by epistemological and disciplinary concerns that influence the sorts of data analysts are likely to seek out. For DP the topical interest in psychological matters, a commitment to CA's methodological principles and a foregrounding of constructionist concerns combine to produce a modified version of Sacks' approach that, while still driven by data, focuses the analysis on interactional phenomena that reveal how participants orient to, produce and contest psychological resources.

Use naturalistic data

Unlike conversation analysis, discursive psychology did not originally work with naturalistic materials but adopted them as a result of engaging with conversation analytic work. The switch towards relying on naturally occurring data provided discursive psychology with a way of clearly distinguishing its work from that of other discourse analytic traditions through a sustained critique of the research interview as a data collection tool. It helps to establish DP as an independent programme of work, though closely allied to conversation analysis.

Privilege participants' orientations

CA's foregrounding of participants' concerns and the requirement to demonstrate the interactional relevance for participants of any analytic claim is the cornerstone of its methodological rigour and empirical power. It is what has enabled CA to generate an extensive and robust body of empirical evidence for the orderliness and organisation of social interaction. This body of work has been very profitably utilised by discursive psychologists to support their own analyses, but more importantly has inspired discursive psychologists to be as rigorous in their own analysis and more closely anchor their analytic claims in members' interactional concerns.

Some very notable contemporary strands of DP draw heavily on CA methods, but, as a field, DP is much more varied. Not all strands of discursive psychology embrace conversation analytic principles – they are more concerned with the relationship between discourse and broad sociocultural themes. Arguably, the limitations of a conversation analytic methodology in fact make it harder to study the discursive construction of some of the central phenomena of interest to DP (e.g., stereotypes, ideological frameworks, social identity).

I would suggest that contemporary DP studies have shown that, although CA demands a very locally situated analysis and sets high standards for empirical soundness, greater dividends are possible by grounding broader cultural themes

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in members' orientations within the interaction. With care, and where the data can bear such an analysis, it is possible to not only locate sociocultural concepts (e.g., sexism) in interaction but also explicate the concrete practices through which they are perpetuated (e.g., Speer, 2001, 2002). Once the practices have been identified, researchers are then uniquely able to work with participants (most notably practitioners within institutions) to apply the findings directly to the real world settings from which they were derived (e.g., Stokoe, 2014).

Despite adopting many of Sacks' principles, DP's particular stance remains staunchly constructionist and adamantly anti-cognitivist. In this respect it is at odds with conversation analysis, which has a far less explicit epistemological position *vis a vis* cognition and social constructionism. Recent moves by conversation analysts to try to find evidence for cognitions in interaction are troubling for DP and have provoked tensions (e.g., Drew, 2005; Potter, 2006; Kitzinger, 2006). Specifically, DP has criticised CA for importing cognitivist assumptions and imposing them on the data and failing to sufficiently privilege participants' orientations to the interactions relevance of their interlocutors' actions. CA researchers might adopt a more explicit epistemological position regarding cognition and might profitably borrow from DP in much the same way as DP has evolved to take advantage of the methodological power of CA.

In conclusion, the robust and compelling empirical findings generated through conversation analytic work can be used to substantiate discursive constructionist analyses of interaction. In this sense CA represents a powerful tool for discursive psychologists and has substantially influenced the development of the field. However, one can still identify epistemological tensions, as well as affinities, between the two approaches. With their shared interest in the performative role of language, CA and DP can continue their dialogue and cross-fertilisation by focusing the lens of their analytic microscopes on different interactional phenomena and by posing different questions for their data to bear.

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