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Introduction

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Key Terms

Action orientation  Narrative analysis
Categorization  Norm
Conversation analysis  Objective
Critical discourse analysis  Orienting
Discourse analysis  Positioning
Discourses  Pre-analytic categories
Discursive psychology  Repertoires
Face  Rhetorical psychology
Flexibility  Self-processes
Foucauldian discourse analysis  Social constructionism
Ideology  Stake
Interactional context  Subject positions
Interest  Talk-in-interaction
Membership categories  Variability
Membership categorization analysis

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This book is about identities and discourse. Our aim is to provide the reader with insight into the range of contemporary studies drawn from discursive research literature which have explored how identities are developed, maintained, challenged and resisted within particular domains of interaction. To do this, we will examine certain features of identity such as gender or nationality which have been of abiding interest to social researchers throughout modern history. We will also pursue how identities are folded into specific contexts of interaction such as health or the law. But we want the reader to be clear from the start that we do not view these features and contexts as pre-analytic categories which the researcher draws upon to make sense of research data in the way that a chemist might draw upon the categories of matter in the periodic table. As will be clear from subsequent chapters, our view is that identities and the contexts in which they arise are matters which are constructed, maintained and challenged as people go about their interactional business. In this sense, features such as ‘gender’ and contexts such as ‘health’ are elements of interaction which the participants in those interactions produce and reproduce in discourse. And so it is through their descriptions and formulations and reformulations that these features and contexts make their appearance. However, we did want to provide the reader with a text that is easily navigable. So we have chosen to structure the book in this way, around readily recognizable themes, so that the reader will immediately have a ‘toehold’ on the materials being discussed and also so that he or she will find it easy to compare what is said here with what is said about similar topics in quite different areas of research. Towards the end of this chapter, we will describe what the subsequent chapters will be focusing on. However, before doing that, it is useful to begin by providing a preliminary discussion of the central elements which run throughout those later chapters: identities and discourse.

What Are Identities?

We seldom have difficulty in talking about ourselves and about other people. Indeed, discussing one’s friends, one’s relatives, celebrities and so on is one of the most natural ways in which we engage with other people. This seems to imply that at an everyday level we all have a very clear grasp on who we are and who other people are. However, throughout the ages, philosophers, scientists, poets, playwrights and other thinkers have challenged our easy acceptance that we know who we are and that we likewise know who others are. In more recent times, social scientists have struggled with the same issue and acknowledge that the term ‘identity’ and related terms such as ‘the self’, although prevalent, continue to stand in need of clarification.
The definition of ‘identity’ provided in the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness.’ This definition helpfully highlights the problem that thinkers have faced throughout the years. On the one hand, the notion of ‘being the same in ... properties’ suggests that we must be considering at least two things, which are the same in respect of their properties. The notion of ‘oneness’ suggests something quite different: that when we think of identity we think of a single thing. Philosophers sometimes distinguish between these two sorts of notion in terms of qualitative identity and numerical identity. So dogs of a particular breed are qualitatively identical, because they share the same breed characteristics, but AMcK’s dog Truffle is numerically identical, and the identity relation here only holds between Truffle and himself. Of course, how this sort of distinction works in practice is a puzzle that modern philosophers, since Leibnitz in the eighteenth century, have argued over.

In the realm of contemporary social science, Weigert, Smith Teitge and Teitge (1986) trace the introduction of the notion of identity back to the work of Erikson (1968), especially to his distinction between ‘ego identity’ and ‘group identity’. Thus we can see right from the start that here too the notion of identity involves a certain sort of ambiguity. It seems to refer both to a person’s central being that continues through biographical history and, at the same time, to the fragmentary and temporary social positions and roles which people take up and discard as they interact with others, with the crucial point being that when one of these positions or roles is adopted, the individual concerned can be thought of as identical to others in that position or role. Verkuyten (2005b) captures this dual aspect of identity in saying

The identity concept is not about individuals as such, nor about society as such, but the relation of the two.

Verkuyten (2005b, p. 42)

In attempting to deal with this sort of dual nature, social psychologists have responded by developing explanatory frameworks such as social identity theory (Turner and Onorato, 1999), in which ‘personal identity’ deals with the notion of the unique individual, and ‘social identity’ represents the aspect of the person that reflects membership of different social groups. Thus ‘personal identity’ can be used to refer to uniquely individual aspects of oneself that persist through time, while ‘social identity’ (or, more properly, ‘social identities’ since it is assumed that we may have many different social identities) can refer to those aspects of society which one draws upon in making sense of oneself as being the same as or different from others. And the social identity theorist is concerned with understanding the cognitive processes which underpin our ability to switch from one of these identities to the other.

One obvious thought is that if there are these two different facets to our use of ‘identity’, perhaps it would be easier if we had two different terms. And a second term is readily to hand: ‘the self’. For example, Owens (2006) argues that although
‘self’ and ‘identity’ are sometimes used as synonyms, they refer to quite different concepts and, indeed, to different levels of analysis. In Owens’s view, ‘identity’ refers to a narrower notion which is intrinsically relational, in that identities are categories that people use to specify who they are in relation to other people. In this sense, the term ‘identity’ is subsumed within a broader notion of ‘the self’. So perhaps we could use ‘identity’ to refer to the ‘social’ part of ourselves, the bit of ourselves that we think about when we are considering whether we are the same as the other members of some social group or other. And we could use ‘the self’ to refer to the bit that is especially unique just to us. But this suggestion implies that we have, at least, an uncontroversial view of what ‘the self’ is. Now it is true that in some respects, the notion of ‘the self’ has a more established lineage in social science research than does ‘identity’. However, there has been a longstanding uneasy awareness that while ‘the self’ appears to point to an individual, selfhood does not seem to be a unitary phenomenon. As long ago as the nineteenth century, William James suggested that:

This me is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The I which knows them cannot itself be an aggregate, neither for psychological purposes need it be considered to be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the Soul …

(James, 1890, pp. 400–401)

And not much later, in the early part of the twentieth century, George H. Mead claimed that:

The observer who accompanies all our self-conscious conduct is then not the actual ‘I’ who is responsible for the conduct in propria persona – he is rather the response which one makes to his own conduct.

(Mead, 1913, p. 376)

In fact, in the decades that have followed researchers have noted that ‘the self’ can refer to a bewildering array of different notions: the self as a person, construed as a bodily whole persevering through time with an accompanying mental aspect which is similarly coherent and temporally enduring; the self as a personality; the self as the focal point of phenomenological experiences; the self as the source of self-knowledge that incorporates the way that one ‘tracks’ information about oneself and experiences self-awareness; the self as actor or agent that incorporates one’s capacities for willed actions and decision-making; the self as a social being concerned with issues of self-presentation and social role performance (Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin, 2007; Leary, 2004). The situation is made more complex because different areas of social research have, quite understandably, different ‘versions’ of the self that reflect that domain’s core concerns.

For example, according to sociologists, we as individuals act within the societies in which we find ourselves. So in one way society is created out of our actions but,
in another way, it is our actions which determine the nature of society (Giddens, 1991; Stets and Burke, 2005). Here the central idea of the self is that of a thinking being who creates or construes meaning from experience, perhaps conditioned by the symbolic world in which he or she lives, and whose actions are guided by the repository of cultural understandings, probably codified in some way or another in language, which are contained within the mind of that thinking being. Thus the self emerges as a somewhat minimal core entity, capable of self-reflection, whose nature in part reflects and in part is constitutive of its cultural context. One of the most influential discussions of the self to arise from within the sociological domain was that produced by Goffman. In her review of this work, Branaman (1997) outlines Goffman’s view of the self as being doubly social. On the one hand, the self is merely a product of the social performances in which it is engaged and thus the self in a sense is no more than the sum of the social roles we adopt. On the other hand, we are not completely ‘free’ to adopt any old version of the self – the social performances we can successfully accomplish may be constrained by societal features such as status and social hierarchy. Much of this theoretical perspective is centrally determined by Goffman’s concern with ‘face’ – the idea that we have an abiding concern with presenting a positive image of ourselves to others. However, Branaman goes on to draw attention to potential contradictions in Goffman’s view of the self. If the self is no more than the sum of social performances, then it seems contradictory to suggest that the self is also responsible for impelling us into and out of such performances in order to achieve and maintain a positive ‘image’ in the eyes of others. The worry here is that there does not seem to be an available version of the self which could count as the master manipulator standing behind all of these face-saving social performances. However, Goffman (1959) himself suggests that in fact this ‘puts the cart before the horse’: the self that is imputed to us by others as they observe our social performances is an effect, not a cause, of those performances. Goffman does suggest that ‘the person’, considered as a unique individual with a continuing and traceable biography, may well be different from the sum total of his or her social performances, but even this distinction is at root a social one. The outcome of this is that the sort of self that, for example, philosophers are concerned with apparently plays a vanishingly small role in the sociologist’s world.

As another example, psychologists provide a kaleidoscope of different versions of the self which range from a concern with whether the self is locatable in the brain (and, if not, whether it is a legitimate construct at all), through analysis of selves in terms of personality constructs such as neuroticism, to the social psychologist’s interest in the self as the locus for issues such as self-esteem or interpersonal relationships. If we restrict ourselves to what social psychologists have said about the self, we discover that they are interested in discovering how well we know ourselves – some people seem to be able to describe themselves in a way which others who know them would agree with, while others do not. Another
interest here is in knowing whether different types of ‘self’ play a role in the sorts of people that an individual might select as friends or soul-mates. Like sociologists, social psychologists display a keen interest in the impact of culture or society on the self. Thus some social psychologists claim that different cultures (e.g. ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’ cultures) produce individuals who think of themselves in characteristically different ways. And of course, different cultures provide different social roles for individuals to inhabit, and social psychologists have also been interested in understanding how and to what extent the self can be subsumed within such roles. Social psychologists are also interested in how people vary on a variety of aspects of the self, for example whether they are concerned with what other people think of them and in how this relates to the types of ‘self-presentation’ activity that someone might engage in.

What is interesting about these different social psychological pursuits is the focus on self-processes associated with oneself, rather than on selves or identity per se. In discussing these sorts of process-models of self and identity, Simon (2004) suggests that the social scientist must view identity as both something that explains social interaction and as something that arises out of those interactions. Now this might seem to raise paradoxical worries about whether identity is something that causes itself, worries which are similar to those that seemed to face Goffman. However, Simon suggests that this apparent difficulty can be resolved by viewing identities as mediators between the input we receive from the social world and our subsequent interactions with that world. One consequence of this is that we might be required to view identity as an ‘analytic fiction’: ‘At best, the search for the essence of identity as a “thing”, say, in the form of a physiological or hard-wired mental structure, would then be a futile effort’ (Simon, 2004, p. 3). In place of this ‘futile’ search, Simon advocates a ‘process-oriented’ approach in which our everyday conception of self and identity remains for lay-people, but is no longer an object of study for the scientist.

What we discover, then, is that when we look at social scientific accounts of the self or identity it often seems that social scientists are less concerned than other sorts of thinkers (e.g. philosophers) with establishing a single, agreed definition of the phenomenon under study. Instead, when the self or identity plays a role as a social science construct it is often because social researchers seek to provide empirical evidence on a range of aspects of human existence in which our behaviours in, and our engagement with, other people and with the social environment can be explained by viewing individuals as having some sort of reflective awareness of, or understanding of, what they are like as individuals. Of course a shortcoming of this sort of approach is that we lack a grand, unified definition of ‘identity’ or ‘the self’ with which all social researchers will agree. However, these researchers would argue that by focusing in a piecemeal fashion on the variety of different ways in which identity and the self enter social life, and by concentrating...
on providing detailed definitions only within these strictly limited domains, researchers are able to address what seem to be important aspects of our lives without being hung up, right at the very beginning, with problems of terminology and definition of the most general level.

So it looks as though our attempt to define ‘identity’ is, then, only partially successful. Even if we attempt to make use of ancillary terms such as ‘the self’, we seem left with an unsatisfying situation where sometimes we seem to be referring to unique individuals, and sometimes to people understood as exemplars of social categories – in terms of ‘being the same as’ other people. And exploring fields of social research such as sociology and experimental social psychology seem to take us no further forward. Indeed, in some sense self and identity seem to disappear from view. One point of interest here, however, is that many social researchers who take themselves to be studying identity apparently ignore one potentially useful resource. We said at the outset that issues of self and other seem to be matters which the lay person deals with all the time in day-to-day interaction. This is at least suggestive of the fact that there might be a different way to approach the study of identity – to attend closely to the ways in which identity and identity issues appear in people’s everyday discourse. Indeed, this opens out the tantalizing possibility that the sorts of definitional issues which we have been wrangling with over the last couple of paragraphs may actually have a quite different sort of resolution. Perhaps some of these problems of definition arise because the notion of identity that people actually experience, in their day-to-day lives, is a quite different sort of thing from that which is captured in the analysts’ definitions we have been examining. So perhaps a more fruitful avenue would be to discover how people, from their own perspectives, make sense of their own identities in their own discourse. But before we can see if there is any mileage in this idea, we need, first, to turn to the prior issue of deciding what we mean by ‘discourse’.

What Is Discourse?

The appeal of turning to the study of discourse has long been recognized in the social sciences. What makes this sort of research distinctive is that it treats discourse as a topic in its own right. Instead of viewing what people say (or write) as in some sense an inconvenient barrier to what they are ‘really’ thinking, discourse is viewed as a phenomenon which has its own properties, properties which have an impact on people and their social interaction. One important aspect of this approach is to emphasize the way in which participants themselves have an at least implicit understanding that discourse has these properties. In using discourse, participants often rely on some of its properties to accomplish a specific social action. So understanding social actions and interactions just is understanding the ways in which people use discourse to accomplish these actions and to engage in these
interactions. It is this feature of discursive research which is sometimes referred to as the action orientation of discourse. And precisely because of this action orientation, discursive researchers take discourse to be a constitutive affair. What it is for someone to have a particular identity is constituted by the discourse which is produced and the actions which are thereby accomplished. And one of the actions that might be performed in discourse is socially constructing for oneself or others a particular identity. Another feature of discursive research is the assumption that constructive actions of this sort do not exist in a vacuum. So if someone takes up or challenges an identity, this particular discursive action is likely to be linked with other actions that are being performed within the interactional context in which the identity claim arises.

As with any field of research, discursive research encompasses a variety of different theoretical standpoints. Some discursive researchers view society as a historical entity in which particular ways of thinking have become crystallized in the form of an ideology or social norm. Because of this, they hold the view that some forms of talk are, in a sense, already predetermined for members of that society, and that the range of discursive actions that they can accomplish is limited by such ideological forces. Other discursive researchers draw similar conclusions about discrete parts of society. So, for example, they suggest that within institutions such as health or the law, what we say and do is partly a reflection of the historical development of those particular institutions. This does not just refer to the fact that there may be normative or legal constraints on what we say in these contexts, but that our very ways of thinking about those contexts are ‘pre-set’ by our own development as members of the particular society in which we find ourselves. Yet other discursive researchers hold a more sanguine view of the potential impact of society upon the individual. From their perspective, discourse is root-and-branch constructive, and this extends not only to unique matters of talk as they might arise in a particular conversation, but applies equally to ‘larger scale’ forms of thinking or categorization. So for these discursive researchers, for example, what it is to have a particular gender identity or a particular ethnic identity is determined completely by how these notions are worked out in discourse, and the analyst need make no recourse to extra-discursive notions such as ideologies of femininity or race in explaining how such an identity appears and is treated during an interaction. Thus while some discursive researchers feel that large-scale issues such as ideology, power and socio-historical forces are intrinsic to the research programme, others claim that these issues are only
amenable to analysis to the extent that their participants can be seen themselves to make reference to such issues.

Associated with these theoretical differences are corresponding debates about methodology. For those with a broader interest in issues of ideology or power, the materials which can be drawn on as data are extensive and can include a wide range of both written and spoken texts, including newspapers, government reports, educational texts, or any other written sources generated within a specific domain such as health or law. On the other hand, those discursive researchers who eschew reference to explanatory concepts lying beyond matters dealt with by participants themselves tend to restrict themselves to a narrower range of data. In many cases, these are verbatim accounts of what people actually said. Even here, dispute may arise over what counts as an ‘appropriate’ verbatim account. In particular, some forms of discursive research restrict attention to verbatim accounts of what is said by people in ‘naturally occurring’ talk arising out of real-life social interactions, with the implication that some forms of interaction, notably research interviews, are not ‘real-life’ enough to produce acceptable data.

So it turns out that if a discursive researcher were to answer our question ‘what is discourse’, that answer will depend on the particular theoretical and methodological position which he or she inhabits. We mention this here for a very particular reason. In the chapters that follow, we will make little attempt to highlight these sorts of theoretical and methodological debate. Instead, we will be focusing on how discursive researchers, of whatever bent, have sought to throw light on identity. However, we did want the reader to be aware that the findings we discuss in subsequent chapters are drawn from a range of different research perspectives. As an aid to developing this awareness, we provide below some thumbnail sketches of some of the more influential strands in discursive research which have informed identity research as it is developed throughout the rest of this book.

Two approaches to discursive research which lay emphasis on the influence of ideology on discourse are critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysts (Fairclough, 1995; Meyer, 2001; Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2001a) are concerned with the way in which social and political inequalities are embedded within our discourse. So in considering gender identities, say, a critical discourse analyst will want to understand how ideologies reproduce unequal aspects of masculinity and femininity. Arguably, from this perspective such ideologies can be thought of as existing within society as a whole and exerting a social force that constrains the ways in which women and men can think about themselves. An important aspect of critical discourse analysis is that research is viewed as having the potential to challenge these sorts of ideological forces.
Foucauldian discourse analysis (Parker, 1992; Burman and Parker, 1993) draws its inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980, 2002). Foucault’s view was that the structure of language reflects the historical development of what is being discursively represented. Because of this, language shapes or conditions the way we can think of things. However, language itself arises out of our own social practices. So, over time, this language structure itself develops in response to the activities of societal members as they act upon the social world. One result of this interactive process is that particular ways of thinking about an issue come to be seen as the obvious ways of thinking about that issue and so, like critical discourse analysts, Foucauldian discourse analysts seek to explore how these sorts of ideological forces impact on our own use of discourse. However, from this latter perspective the issue is not so much to grasp how society as a whole is structured into powerful elites whose thinking becomes the ideological norm, but instead to understand how particular domains such as health or the law embed or codify specific sorts of historical-ideological features. In part arising out of this focus on specific social and historical domains, Foucauldian discourse analysts have a greater interest than their critical discourse cousins in how identities are represented by the subject positions we all inhabit in such discourse domains; what, for example, are the real-life consequences of discovering that when one enters hospital, one acquires an identity of an ‘ill person’ or a ‘doctor’ depending both on our own histories and on the socio-historical development of the health domain as a social phenomenon.

Two approaches which are usually associated with a rejection of these sorts of ideological notion are **conversation analysis** and **discursive psychology**. Here, the view is not that ideological discourse does not occur but that ideologies do not represent useful analytic referents which exist outwith the context of discourse itself. Conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999) grew out of the work of Harvey Sacks and the theoretical and methodological interests of the ethnomethodology movement, especially the work of Harold Garfinkel (Heritage, 1984) and the work of Erving Goffman on the social structures of everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Conversation analysis focuses on the social actions which people perform in naturally occurring interactions. Its emphasis is on the way that sequences of utterances are organized and it examines how utterances are designed to accomplish specific actions. Here, the action orientation of discourse receives particular emphasis, along with the idea that participants may co-produce such actions, and the contexts of talk which conversation analysts draw.
upon are sometimes referred to as talk-in-interaction. Conversation analysts are concerned with discrete ‘action sequences’ which arise in discourse. In particular, they examine the ways in which participants in a sequentially unfolding interaction orient themselves to the normative expectations which any competent speaker can be expected to display in relation to such sequences. So, for example, a competent user of discourse is likely to display an understanding that when two people meet, one greeting is normally followed by a greeting in response. And the speakers’ awareness of this expectation can be publicly displayed, for example, in how the interaction will sequentially unfold if a greeting is followed by a silent response. It is this public aspect of the way participants understand each other’s talk which underpins the conversation analyst’s analytic claims. The analyst warrants a particular claim by drawing attention to the public display of understanding which the participants provide for each other. In terms of identity, then, the conversation analyst is not, for example, concerned with whether ideologies of nationhood or race are underwater currents around which the participants’ talk swirls at any given moment. Instead, the analyst picks out for study those elements of talk in which the participants themselves produce versions of national or ethnic identity and then subsequently accept as unremarkable, or take up and challenge, such identifications.

Discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997, 2005; Edwards and Potter, 2005; Potter, 2003) was developed by Jonathan Potter and Derek Edwards and is closely aligned with the theoretical and methodological approaches represented by conversation analysis. However, discursive psychology is especially concerned with a rejection of the theory and method of cognitive psychology. Instead of viewing phenomena such as memory or perception as interior mental states, the discursive psychologist explores the ways in which such phenomena get to be introduced and dealt with in talk. So this approach focuses on a switch of interest away from cognitions as mental states to how talk makes cognitions or emotions inferable outcomes of what is said. This switch to understanding how inferences of this sort are made available underpins a particular interest in how people display sensitivities about, and manage the potential interactional consequences of, inferences that other people might draw about themselves in virtue of what they have said. This is sometimes referred to as the management of stake and interest. Of special interest in the present context is that talk often makes available inferences about what sort of person one is – inferences, in other words, about one’s identity. So discursive psychologists view identity talk as the sort of context in which people may display, through what they say, that they have a stake in how they are perceived and are attempting to manage the sorts of inferences that can be drawn about them, such as inferences about one’s currently ascribed identity, or
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Inferences about how one views other identities (e.g. inferences that one is or is not prejudiced towards those other identities). Allied to this is a focus, shared with conversation analysts, on membership categorization analysis. This is a form of analysis that pays particular attention to the way that membership categories such as social group labels get introduced into and managed within talk.

Other discursive research perspectives lie somewhere in between these critical and conversation analytic extremes. Discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1997; Wetherell and Potter, 1998) has explored the ways in which our ‘accounts’ of actions and events display interesting properties of variability and flexibility. ‘Variability’ means that different sorts of accounts might be generated in order to accomplish different effects. ‘Flexibility’ means that the same sort of account could be used to perform different social actions on different occasions. Discourse analysts suggest that we can study similarity and variation in the accounts which people produce to understand how language is used to perform a variety of social actions. In particular, discourse analysts attempt to show how such flexibility and variability is deployed in the ‘construction’ of ‘versions’ of actions and events. For this reason, discourse analysts often refer to themselves as social constructionists because they wish to examine how people deploy flexible and variable accounts in producing or constructing a particular version of an action or event. Thus, like other discursive researchers, the discourse analyst has an abiding interest in the action-orientation of discourse. Discourse analysts are also interested in categorizing accounts in terms of the discourses or repertoires to which they belong. So, for example, if the discourse analyst seeks to understand gender identities, he or she might be interested in how repertoires or discourses of masculinity and femininity are reproduced in the accounts that people produce.

Rhetorical psychology arises out of Michael Billig’s work, especially his influential book Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology (Billig, 1987). In this book, Billig explores the history of persuasive talk and then produces a number of analyses of the
way that everyday argumentation relies on implicit rhetorical skills. For example, he draws attention to the way that ordinary processes of categorization are often produced in talk alongside processes of particularization in which people provide argumentative counter-examples to general claims. Billig has also been influential in our understanding of national identities by applying some of these insights to his work on the everyday ways in which nationhood is culturally represented to us in acts of ‘banal nationalism’.

**Narrative analysis** (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2003) stems in part from the work of William Labov (1972). Narratives can be thought of as extended portions of talk which have an identifiable, story-like structure such as a beginning, middle and end. This form of analysis is considered to be important in the study of identity because people often rely upon biographical narratives in trying to make sense of their own experiences and to report on the important aspects of their lives.

**Identities in Discourse**

So far we have suggested that the definition of ‘identity’ is a challenging task and we offered hints that the study of discourse might provide some help in this area. Now that we have examined in some detail what discourse is, we can go some way towards filling out that hint by setting out some of the central features of identities that discursive researchers consider important:

- Identities are discursive characterizations of someone (either oneself or others) which are not reducible to objective facts about a person.
- These categorizations construct a version of that person either as a unique individual or as being categorizable in a way that establishes commonalities with other people.
- These characterizations are action-oriented, in that they are bound up with social actions such as inclusion or exclusion, or blaming or exonerating, or maintaining or challenging established social norms.
- These categorizations are, like all discourse, situational either because they draw on discursive features of the local context of their production or because they reflect broader issues of ideology.
- Some analysts will go further and argue that these categorizations are not ‘free creations’ but rather reflect the positioning which ideological structures in society (e.g. ideologies of gender or class) provide for us.
So identity discourse, just like all other forms of discourse, should be understood as flexible and varied, and as intrinsically caught up with the action-orientation of language. People will construct identities for themselves and for others as they interact with others through discourse. In part, what this means is that the interactional consequences of a particular identity claim depend in part on what other actions are taking place within the local context in which the identity claim arises. It also means that people will display a sensitivity to the sorts of inferences which such identity talk makes available, and so issues of identity management may well arise as other bits of interactional business are being performed. So this move to discourse as a topic in its own right is accompanied by a shift away from a search for the ‘essential core’ of the concept of identity to a consideration of how identities are ‘performed’ just like any other social actions. And this move is accompanied in turn by a switch in emphasis towards the everyday practices that people produce within social interactions. As we follow the rest of the chapters in this book we will, however, discover that on occasion some discursive researchers will also draw on broad notions of social power and ideology in making sense of how such identity ‘work’ gets accomplished in discourse. We will also see a range of occasions where the notion of membership categorization plays an explicit or implicit role. It is clear that one of the practices that we all engage in when describing ourselves and others is that of categorization. And so we will find that some of the research which is presented in later chapters is precisely directed towards understanding what happens when someone is characterized as being a member of some social category or other.

In summary, it seems as though discursive researchers have in many respects followed the practices of other researchers. As we saw at the start of this chapter, many social scientists forego the attempt to provide a universally acceptable definition of ‘identity’ or ‘self’. Instead, they provide locally relevant definitions which are useful in pursuing other projects such as understanding self-esteem or measuring self-awareness. In an analogous fashion, discursive researchers treat identity discourse as something that is variable, flexible, contextually sensitive and influenced by the action orientations of those who produce that discourse. Of course, unlike the former, in the latter case things could not be otherwise, since this is entirely consistent with the overall theoretical approach to discourse which is the cornerstone of the discursive researcher’s work.

**About this Book**

We said at the beginning that we have drawn upon common themes and contexts in the study of identity because we want to provide the reader with a preliminary ‘toehold’ on the material being covered in each chapter. Hopefully, the caveat we introduced there, about this being a textual convenience rather that the introduction
of pre-analytic categories, now makes more sense to the reader. To the discursive researcher, identities are accomplished through discourse, so a particular religious identity, say, is not a predetermined given from which other conclusions follow, but is instead an interactional outcome of the actions and interactions which set the context in which the relevant identity claim appears.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 examine gender identities, national identities, ethnic identities and religious identities. We will include in each of these chapters a consideration of how each of these identity terms has been defined within the broader social science arena. These broad discussions can be found under headings such as 'What are national identities?' Our goal here is to help the reader to locate what discursive researchers have said about these identities within a wider framework of social analysis. As we discuss these definitions, we will note the ways in which, for each case, the 'traditional' definitions provided for these identities stand in need of some amendment.

In Chapter 2, we will focus on national identities. We will find that the term 'nation' seems to refer to a variety of different phenomena and seems to involve characterizations not only of oneself but also of 'the other'. As will be the case for all of the other chapters in this book, we will set out the claim that this form of identity is best understood from the perspective of the discursive researcher. Having done this, we will turn to consider discursive research on national identities by first considering issues of time and place. We will note how people such as politicians draw upon national histories to create national identities, but we will also see how features of talk such as 'place identities' play a role. We then move on to a discussion of prejudice in respect of national identities, and conclude with a brief foray into the world of the media.

Chapter 3 moves on to the study of ethnicity and religion and the ways in which ethnic and religious identities are formulated. The chapter begins drawing attention to similarities between ethnic and national identities, and then moves on to provide a definition of 'ethnic identity'. Some examples of discursive research in ethnic identities are then examined, with particular reference to the notion of 'hybrid identities'. The chapter then switches tack to examine religious identities and, once again, we start with the definitional task. The chapter then presents data on how religious leaders and religious followers make out a sense of themselves in relation to their faith. Finally, as in the previous chapter, we turn to the question of prejudice as it applies to ethnic and religious identities.

Chapter 4 turns attention to gender identities. As with previous chapters, we spend some time at the start of this chapter by exploring different definitions of 'gender identity'. The main body of the chapter is given over to a discussion of women's gender identities, focusing on women's constructions of themselves in relation to their interpersonal relationships. Next, the chapter discusses men's gender identities with specific reference to 'macho' identities. We then briefly discuss how gender identities can be interwoven with other forms of identity. Again, this chapter concludes by discussing some of the ways in which these gender identities can leave men and women facing problems of prejudice.
Chapter 5 marks a change in the text. Here, we move away from considering different general 'types' of identity such as nationality, ethnicity, religion and gender and turn instead to a consideration of the sorts of context in which specific identities make their appearance. In this chapter, we examine identities as they appear within the context of health. We begin by looking at the ways in which the identity of 'being ill' is constructed and at the parallel notion of the construction of the health worker's professional identity. Among the contexts which we focus on are the interactional settings of doctor and patient and psychotherapist and client. We then discuss how people weave concerns with 'care' into their talk and then examine how these sorts of discursive features are played out in the hospital setting. Finally, we conclude by examining challenges to health identities by looking at how one's identity as a 'healthy person' can be undermined and at the different ways in which the health professional's identity as a competent practitioner can come under challenge.

Chapter 6 moves us into legal contexts. In this chapter, we are going to begin by looking at how legal contexts offer the lawyer and the judge opportunities to develop a sense of themselves and others. We will note that in this context, discourse is bounded by a set of legal and procedural requirements. And yet, we will find, the lawyer and the judge are able to negotiate these constraints in a way that still allows them to engage in the social construction of identities. We will see that this applies not only to the legal professionals' talk, but also to legal writings. As we follow these discussions, we will see that legal professionals are not only concerned with developing their own legal identities, but also with constructing versions of other people as they pursue their legal projects. But in the next part of the chapter, we will discover that lay-people within the legal system have their own constructive resources at hand. And this will be seen to be the case both within the courtroom, where witnesses rely on techniques such as 'narrative expansion' and outside the courtroom walls, where people construct identities for other people who are, or may be, caught up in the legal system.

Chapter 7 switches to the context of the organization. The chapter begins by noting that occupational identities are complex creations, and that they reflect interactions with the employing organization, with co-workers, and with clients of the services that the organization provides. The creation of such identities is, then, inextricably linked with the practices that occur within such organizations. After discussing the ways in which identities are created both within the organization itself and in interaction with the 'outside' world, this chapter moves on to consider two specific examples: the helpline service and the educational sphere. For example, we will see that when people contact helpline services, one of their identity concerns is to demonstrate that they are responsible people in having justifiably 'bothered' those who provide such services. We will also see that the vexed issue of educational policy and practice is an arena in which schools are required to demonstrate identity concerns that lie far beyond the scope of the three Rs. The chapter concludes by exploring the sorts of identity challenge that can arise in organizational contexts, such as the difficulty of negotiating unemployment status or acquiring a problematic workplace identity.
Finally, Chapter 8 takes us into yet another context: the virtual world. The chapter begins by providing an account of communications technologies and the identities which can be constructed in such contexts. In particular, we look at phenomena of turn-taking in text messaging and at the relevance of social groups to processes of identity formation among computer users. The chapter then moves on to consider the special virtual domain of online communities. Here, we examine how identities can be formulated and renegotiated in such communities and how individuals strive to develop and maintain ‘authentic’ identities. The chapter continues by considering a further aspect of virtual identities: identities as they are constructed in online support groups. The chapter moves to a close by discussing some of the challenges to identity that can arise in this domain.

A Note on Transcription

Each of the following chapters contains a range of transcription extracts drawn from research articles. Wherever possible, we have tried to retain the original author’s format and line-numbering scheme. However, the typographical layout of this text differs from that of many academic journals. For this reason, the reader will note that on some occasions, where an extract uses line numbering, text which spreads across more than one line is denoted by a single line number. In addition, where we have thought it helpful, we have included the original author’s foreign language transcription along with the translation into English.

The transcription of talk is a complex affair. Most discursive researchers rely upon a form of notation developed by Gail Jefferson. However, transcription schemes vary, and the reader will find that different researchers have their own transcription preferences. In order to aid the reader in making sense of the transcribed examples presented in this book, Box 1.1 describes the way that special symbols are used in transcribing talk. The box summarizes some of the main features of Jefferson’s transcription notation which is described more fully, together with explanatory examples, in Jefferson (2004).

Box 1.1  Transcription Notation

[ ] Overlapping talk is shown by square brackets, with ‘[‘ indicating where the overlap begins and ‘]’ indicating where the overlapped utterance (or part of an utterance) stops.
= An ‘equal to’ sign, ‘=’, at the end of one line and another at the end of the succeeding line, indicates that there is no gap between the two lines.
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. (dot) A dot in parentheses, ‘(.)’, indicates a very slight gap.
: (colon) A colon, ‘:’, indicates that the sound immediately preceding the colon has been elongated, with the lengthening of the sound indicated by the number of colons.
↑ An upwards pointing arrow, ‘↑’, indicates that the speaker is raising pitch.
↓ A downwards pointing arrow, ‘↓’, indicates the speaker is lowering pitch.
Numbers Numbers in parentheses, e.g. (0.3) indicate time elapsed in tenths of a second.
Underlining Underlining of letters or words (e.g. ‘Doh’) indicates that the speaker is stressing that part of the speech by increasing volume or raising or lowering pitch.
Upper case Upper case (e.g. ‘DOH’) indicates that the speaker’s utterance is produced with a particularly high volume.
Punctuation Punctuation markers indicate the speaker’s intonation. For example, the question mark, ‘?’, indicates a ‘questioning’ intonation.
° (degree sign) The superscripted degree sign, ‘°’, indicates unvoiced production.
< (left outward facing arrow) Placed before a word, a left outward facing arrow, ‘<’ indicates a hurried start. Placed after a word it indicates that the word stopped suddenly.
> < (right/left inward facing arrows) Right/left inward facing arrows, ‘> <’, surrounding an utterance (or part of an utterance) indicate the speech is speeding up.
< > (left/right outward facing arrows) Left/right outward facing arrows, ‘< >’, surrounding an utterance (or part of an utterance) indicate the speech is slowing down.
– (dash) A dash, ‘–’, indicates that an utterance is ‘cut-off’
.hhh A row of instances of the letter ‘h’ prefixed by a dot, ‘.hhh’, indicates an in-breath.
( ) Empty parentheses, ( ), indicate that the transcriber could not make out what was said or, alternatively, who was speaking.
(Doh) (word in parentheses) Placing parentheses around a word indicates that the transcription is uncertain.
(( )) Doubled parentheses contain transcriber’s descriptions.
**Chapter Summary**

Two ideas are drawn upon throughout this book – identity and discourse. Thinkers throughout the centuries have tried to produce an acceptable definition of ‘identity’. Most of these indicate that identity involves both the idea of unique, individuality and the apparently contrasting notion of two or more people sharing the same qualities because they share the ‘same’ identity. So identity is sometimes treated as an individualistic thing and sometimes as a social thing grounded in social group categorizations. A suggestion is made that this potentially problematic mix of features may be better understood by examining the discourse of identity as it is actually used by people in everyday life. This leads to a discussion of the nature of discourse. The key suggestion here is that unlike other forms of study, discursive research treats discourse as a topic in its own right. However, it is noted that different approaches to discursive research focus on different aspects of discourse. A description is provided of some of these different approaches and of how they deal with discourse.

A common thread that runs through many of these approaches is that analysing discourse involves treating discourse as context-dependent, action-oriented and as socially constructive. In light of this, the chapter moves on to suggest that ‘identity’ is a notion that stands in no need of a single, unifying definition. Instead, the discursive researcher should examine how identity discourse is produced and dealt with within the specific particularities of the interactional contexts in which it appears.

**Further Reading**


The goal of this book is to provide a broader understanding of the relationships between discursive research and central themes in social psychology, beyond the narrow confines of identity research. It therefore represents a ‘companion reader’ to the present text.

**Activity Box**

The suggestion in this chapter is that we can understand identity when we understand how identity discourse is produced in everyday talk. Pick two items from a newspaper in which characterizations of people appear. Either might involve what happened on television last night, or a description of the latest political fiasco, or
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even the love-life of your favourite movie actor or sports-person. Read through the
article and decide what sort of identities are in play as the story unfolds. Are there
other actions which are being performed at the same time (e.g. is someone being
accused, or blamed, or defended)? What do you perceive to be important similarities
or differences in the two newspaper accounts? In the context of producing identities,
why do you think these similarities or differences appear?