

Discursive Psychology (DP)

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September 26, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Discursive Psychology (DP)*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=28633>

Discursive Psychology (DP)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Social Sciences, Linguistics

Proponents: Jonathan Potter, Margaret Wetherell, Derek Edwards

1. Introduction to Discursive Psychology

Discursive Psychology (DP) represents a distinctive approach within the social sciences, primarily concerned with understanding psychological phenomena as they are constructed, managed, and enacted within everyday social interaction. Unlike traditional psychological frameworks that often seek to uncover internal mental states or cognitive processes as the drivers of behavior, DP focuses intensely on how psychological themes such as emotions, attitudes, memory, identity, and personality are formulated, negotiated, and contested through language and symbolic interaction. This field meticulously analyzes instances of talk, text, and other forms of discourse, treating them not merely as reflections of underlying psychological realities but as constitutive practices that actively shape and perform those realities in situ. The foundational premise of DP is that psychological concepts are not fixed, internal entities but rather dynamic, context-bound constructions that emerge and are utilized within specific social and rhetorical contexts.

The essence of Discursive Psychology lies in its commitment to treating language as a form of social action, a medium through which individuals accomplish various interactional tasks. It meticulously examines how participants orient to and make sense of psychological concepts in their interactions, revealing the practical functions and consequences of deploying certain psychological descriptions or categories. This analytical lens allows researchers to explore the intricate ways in which people use talk to account for their own and others' actions, to justify, blame, persuade, or resist, and in doing so, to construct particular versions of psychological states or traits. Consequently, DP moves away from attempting to infer cognitive processes from observable behavior and instead investigates the observable, public work that psychological terms do in interaction, rendering psychology an inherently social and interactional enterprise.

2. Foundational Principles: Discourse as Action

A central tenet of Discursive Psychology is the principle that discourse is not merely a transparent medium for conveying pre-existing thoughts or information, but rather a powerful form of social action that actively shapes realities and achieves specific interactional goals. This perspective views language, whether spoken or written, as inherently pragmatic and performative, designed to do things in the world. When individuals engage in talk or create texts, they are not simply expressing internal states; they are performing actions such as requesting, denying, persuading, excusing, or legitimizing. These actions have tangible consequences for the ongoing interaction and for the participants' social realities.

In this framework, psychological phenomena are understood as being constituted and managed within these discursive practices. For instance, an expression of "anger" is not necessarily a direct report of an internal emotional state, but rather a discursive move that can serve to justify an action, account for a transgression, or solicit a particular response from an interlocutor. DP researchers analyze the detailed organization of talk to uncover how these psychological formulations are constructed to be persuasive, coherent, or accountable within their specific interactional contexts. This involves a rigorous examination of linguistic features, rhetorical strategies, and the sequential organization of talk, demonstrating how discourse functions as a medium for accomplishing social and psychological work.

3. Contrast with Cognitive Psychology

Discursive Psychology emerged partly as a critical response to mainstream cognitive psychology, fundamentally challenging its core assumptions about the nature of the mind and its relationship to language. Cognitive psychology typically conceptualizes talk and behavior as outward manifestations or effects of internal mental states, processes, and structures, such as beliefs, attitudes, memories, and intentions. In this traditional view, language is often seen as a conduit through which these internal cognitive entities are communicated, implying a causal link where mental states precede and give rise to verbal expressions.

In stark contrast, DP posits that psychological concepts are not pre-existing, stable mental entities that simply find expression in language. Instead, they are treated as interactional resources and constructs that are deployed, negotiated, and made relevant within specific discursive practices. For discursive psychologists, talk is not merely "caused by" mental states; rather, it actively constructs, performs, and makes sense of what participants treat as psychological states. This reorientation moves the focus from an individual's private cognitive architecture to the public, observable, and interactional dimensions of psychological phenomena. The deviation is profound, as DP argues that psychological descriptions are less about reporting an internal state and more about performing a social function or achieving a particular interactional outcome, thereby shifting the locus of psychological inquiry from the individual mind to the social interaction.

4. Methodological Approach

The methodological backbone of Discursive Psychology is centered on the detailed analysis of naturally occurring discourse, typically in the form of transcribed talk, text, or symbolic interaction. This approach demands a meticulous, empirical examination of how psychological themes and concepts are actually used by participants in their everyday lives. Researchers typically work with recordings of conversations, interviews, media content, or institutional interactions, which are then meticulously transcribed to capture not only what is said but also how it is said, including pauses, intonation, overlaps, and other interactional nuances. This granular level of detail is crucial for

uncovering the subtle ways in which meanings are constructed and actions are performed.

The analytical process involves identifying patterns in how psychological accounts are formulated, challenged, and responded to, paying close attention to the rhetorical organization of discourse. DP employs techniques borrowed from conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, focusing on sequential organization, membership categorization, and the indexical nature of language. The aim is not to generalize about universal psychological laws, but to understand the specific, situated practices through which psychological phenomena are made relevant and functional in particular contexts. This involves demonstrating how participants themselves orient to and make sense of psychological categories, rather than imposing researcher-defined psychological constructs onto their interactions.

5. Key Psychological Themes

Discursive Psychology has been applied to a wide array of psychological themes, providing novel insights into areas traditionally studied by cognitive or social psychology. Instead of viewing emotions, attitudes, memory, and identity as stable internal constructs, DP investigates how these topics are actively viewed, constructed, and managed by participants within their interactions. For example, DP researchers examine how expressions of "emotion" are used as resources for justifying actions, attributing blame, or soliciting empathy, rather than simply being direct reports of internal feelings. They show how emotions are performed and recognized within specific social contexts, often serving particular interactional functions.

Similarly, "attitudes" are analyzed not as fixed internal dispositions but as rhetorical positions taken up in arguments and debates, designed to persuade or resist. "Memory" is explored as a reconstructive and social practice, where recollections are formulated to achieve current interactional goals, rather than as a neutral retrieval of past events. "Identity" is understood as a fluid and context-dependent accomplishment, constantly negotiated and presented through talk. By focusing on these themes as interactional accomplishments, DP highlights the flexible, situated, and socially accountable nature of human psychology, moving away from essentialist views of the mind.

6. Historical Context and Development

Discursive Psychology emerged as a distinctive intellectual movement in the late 20th century, primarily in the 1980s and 1990s, building upon several preceding theoretical and methodological traditions. Its roots can be traced to shifts within social psychology and a growing critical stance towards cognitive reductionism. Key intellectual influences include ethnomethodology, particularly the work of Harold Garfinkel, which emphasized how social order is achieved through members' practical reasoning; conversation analysis, pioneered by Harvey Sacks, which provided rigorous

methods for analyzing the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction; and rhetorical psychology, which highlighted the persuasive and argumentative nature of everyday language.

The foundational work of Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, particularly their 1987 book "Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour," is widely recognized as a seminal text that formally established DP. This work articulated a clear theoretical and methodological framework for studying psychological phenomena discursively, moving beyond the then-dominant cognitive paradigms. Their subsequent research, along with that of scholars like Derek Edwards, further developed the core tenets of DP, refining its analytical techniques and broadening its scope of application. The development of DP marked a significant turning point in critical social psychology, offering a robust alternative for understanding the intricate relationship between language, social interaction, and psychological life.

7. Practical Applications and Exemplars

The analytical framework of Discursive Psychology offers powerful tools for understanding how psychological phenomena play out in practical, real-world settings, moving beyond abstract theories to concrete instances of interaction. A compelling example of DP in action involves the analysis of emergency service calls, such as those made to 911 dispatchers. Discursive psychologists examine how dispatchers' instructions and questions are meticulously formulated not only to efficiently extract critical information but also to manage callers' emotional states, such as fear or panic. For instance, a dispatcher might use specific linguistic strategies to soothe a caller's distress, normalizing their reaction while simultaneously guiding them through a structured information-gathering process. This analysis reveals how psychological work - managing fear and maintaining composure - is achieved through the precise details of interaction, rather than being solely dependent on pre-existing mental states of either the caller or the dispatcher.

Beyond emergency services, DP has been applied to a wide range of institutional and everyday contexts, including therapeutic interactions, media representations of social issues, political debates, classroom interactions, and legal proceedings. In therapy, for example, DP explores how client "problems" and "progress" are constructed and negotiated through dialogue, rather than being objective entities simply uncovered by the therapist. In legal settings, it examines how witness testimonies are crafted and challenged, highlighting the discursive construction of 'truth' and 'memory'. These applications demonstrate DP's utility in unpacking the intricate ways in which psychological concepts are invoked, contested, and made consequential in diverse social environments, thereby illuminating the practical, interactional accomplishments of psychological life.

8. Broader Impact and Significance

Discursive Psychology has had a significant impact on various academic disciplines, extending its influence beyond the confines of psychology into fields such as sociology, linguistics, communication studies, and education. By offering a rigorous methodological framework for analyzing discourse, DP has provided a powerful alternative to cognitivist and individualistic accounts of human behavior and experience. Its emphasis on the social and interactional construction of psychological phenomena has fostered a deeper appreciation for the situated, contextual, and rhetorical nature of human meaning-making.

The significance of DP lies in its ability to de-naturalize psychological categories, revealing them as dynamic cultural resources rather than fixed, universal essences. This perspective encourages researchers and practitioners to critically examine how psychological terms are used to classify, explain, justify, and control in various social domains, from clinical practice to public policy. By focusing on the details of interaction, DP has enriched our understanding of how social structures and power relations are reproduced and challenged through everyday talk, making it a crucial framework for critical scholarship across the social sciences. Its insights continue to inform qualitative research methods and theoretical debates about the relationship between language, mind, and society.

9. Criticisms and Methodological Debates

Despite its significant contributions, Discursive Psychology has also faced various criticisms and has been the subject of ongoing methodological debates. One common criticism centers on its perceived focus on micro-level interaction, with some arguing that DP struggles to adequately address broader macro-social structures, power dynamics, and historical contexts. Critics suggest that by concentrating intensely on the immediate details of talk, DP may overlook the enduring influence of institutional frameworks, economic inequalities, or cultural ideologies that shape and constrain individual interactions. While proponents argue that macro-level phenomena are always instantiated and reproduced through micro-level practices, the challenge of explicitly linking the two remains a point of contention.

Another area of debate concerns the generalizability of DP's findings. Given its commitment to analyzing specific, situated instances of discourse, some critics question whether the insights gained from such detailed analyses can be generalized to larger populations or different contexts. While DP typically eschews traditional notions of statistical generalizability, focusing instead on theoretical transferability or the robustness of analytical claims, this difference in epistemological orientation can be a source of tension with more quantitatively oriented research traditions. Furthermore, the intensive, qualitative nature of discursive analysis requires significant interpretive skill and judgment, which can sometimes lead to questions about researcher subjectivity and the replicability of findings, although DP emphasizes transparency in its analytical procedures and the grounding of interpretations in the empirical details of the data.

Further Reading

[Discursive Psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Jonathan Potter \(psychologist\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Margaret Wetherell - Wikipedia](#)

[Discourse - Wikipedia](#)

[Cognitive psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Discourse analysis - Wikipedia](#)

[Conversation analysis - Wikipedia](#)

[Ethnomethodology - Wikipedia](#)

[Harold Garfinkel - Wikipedia](#)

[Harvey Sacks - Wikipedia](#)

[Rhetorical psychology - Wikipedia](#)

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