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Series Foreword

Qualitative approaches have become accepted and indeed embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences, as scholars have realized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection and equally penetrating examination. Quantitative approaches often cannot capture such phenomena well through their standard methods (e.g., self-report measures), so qualitative designs using interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures offer exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed is remarkable. We remember Bill Stiles saying (quoting Chairman Mao) at one meeting about methods, "Let a hundred flowers bloom," indicating that there are many appropriate methods for addressing research questions. In this series, we celebrate this diversity (hence, the cover design of flowers).

The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among approaches and how to learn the different methods. Many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear enough descriptions of the methods, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of these approaches, with lots of examples to illustrate the method so that readers can grasp how to use the methods.

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The purpose of this series of books, then, is to present a range of different qualitative approaches that seemed most exciting and illustrative of the range of methods appropriate for social science research. We asked leading experts in qualitative methods to contribute to the series, and we were delighted that they accepted our invitation. Through this series, readers have the opportunity to learn qualitative research methods from those who developed the methods and/or who have been using them successfully for years.

We asked the authors of each book to provide context for the method, including a rationale, situating the method within the qualitative tradition, describing the method's philosophical and epistemological background, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to describe in detail the steps of the method, including the research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analysis, and variations on the method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing a manuscript emerging from a study that used the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of the approach, along with the benefits and limitations of the particular method.

This series of books can be used in several different ways. Instructors teaching courses in qualitative research could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time as they expose students to a range of qualitative methods. Alternatively, instructors could choose to focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from studies that have been published using the approaches, and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches.

In this book, Linda M. McMullen guides readers through the fundamentals of discursive psychology. Discursive psychology involves analysis and interpretation of written or spoken language. Given that our communications are laden with social messages and constitutive of social actions, the study of language can reveal much about relationships and culture. As Dr. McMullen shows us, discursive psychology provides a clear, coherent approach for analyzing talk and text and for situating discourse within social contexts.

—Clara E. Hill and Sarah Knox

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ESSENTIALS OF

Discursive Psychology

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1 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

All of us are discourse analysts in our everyday lives. We listen to others speak, we read texts, and we make meaning of, and interpret, what is said or written. We also attend to how something is said or written and can understand the same word, phrase, or sentence in different ways depending on the speaker's or writer's tone. What sets discursive analysis as a qualitative research methodology apart from these everyday activities is the analyst's deliberate showing of what it is in the speaker's or writer's use of language that results in particular understandings and interpretations of what is said or written.

In this book, I provide a brief introduction to (a) the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of discursive psychology; (b) considerations involved in designing a discursive study, including the kinds of questions that are suitably addressed via this form of research and the types of data that can be collected or generated to address them; (c) how to engage in an analysis of data using this methodological perspective, including various analytic strategies that can be used and the types of linguistic resources and devices that are available to speakers and writers who use the English language; (d) how to communicate and assess such research; and (e) ongoing

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conversations about ethical, conceptual, and methodological issues related to discursive psychology. Let us begin with a few definitions.

WHAT IS DISCOURSE, AND WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

Discourse can be straightforwardly defined as spoken or written communication. It follows, then, that the term *discourse analysis* can be understood as the analysis of such communication. However, in the context of research, discourse analysis is a nonspecific term. It has been used to refer to (a) a *method* or set of strategies or procedures for analyzing data that have been collected or generated to address particular research questions; (b) a *methodology* or plan of action that underlies our choice of particular methods of data analysis and links this choice to what the researcher hopes to achieve with the research (Crotty, 1998, p. 3); (c) a perspective on social life that includes metatheoretical and theoretical, along with analytic, principles; and (d) a critique of cognitivism in psychology (Potter, 2003; Willig, 2001; Wood & Kroger, 2000)—that is, of the notion that cognitive processes are the primary shapers of human action (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Furthermore, when used to refer to a research methodology, discourse analysis is best thought of as an umbrella term that covers many different forms of analysis with different foci and goals and that demands further specification. Discourse analysis has been used, for example, to refer to a focus on

- how sentences are put together (linguistics),
- how conversation or talk-in-interaction is structured (conversation analysis),
- how objects and subjects are constituted in language (Foucauldian discourse analysis), and
- how patterns of language use can be understood in relation to the exercising of power in social relationships (critical discourse analysis; McMullen, 2011, p. 205; see Wiggins, 2017, Chapter 2, for a more comprehensive overview of various forms of discourse analysis).

So, although discourse analysis is rightfully understood as a major form of qualitative research now undertaken by psychologists, it is imperative that you specify what form (or combination of forms) of discourse analysis you are using and why.

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WHAT IS DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY, AND WHAT IS CRITICAL DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY?

Further specification of discourse analysis has also occurred in relation to its application to questions of psychological relevance. The first articulation of what is sometimes referred to as discursive social psychology (Potter, 1998), discourse analysis in social psychology (Wood & Kroger, 2000), or eventually, discursive psychology, as popularized in the United Kingdom (Edwards & Potter, 1992), was by Potter and Wetherell (1987). As part of the "turn to language" that occurred in the 1980s in the social sciences, in general, and psychology, in particular, Potter and Wetherell promoted the analysis of talk and text as an important focus in and of itself, rather than as a route to inner cognitive processes.

In addition to foregrounding this theoretical perspective on language, discursive psychology has come to be associated with evolving analytic foci. In what Potter (2012) called "strand one" of discursive psychology, the focus is on identifying the interpretative repertoires or conceptually organized clusters of terms, phrases, grammatical features, and figures of speech that are used to build social action and, often, to maintain existing configurations of power and inequality. "Strand two" of discursive psychology, according to Potter, is focused on what speakers and writers are doing with language—on the social actions that are being performed. Are speakers, for example, arguing, assuming blame, complimenting, belittling, demanding, or acquiescing? As emphasized by Wiggins (2017), this strand is also concerned with a reenvisioning of psychological concepts, such as attitudes, beliefs, and emotions, as "socially managed" (p. 4). That is, rather than being located "within" the person, these concepts are understood as social practices that transpire between people, often in conversation or other verbal exchanges. For example, advocating for the legalization of cannabis would be understood not as an indication of a speaker holding a liberal attitude; rather, it would be seen as a social action that was performed in a particular context with particular interactional consequences. "Strand three" of discursive psychology was characterized by Potter as involving close attention to the sequential structure of talk that is typical of conversation analysis. The focus of this strand is on what are often considered the micro features of interaction, including, for example, grammatical forms, pauses, intonation, and turn taking.

Critical discursive psychology has grown out of Wetherell's (1998) contention that the focus on showing what people are doing with language in talk and/or text, along with the interactional consequences of this doing, should be combined with a focus on the broader normative conceptions—or

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ways of understanding and being in the world—that are associated with the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which such talk and text are located. So, for example, talk or text about legalizing cannabis might be understood in relation to broader culturally and historically available discourses or ways of talking or writing about the topic of cannabis use. In Canada, where cannabis is legal, such discourses might include a focus on the continued need for deterrence through criminalization, the potential health benefits of legalization, or the freeing up of the criminal justice system from unnecessary prosecution of cannabis users. So, this approach takes seriously the notion that speakers and writers exist in worlds populated with discourses—or particular ways of speaking and writing—which can both enable and constrain how they speak and write. Sometimes referred to as a synthetic approach, this form of discursive psychology takes the more detailed analysis of talk and text afforded by discursive psychology and connects it to broader patterns of speaking and writing that are available to language users by their cultural and historical location.

This book focuses on showing how attention to these micro and macro levels of analysis of discursively oriented questions of psychological relevance can be used to investigate topics of interest to social scientists. I have chosen to focus on this approach to discourse analysis because of its connection with the discipline of psychology and because it requires a reconceptualization of language and its uses that can be useful in understanding other approaches to discourse analysis. My use of the term *discursive psychology* should be understood, however, in a broad sense. Specifically, this book does not focus exclusively on a particular strand of discursive psychology or critical discursive psychology as they are defined and demarcated by Potter (2012) and Wiggins (2017). Rather, I draw on examples from my research and from the research literature that sometimes display a fairly detailed analysis of an extract of talk or text or that sometimes combine this sort of analysis with attention to the broader discursive context(s)—culturally and historically available discourses, in which the sequences of talk or text are located. But why might you choose to use such an approach? What is afforded, and what is challenged by such a choice?

WHY CHOOSE DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY, AND WHAT DOES THIS CHOICE ENTAIL?

Put simply, discursive psychology allows you to address questions about how people, located in particular contexts of time and space, take up available discourses and use features of language (sometimes referred to as linguistic

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devices, strategies, or resources) to perform social actions, including how they construct versions of reality with what possible consequences. For example, this approach would be useful if you were interested in how people use scientific discourses to argue for and against the notion of human-induced climate change, in how they justify their decision to start vaping, or in how they criticize each other in face-to-face encounters. However, of all the qualitative methodologies used by psychologists, discursive psychology ranks among the most challenging. In part, as we will see later, these challenges have to do with learning how to use this methodology—for example, how to become familiar with a wide-ranging set of linguistic resources, how to use a set of analytic strategies that focus on both micro and macro levels of analysis, and how to use one's familiarity (or lack thereof) with local customs or norms in making interpretations as to what is going on in talk or text. But, perhaps even more challenging is how discursive psychology upends many of the taken-for-granted notions in the discipline of psychology as it has traditionally been framed and practiced in the United States and Canada.

Let us touch briefly on how discursive psychology departs from some of these taken-for-granted notions.

Epistemology

Discursive psychology is not grounded in an objectivist epistemology, the theory of knowledge that maintains that "meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists . . . apart from the operation of any consciousness" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). That is, it does not adhere to the notion that meaning resides in objects themselves and that human beings can discover (or come close to discovering) objective truths. Instead, much of the research that is conducted with this approach proceeds from a constructionist epistemology or theory of knowledge. Crotty (1998) defined *constructionism* as "the view that *all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context*" (p. 42; italics in original). So, in contrast to objectivism, constructionism is based on the premise that there is no meaning without a human mind and that meaning is constructed in the interactions between human beings and their world(s). If meaning comes into being in this fashion, then language—a primary means by which human beings communicate and interact—is at the heart of meaning making. In addition, because the worlds with which human beings are interacting are not fixed, but ever changing, it follows that, as Burr (1995) stated, "the ways in which we commonly understand [these worlds], the categories and concepts we

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use, are historically and culturally specific" (p. 3). A discursive psychologist interested in studying a category or concept such as "depression" or "gender identity," for example, would understand it as having been brought into being in particular historical–cultural locations, as having greater resonance in some locations than in others, and as continuing to change as people rework it in their interactions with each other.

Theoretical Perspective

Discursive psychology does not proceed from the perspective of post-positivism, that scientific "truths" are provisional statements, which, due to the limits that human senses impose on our ability to observe reality and to the changing nature of what it is we are observing, we know with a level of probability, but not with certainty (Crotty, 1998). Rather, it is compatible with a variety of non-postpositivist theoretical perspectives, including, as Crotty (1998) noted, various forms of critical theory and inquiry (p. 5). With its location in constructionism, discursive psychology assumes a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge (Burr, 1995), which often involves a questioning of the very categories we assume to be "givens" and a sensitivity to how these categories structure our worlds and with what possible consequences. Although adherents to this approach typically do not deny the existence of a material world—they can assume realism in ontology (the study of being)—they contend that what we think of as realities are made meaningful only through the use of ever-changing historically and culturally constituted discourses or patterns of language. So, all of what we know is contextually situated and subject to change. For example, consider how our language with respect to gender and sexual identity has moved in many parts of the world from male or female and homosexual or heterosexual to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, cisgender, transsexual, queer, two-spirit, to name a few.

Process of Knowledge Production

Discursive psychology is not based on the hypothetico-deductive method. It does not attempt to falsify propositions (hypotheses) that are deduced from scientific theories, as is often the case in experimental (or quasi-experimental) research. Instead, discursive psychology is guided by research questions and relies on a process of drawing out, articulating, and interpreting patterns in the data that are relevant to these questions. On occasion, the development of these questions might be guided by theory, but more