

35 The Discursive Turn in Social Psychology

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0 Introduction

Fully to grasp the depth of the change that attention to discourse¹ has brought about in social psychology it is necessary to understand something of the early history of this branch of the human sciences. The general topic of social psychology is simply defined: the study of certain kinds of interaction between people, such as friendship, leadership, aggression, the influence of other people's opinions on an individual's beliefs, and so on. The fundamental presupposition of what is now called the "old paradigm" privileged the cognitive and emotional states of individuals as the source of the properties of the patterns of social interactions they engaged in.

The methodology that grew out of this root metaphysical principle was exclusively experimental. People were defined as subjects. The treatments to which they were subjected in laboratories were partitioned into independent variables, and the reactions of the subjects to these treatments were analysed into dependent variables. The upshot was a catalogue of correlations between independent and dependent variables. In one famous study the result purported to display a correlation between the frequency with which people met and the degree of their liking for one another. For the most part the experimental program paid no attention to the meanings which subjects might have given to what was happening, nor were the conversations that ordinarily surround and partly constitute social interactions included within the methodological scope of mainstream research. The "frequency/liking study" (Zajonc 1984) abstracted from all real situations to a laboratory stimulus consisting of meaningless symbols. It was widely assumed that the real cultural and historical contexts of social action could be ignored, since the laboratory was deemed to be a culturally neutral place. What people did in the laboratory was taken to be indicative of general psychological laws, of comparable scope to the laws of physics. They were taken to cover all instances of a type of being and to underlie their patterns of behavior – in this case all human beings and their social interactions. Both these paradigm-defining assumptions were flawed. This way of doing social psychology was well entrenched by the 1950s, and particularly strongly so in the United States. The reactions of undergraduate

psychology majors became the main database for far-reaching generalizations about human behavior.

The research program that initiated the study of social psychology that became the "old paradigm" was concerned with the phenomenon of social facilitation. How does the presence of other people affect an individual's performance? This question is germane to athletics as much as it is to factory work. With his studies in both these areas, Triplett (1897) established a certain way of thinking about and studying social interactions. The metaphysics was causal, in that he thought of the reactions of a target person as the effects of the stimuli provided by the onlookers, coworkers, pace-makers, etc. The methodology was experimental, in that the effect was to be understood by treating the phenomenon as if it could be analyzed into a relation between the enhanced or declining performance of the subject, treated as the dependent variable, and the character of the surrounding situation, taken to be the independent variable.

It is a remarkable tribute to the persistence of a "convenient" paradigm in the face of mountains of conflicting evidence that the majority of social psychologists, in academic psychology, still work within the old paradigm, descended from Triplett's framework. The effect of this has been to make most of the academic research in social psychology little more than a study of local customs and practices, in fact a kind of local anthropology. For example, studies of the conditions under which people would help one another presumed a base-line "Christian" ethics in place among the people studied.

Two sets of influences led to the development of new-paradigm social psychology. It was realized that the old paradigm focused attention on the supposed states of individuals and their cognitive processes figuring as causal mechanisms, so largely ignoring the dynamics of the episodes in which these people were engaged. Indeed much of the work was quite static, or involved changes in the tendencies of individuals when subject to experimental treatments. The shift from contrived experiments to a study of real-life social episodes changed the underlying assumptions of social psychology quite radically. Context became important (Marsh et al. 1977) and the role of language took centre stage (Giles and Robinson 1990). What were people doing in extended social interactions, and what was the main medium by which social interaction was sustained? What did people have to know to be able to engage in such episodes? Patently the old-fashioned "experimental" method of the old paradigm would be useless in these conditions.

Perhaps these shortcomings could be overcome by staging realistic experiments, real-life episodes in laboratories. The failure of this compromise led to a second set of influences coming to bear. A series of experiments on obedience and authority, staged by Zimbardo (1969), had to be called off since dangerous situations developed among the people involved. Those playing the role of the warders in a simulated prison were just too tough on those playing inmates. The attempt to simulate the conditions which supposedly made the Holocaust psychologically possible resulted in the morally equivocal treatment of experimental subjects (Milgram 1974). In Milgram's study, subjects were deceived into thinking that they were giving dangerous, even lethal electric shocks to people, under the orders of a psychologist. Some became greatly distressed by the situation.

It was also realized that the methods of inquiry in most experimental projects were shot through with radical ambiguities. The interpretations that people were giving to

the experimental “treatments” often bore little relation to the interpretation with which the psychologist conducting the experiment was working. For example, Milgram thought he was investigating obedience while all along the people involved were interpreting the episode in terms of trust. The many who continued to deliver shocks to the presumed victim explained their actions in terms of the trust they had in the integrity of the scientific community, rather than in terms of Milgram’s interpretation of their actions as obedience to constituted authority.

The moral problems of the old paradigm were tackled by moving from reality to fantasy, by asking people to reply to questionnaires about what they would do, feel, and so on in imagined situations. This method was assimilated to the old paradigm by lexical legislation. Questionnaires were called “instruments” and the business of answering them was called an “experiment.” Unfortunately the same method, statistical analysis of correlations, reappeared in the new, discursive frame, a story or vignette being labeled “stimulus object” and the answers correspondingly being called “responses.” The effect of this was to maintain the metaphysics of causation in the new situation, in which it no longer made any sense at all. Semantic relations between meanings are not causal relations between stimuli and responses.

The problem of divergent interpretations has never been tackled by adherents to the old paradigm. An honest, open-minded appraisal of academic social psychology could only lead to the abandonment of the metaphysics and the methodology that had led to these impasses. What would a clear-eyed view disclose? First of all that social episodes are more often than not carried through by the use of language, and secondly that answering questionnaires is not an experiment but a formalized conversation *about* this or that type of episode, in short nothing but a stripped-down account.

Here we have fertile soil for the development of a more sophisticated psychology, sensitive to unexamined metaphysical assumptions and ready to undertake the time-consuming and painstaking analysis of the complex phenomena of real social interactions, mediated by meanings and made orderly by the following of rules.

In this chapter we will be following the growth of a new paradigm, which is much indebted to the rather simple insight that people do a lot of their social interacting by talking, displaying symbolic objects, and so on.

1 From State to Process: The Moral/Political Dimension

The shift from a social psychology of individual mental states, or even of individual biological reactions, to one of collective social processes is not just a shift of focus. It is also a profound reconstructing of the moral and political conceptual framework within which psychological research is carried on. Anthropologists and historians are very familiar with the polarization of cultures along an axis from the highly individualistic to the strongly collectivist. American society has taken the Enlightenment ideal of the morally and socially autonomous individual, amplified by various influences, toward the individualistic pole. At the same time, individuals are assumed to be the focus of moral assessment, so there is strong motivation to find ways of easing the

burden of individual moral responsibility. This feature, found to a lesser extent in other societies tending toward individualism, accounts for the paradox that strikes thoughtful foreigners: the seeming incompatibility in American social arrangements between democracy in the large and autocracy in the small.² From the point of view of the metaphysics and methodology of psychology the same contrast appears in the attempts to give causal accounts of social behavior, typical of much American work. This orientation is opposed to the agentive metaphysics of work elsewhere, for example the “activity” psychology approach of von Cranach (von Cranach 1981). If what one does is the effect of some causal mechanism, one can hardly be held responsible for one’s actions. Extravagant and reckless shopping used to be looked on as a moral failing to be censured. People who got into debt were expected to take better control of their lives. Lately we have had “shopping” classified as an addiction, with the implication that the shopper is the victim of a causal mechanism for which a display of goods is a stimulus and purchasing some a response. One is no more responsible for one’s escalating credit card debts than is the influenza victim for an escalating temperature. Experts must be called in to effect a cure.

There are two caveats to be entered vis-à-vis the new paradigm change from causal to normative or rule-referring explanations. The shift to “the rules,” as extrapersonal constraints, *can* be made to serve in a causal explanatory framework. Rules have been interpreted not as discursive devices for making one’s action intelligible and warrantable, but as causal influences. But what would motivate such a strained interpretation?

One could look on a social psychology based on a cause/effect metaphysics and a neobehaviorist experimental methodology as a socially potent device for making alibis available.³ In many respects social psychology, and indeed other branches of both clinical and academic psychology, are not sciences, but part of the everyday apparatus by which people escape the consequences of their own actions. Paradoxically again, attention to episodes of collective and joint action forces one to pay attention to the individuals who enter into life episodes as responsible beings.

The shift from an interest in the cognitive mechanisms or biological reactions that are the focus of individualist research paradigms, to an interest in the way that people actively engage, with others, in projects of various kinds and levels, involves a new view of the relevant phenomena. There is not only a moral/political contrast between repudiating and claiming responsibility for one’s action, but a shift from states of individuals to structures of multiperson episodes as defining the basic level of “what there is.”

From the new theoretical point of view, what is new-paradigm research going to be engaged on? And what exemplars can we rely on to help bring a true *science* of human thought, feelings, and conduct to fruition?

2 First Steps in Methodology: How To Do Science

We are presented with a world of enormous complexity and indeterminacy. This is true of our world in both its physical and its cultural aspects. The greatest innovation in technique, an innovation that made physics possible, was the development of the technique of building, imagining, and using models. The first steps in this radical

shift in methodology were taken between 1400 and 1600. A model is an analogue of its subject.

Let me illustrate two important roles of model making, both of which have an important part to play in psychology, with examples from early modern physics. The technique of model making is fairly simple in elementary physical sciences, though the same general plan is preserved into the very much more complex procedures required when the subjects of our models are human actions themselves and the cognitive processes and states produced by them. There are two main families of models in use in all the sciences.

2.1 *Heuristic abstractions*

It often happens that the real-world object or process that seems to be at the heart of some phenomenon of interest is too difficult to study in itself. In the case of physical systems it may be too large or happening too rapidly or too slowly. In 1600 William Gilbert published his great work, the *De Magnete*, the definitive work on the properties of simple magnets. Gilbert was interested in the problems of navigation and particularly in the use of the magnetic compass as a navigational instrument. To experiment on the whole earth was then impossible, so to shrink the world to manageable size Gilbert constructed a "terrella," a little earth, a sphere of lodestone with the magnetic and geographical poles coinciding. The oceans were carved out as depressions on the surface, and he attempted to chart the magnetic variation from true north as he moved a miniature compass across the micro-oceans. Such models have been variously named. I shall call models in this family "heuristic abstractions." The physical sciences and engineering are full of these models. Some are created out of material stuff and manipulated in the laboratory. For example, wind-tunnel models of airliners are analogs of the real thing, "flying" in an analog of the atmosphere. Some are imagined and their behavior studied by developing mathematical models of the basic physical entities of the model, or run on computers, for example models of the solar system from Exodus to Einstein. Heuristic abstractions do no more and no less than represent the nature of the things we can observe, in a manageable form. But there is another family of models, serving a different purpose.

2.2 *Explanatory models*

Francis Bacon was puzzled by the anomalous effect of heat on different solids. For instance, wax was liquefied by heating but clay was solidified. How could this be? He tried to explain the difference in the effects by imagining what solids might be like: assemblages of small, hard particles, or corpuscles. His model for heat itself was a motion of the constituent parts of bodies. By assigning wax atoms and clay atoms different degrees of adhesion he was able to invent an explanation. In the hands of Boyle, Newton, J. J. Thomson, Rutherford, Feynman, and many others, this primitive model of matter has been amazingly refined and elaborated. Explanatory models are invented and applied to the reality they model, whereas heuristic abstractions are abstracted from it.

So we have families of models distinguished by their subjects, that of which they are models. But neither heuristic abstractions nor explanatory models are freely constructed. They are constrained by sources. There is a limit to what we are permitted to imagine as explanatory models. They must, if plausible, be possible realities. The way to ensure that is to set up a double analogy. The model is an analog of the unobservable state, object, or processes we are assuming really explain the phenomena of interest. But in most cases the model is itself an analog of something we can already observe. The corpuscular model of an atom is modeled on a small material particle, say a grain of sand. Democritus is said to have thought of the atomic model of matter by observing the dancing motes in the sunbeam. So that Bacon's corpuscles are not unlike the grains of sand that can be made to stick together into a sandcastle or more drastically into glass. Heuristic models too are constrained by reference to sources. How do we know what to look for in abstracting an analog from a complex phenomenon? How do we ensure that we abstract the same way in all aspects of our construction? The technique of the physical scientists has been to double the analogy here too. Darwin's famous "natural selection" model directs our attention to certain features of the biosphere, but his abstractions were controlled by thinking of the living world as if it were a huge farm. He knew a great deal about creating varieties by domestic selection of favored breeding pairs. He looked for something similar in nature, and found it in the greater breeding potential of plants and animals that were most "at home" in their environments.

Both kinds of models deal with problems of observation. In the one case the reality is too difficult to observe and study conveniently, while in the other it cannot be observed at all. An experiment is not primarily a test of a hypothesis, but the running of a working model of some process in the world under study that cannot conveniently be examined in its natural form. Studying genetics by experimenting with garden peas and drosophilas in a jar is an example of the making of models of aspects of the natural world and seeing how they run. Experiments in the human sciences too must have this character to be scientifically acceptable.

3 Models in the Human Sciences

There are plenty of examples of both types of model in human studies, and indeed in the patterns of thinking of everyday life. Every time one consults a map one is using a heuristic abstraction from the countryside. Maps are simplified and reduced abstractions from the reality of a region. Every time one declares oneself to be fighting off a virus one is thinking in terms of an explanatory model. Viruses, until recently as unobservable as quarks, were invented to explain the onset and course of diseases for which no bacterial cause could be found. But what about models for psychological phenomena themselves?

The dramaturgical model in social psychology that has been used to good effect in several contexts is an abstraction from the messy goings-on it is used to represent, for example the behavior of the staff of a restaurant. To the student of social psychology, the shift of style and other indicators of cognitive slant as a waiter moves from kitchen to dining room presents a puzzle to be solved. How are these performances

to be accounted for? By trying to abstract a pattern from the events, controlled by the idea of likening the work of a restaurant to the performance of a play, the decor to the stage sets, and so on, Goffman (1957) was able to present the work of the restaurant in a simplified but illuminating way. Similarly the fine structure of football hooliganism was revealed by Marsh et al.'s (1977) use of the idea of a status-creating and status-confirming ritual to abstract a pattern from what seemed at first sight to be chaotic acts of violence.

Cognitive psychology is rich in explanatory models. For instance, the use of cost-benefit analysis to analyze the thinking of lovers may seem somewhat unromantic, but it has offered a possible explanatory account of the ups and downs of love affairs. More technically impressive has been the use of the famous analogy through which artificial intelligence has spawned some interesting explanations in cognitive science. The model-creating analogy looks like this:

Computer : Running a program :: Brain : Thinking

The slogan that the brain is a kind of computer is a rather extravagant way of stating the thesis that computation is a model of some, perhaps all, kinds of cognition. Here we have a very powerful, though ultimately flawed, explanatory model. It is flawed because the number and weight of ways in which brains and their functioning are unlike computers vastly outweighs the number and weight of ways they are alike.

It is not too much to say that a great deal of thinking, perhaps all, is a matter of model making, sometimes richly imagined but sometimes taking the form of highly schematized formal representations. The model-engendering relation is analogy. To what is social interaction analogous? Is there a kind of social interaction that could serve as a heuristic (and perhaps even an explanatory) model for social interaction of many or most kinds?

3.1 Conversation: the leading model for discursive psychology

I have been arguing that cognitive psychology ought to be focused on the public uses of words and other symbolic devices that active people use to carry out all sorts of projects. The means adopted in most cases involve a great deal of public and private talk. "Conversation" can be given an extended role as the leading metaphor for making sense of those aspects of episodes that seem to be mediated by other symbolic devices, though these are not conveyed by speech. Some of the concepts appropriate for analyzing linguistic interactions, such as syntax and semantics, may have a metaphorical use in nonlinguistic contexts. For example, what people do is effective insofar as it has a more or less shared meaning in the group involved. To be fully comprehensible and socially efficacious, say as an apology, the meaningful gesture, etc., must take place within a tacit system of norms that would, if stated explicitly, express the loosely bounded set of possible courses of thought and action that these people would regard as justified, sensible, and proper. Since conversation is literally a subtle symbolic public activity, often but not always directed to some overt or covert end, and occurring within the bounds of certain conceptions of what is a

possible conversation, it ought to serve as a model for all types of meaningful interpersonal interaction, whatever be the medium (including, as I shall show, tennis).

It further follows that in so far as *all* human encounters are meaningful and norm-bound, the conversation or discursive model should straddle the boundaries between social orders and their cultural realizations. In the examples to follow, I will try to illustrate the literal use of the concept of “conversation” as a guide to building working models of psychological phenomena. This is the basis of the conversational or discursive analogy.

4 What is the Field of Interest for Social Psychology?

4.1 *Task and tool: a fruitful metaphor*

Suppose we adopt the new-paradigm stance, and define our task as the discovery of the aims and norms of small-scale collective joint action, revealing the nature of interaction episodes. What about the people who engage in them? Where is the psychology? If we see episodes as people doing things, then the most natural organizing principle within which to frame our studies is the task/tool distinction. What are the socially relevant tasks that people are engaged in and what are the tools they are using to accomplish them? Tools for executing social tasks fall into two classes. There are symbolic devices such as words, gestures, flags, music, and so on. Then there are tools that individual people use to manage these symbolic tools, namely their own bodily organs such as brains and tongues. These too are tools.

Now the work of the social psychologist becomes complicated, because the concept that links a person to the task that he or she is jointly performing with others is their skill. To have a skill is to have a certain kind of procedural knowledge, know-how; and also some propositional knowledge, some know-that. Matters become still more complicated, since there has been a good deal of work that shows that in a group of people engaged in some activity, deficits in the skills of some members are made up for by the others. This familiar aspect of joint action has been called psychological symbiosis. We have then a three-fold structure:

- 1 There is the task/tool distinction to be applied to any given type of episode, say the building of friendship.
- 2 There is the tool/skill distinction by which individual actors are seen as working on the production of the psychological phenomenon in question.
- 3 There is the mutual pattern of interactions between team members, in which various relations, such as psychological symbiosis, completing the inadequate social performance of someone else can be observed.

One of the more difficult ideas for traditionalists, practitioners of old-paradigm social psychology, to accept is the central thesis that most cognitive phenomena have their primary location in the flow of interpersonal, joint action. I will describe this key concept more concretely in the case of remembering below, but there are plenty of models for the genesis of something cognitive in interpersonal interaction.

Let us take tennis as an illustration, and apply it as the source of our heuristic model of some cognitive phenomenon in the unfolding of collective action, for example remembering. How are we to understand an *act* of remembering as a social performance? According to the discursive point of view it is like the score "40/30" in a tennis match, say between Agassi and Sampras. This score is a cognitive phenomenon that was jointly produced by the players, acting in accordance with the norms of tennis matches, which neither could have produced singly, and for which both are responsible. Conformity is ensured publicly, and thus the joint construction of that score is rendered possible, by social norms personified in the umpire. In subsequent play the competitors must take account of that score, though in the plays that follow the fateful role may change. Let us say the game evolves through "Deuce" to "Advantage Agassi" to "Game." Remembering, I shall try to show, is rather like that. We notice also that to create that score and the subsequent "match" both players must be skilled at tennis, both as a material practice and as a discourse. Had I been playing Sampras the score would have been 6–0, 6–0, 6–0.

4.2 *Speech as social action: performative utterances as speech acts*

The notion of discourse has its home in linguistic exchanges, storytelling, and the like. Before I go on to show how the scope of the concept must be enlarged to include nonlinguistic interchanges of certain sorts, we need to ground the whole enterprise in a suitable account of language as a discursive medium. Why do we say things to one another? For almost two millennia it was assumed that it was to exchange information. The job of language was primarily descriptive. "How many eggs this morning?" "Six." But think about some more of this conversation. "Come to breakfast." "How do you like them done?" "Sunny side up." "The yolks are too hard." "You're always complaining! Cook them yourself." "Aw! Mum!" We all know that even "You're always complaining" is not a simple description of someone's habitual behavior. It is at just this point that social psychology and linguistic analysis intersect. The last six utterances are performances of certain social acts: inviting, questioning, answering, complaining, expressing resentment, and apologizing. Seen thus the conversation is a complex social episode, with its own rules and conventions.⁴ Here we have a social episode and the medium is literally discursive. Utterances like those above have been called "performative" by Austin (1964), and the work they do "speech acts."

It is very important to resist the temptation to fall back into psychological individualism at this point.⁵ Austin realized that what someone said was effective only if it was said by the right person in the right circumstances, and if it was so understood by the other people involved. He was insistent that the intentions and states of mind of speakers played a secondary role. To keep the distinction between what an individual speaker intended and what was jointly produced, I shall adopt the well-known distinction between actions (individual intended behavior) and acts (the jointly constructed social meanings of actions) in distinguishing between speech actions – what someone intends by an utterance – and speech acts – what is jointly accomplished by that utterance in context. Thus I may intend to praise you when I say "Not a bad show, old pal," while you and everyone else around take me to be belittling your achievement.

Now if we put the question: "Why do we say things to one another?" the answer will be: "To accomplish all sorts of practical and social tasks." We are back at the point of transition from old- to new-paradigm social psychology. Instead of a cause/effect metaphysics we adopt the agentic framework, in which active and skilled beings set about jointly accomplishing projects. Of course this leaves room for oddballs, mavericks, weirdos, nerds, squares, and so on. We shall see later how we must acknowledge a multiplicity of overlapping customs and constraints on what we do and say to one another in creating and managing the next episode in our joint lives.

5 Positioning: The Microstructure of Social Order

Not everyone present in some scene is authorized to do or say everything that might be said on the occasion. The notion of "role" was introduced to express the way certain kinds of actions belonged to certain persons as role holders. It was not the individual but the role that authorized this or that kind of action. "In the role of . . ." certain things were possible, but out of that role the very same person could not perform the act without censure or futility. Only as a licensed medical practitioner can anyone prescribe certain pharmaceutical drugs. Only as a father do I have a right to decide the schooling of my child, and so on. But the notion was used in such a catholic fashion that it soon was both too rigid, emphasizing formal and closed roles like judge and priest, and also too loose, emphasizing informal and open roles like "the role of women." Furthermore, the shift from a static to a dynamic conception of social interaction led to dissatisfaction with the relatively fixed character of what was picked out by the concept of role. In the attempt to understand the fluid exchanges of everyday episodes, something more dynamic was needed. This was provided from several sources. Goffman (1975, 1981) contributed the concept of "footing"; from Torode came a social psychological appropriation of the literary concept of "voice" (Torode 1977) and from the unlikely partnership of business studies and feminism (Hollway 1984) came "position." A major contribution to the development of the concept of "position" came from Davies (1989). For reasons not germane to this exposition I have come to prefer "position" as the most satisfactory term for this concept.

A position in an episode is a momentary assumption or ascription of a certain cluster of rights, duties, and obligations with respect to what sorts of things a certain person, in that position, can say and do. It is important to emphasize the ephemeral character of positions. They can be challenged, transformed, repudiated, exploited, expanded, and so on, and in those transformations the act-force of the joint actions of an episode ebb and flow. Furthermore, each speaker/hearer in an episode may construe what is said and done by reference to a different positioning, and so act in relation to different acts, even though all hear, in one sense, the same speech action. He may think he has commiserated with her, while she may think what he said patronizing. He uttered "Too bad the job turned out not so good."

In order to follow the unfolding of those fateful episodes in which friendships are sealed, love affairs disintegrate, bargains are struck, deadly insults are exchanged, jokes are made, decisions are arrived at, and so on and so on, close attention must be paid to the dynamics of positioning, as the episode develops.

What explains the sequential structures of speech acts, understood in the light of our intuitions as to the positions of the interactors? This question could not be posed within the framework of the old paradigm, with its essentially static conception of social interaction. Here we return to the important notion of model.

The most powerful and the most ancient heuristic abstraction used to throw the relevant structure of an episode into high relief is the dramaturgical model. Shakespeare famously used it, drawing on the social psychology of the Elizabethan era in authors such as Erasmus. It was revived as a deliberate counterforce to behaviorism by Kenneth Burke (1945), and subsequently inspired some of Goffman's most illuminating studies (Goffman 1967). The idea is very simple: we juxtapose the staging of a play to the living out of an episode of everyday life, using the concepts from the stage to analyze the otherwise opaque happenings of the lived episode. Burke recommended a five-fold basic scheme: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. One would approach a scene from *Hamlet* with these in mind, and Burke recommended that we approach the scenes of everyday life with the same scheme. Taken in pairs he called them "ratios." He thought that the model could be enriched by looking for the act/scene relationship, the agency/purpose relationship and so on. So to force the guilty pair to confess (act) Hamlet stages the play within the play (scene). The agency is the playlet while the purpose is to secure a confession. In like manner one might study the stages of the formation of a friendship as the unfolding of a drama.

6 Narrative: The Microstructure of Social Episodes

Burke's dramaturgical model is not the only fruitful borrowing discursive social psychology can make from literary studies. How are we to discern the sequential structure of social episodes?⁶ Two heuristic abstractions have been much in vogue.

6.1 *Life as ceremony*

It is sometimes fruitful to look on social episodes as if they were literally ceremonials. This model has the advantage that some social episodes are indeed so. Ceremonials consist of hierarchically organized patterns of social acts, performed by the authorized role-holders, in the right settings. In the course of the performance some larger act is accomplished, often one in which the social relations that existed at the beginning of the episode are ritually changed or revised. Marriages are created, people are deprived of civil rights, presidents are created by swearing in, and so on. The social psychology of these episodes is on the surface, since the rules for the performance of the ceremony and the conditions that individuals have to meet to be acknowledged as role-holders are clearly and formally laid down. No one is condemned to death inadvertently or sworn in as President of the United States accidentally. Things do go wrong with trials and elections, but these are not matters of inadvertence or accident.

In discussing the social psychology of friendship, I shall illustrate the use of ceremonial as a heuristic model for revealing the structure and meaning of the episodes in which friendships are brought into being. For now it is enough to say that it

requires hierarchical patterns of social acts of a kind taken as proper in a particular society, with the active cooperation of certain people having well-understood roles. Unlike in true ceremonials, there are no formal rules, no written protocols, and no formal criteria for acceptance as a role-holder. We shall see how the ceremonial model contrasts with the cause/effect metaphysics, in which friendship is treated as an effect and the investigator tries to find some condition that is its cause.

6.2 *Life as narrative*

Jerome Bruner (1986, 1991) and others have developed a second heuristic model to do similar work to the ceremonial analog. He noticed how much of life is recounted through stories. When people get together they tell each other anecdotes, bits of their lives. They present episodes to one another in the form of stories. Folk social psychology consists very largely of the skills and resources needed for storytelling. Stories are not just catalogues of events, but narratives, with customary forms and often with plots. Some of the plots are traditional, collected and analyzed by such students of everyday narratives as Opie and Opie (1972) and Propp (1924). The role of narrative in accounts has been nicely summarized by Bernstein (1990: 55):

One of the ways human beings assess and interpret the events of their life is through the construction of plausible narratives. Narratives represent events not as instances of general laws but rather as elements of a history where a continuing individual or collective subject suffers or brings about dramatic, i.e. meaningful, change.

Bernstein goes on to remark that narratives have plots in which there is a narrative conclusion, which is related to what has gone before not by logic but by its appropriateness to the story line. The psychological point of this approach is that whatever happened in the past, it is the construal of the past in terms of the presently told narrative that provides the stepping-off point for how the narrator's life will be carried on. Since the process of narrative reappraisal is never ending, the form of a life is a kind of continual but subtly transformative reappropriation of the past, through which it is effectively recreated for the purpose in hand.

In introducing the idea of positioning I pointed out that the speech act-force of this or that speech action is dependent on the positions that the actors acknowledge each other to be speaking and acting from. There is a third component in this pattern of mutual influences: the story line that those engaged in the episode are working out. Story lines are potential narratives, the raw material for reworkings of episodes along lines that disclose themselves as possibilities as the episode and others connected to it unfold.

7 Accounts

A remarkable feature of human social interaction, in contrast to that of other primates, is the overlaying of the first-order action, be it in a conversational medium

or some other, with an interpretative gloss, a second-order discourse, an account. Human social life is potentially, and often actually, multilayered. The collection and analysis of accounts has been part of the methodology of new-paradigm social psychology from its inception in the late 1960s. Ethnomethodologists were the first to notice that intentional actions were not only oriented to audiences, but that insofar as they were so oriented they were potentially accountable. Scott and Lyman (1968) were the first to suggest that the elicitation of accounts was a powerful method for the understanding of social episodes.

An account is an interpretive and justificatory discourse, the topic of which is a social interaction. In exculpatory talk we find both claims about the meanings of social actions as acts, and assertions of the relevant norms, in light of which what has been done can be seen as reasonable and proper. Accounts address the question of the intelligibility and warrantability of actions, insofar as they are seen as the performance of acts.

However, accounting is itself a form of social action, and as such is potentially accountable at a third level, and so on. Accounting is hierarchical. Philosophers have addressed the question of the closure of accounting hierarchies. Taylor (1989) has suggested that they terminate in "existential" declarations: "That's the sort of person I am!" Wittgenstein has argued (1953: §§217–44) that in the case of hierarchies of rules, closure can be achieved only by citing either a practice, into which one has been trained, and to which one has, therefore, no further reason for conforming, or a natural regularity, explicable biologically. From the point of view of the discursively oriented social psychologist, the collection of accounts need proceed only so far as is necessary to establish a working interpretation of the actions that constitute a social episode. All interpretations are capable of further refinement.

Worked example 1: Friendship as an accomplishment

The nearest old-paradigm psychologists got to studying friendship was to try to find out the conditions under which people came to like one another. The flaws in this work are very instructive. The best-known piece of research was carried out by R. B. Zajonc (1984). Fully immersed in the causal metaphysics of psychological individualism, he tried to show that the more frequently people met the more they would like one another. But instead of studying people meeting people, he experimented with people meeting meaningless signs, pseudo-Turkish words. Lo and behold, the subjects in his experiments declared that they most liked the words which had been presented the most. This experiment has two major flaws. The first is its lack of applicability to human relations, in that in that case it is the meaning of frequent meetings that plays a role. Liking is not an effect produced by a cause. This is so obvious it is hardly worth reiterating. But the second flaw is more deep seated. It has been shown that whatever is the attribute asked for in the experiment, the more frequently an object is shown to a person the more she or he is likely to declare it has the salient attribute. The question "Which is the brightest?" also gets the most frequently seen as the object of choice. It would be interesting to test this explanation in the realm of audition. Is the most frequently presented sound picked

as the most pleasant, or the loudest? I am fairly confident we will get the same sort of result.

A good deal of research in the general area of interpersonal attraction does actually use discursive methods, but presents them as if they were experiments. For instance, Byrne (1971) asks people to form an impression of another person by consultation of a written profile. Of course this is a task in discursive psychology, part of the psychology of literary interpretation; for instance: "Do you like Ophelia more than you like Rosalind?"

Turning away from the simplicities of old-paradigm research to the more sophisticated work of anthropologists and microsociologists, we find a quite different research focus. Instead of the static cause/effect metaphysics of the old paradigm we find a dynamic metaphysics for modeling the processes of making friends, including the way we mark stages in the development of a relationship in different cultures, the differing levels of commitment at each stage, and so on. Still the most interesting work published on the topic is by Douglas (1972), in which she tracks the development of a relationship through successive rituals, particularly ritual meals. In our extended notion of discourse these are socially significant as acts, having their own "semantics" and their proper order and sequence, their own "syntax." She shows how people pass from unstructured mutual entertainment ("drinks") to highly structured ("dinners") through to informal ("pot luck"). The sequence defines and records the stages from acquaintance to intimacy. What is the psychology of this process? Once again it is a matter of local knowledge, knowing the meaning of this or that stage in the process and how it relates to those that have gone before and might subsequently occur.

In their classic study of the social psychology of childhood, Opie and Opie (1972) identified and described a number of friendship rituals by which a relationship is sealed. For example, there are mixing of blood, dividing a coin, exchanges of ritual gifts, and so on.

But, it might be said, what is characteristic of the people who are willing to take part in the discursive construction of friendship (or its opposite)? Are there not personal characteristics that draw people to one another? This might have been true were there any such thing as context-independent personal attributes. Despite the attempts at the revival of the discredited trait theory, flawed in the same way as original trait theories by statistical fallacies, it seems that people have psychological and characterological attributes only in those moments when they are interacting as pairs, triads etc. It turns out that personal and characterological attributes change with imagined respondent in much the same way as they do when we each interact with different respondents in real-life episodes. So it cannot be that the relationship develops out of a pre-existing similarity of taste, or agreement in opinions, if those similarities and agreements are themselves the product of the coming to be of the relationship. Once one is committed to a person, one adjusts oneself to the other and the other adjusts himself or herself to one. People who stick to the opinions and so on that they bring into a relationship doom it to an unpleasant end. Trait theorists seem to see stable traits because it is they who are interacting with the subjects of their studies, or if they are using a questionnaire method, the local discursive conventions constrain answers within a certain framework.

According to the discursive point of view, friendship and the liking that goes with it are an accomplishment, a relatively permanent aspect of interpersonal interactions in a variety of episodes that are framed within the local system of norms of ritual interaction. The discursive study of friendship and other interpersonal relations is still undeveloped, despite the large number of data available concerning destructive and constructive ways of conversing, for example within families.

Worked example 2: Remembering as a social act

There has been a great deal of confusion of thought in the old-paradigm attempts to develop a psychology of remembering. The source of the confusion lies in the failure to realize the role of the experimenter in the process that is being studied. Remembering is not just personal recollecting and reporting what one recollects, though these are often the very same act. It is also recollecting correctly. In laboratory experiments, a genre of episodes deriving more or less directly from the work of Ebbinghaus, the experimenter fixes the past, and determines, a priori, what it is. This is usually done by creating "stimulus materials" that are reckoned to be durable, and to persist unchanged throughout the experiment. This ensures that the past is available in the present in a way that is almost never found in everyday life. In our terms, traditional remembering experiments are poor models of people engaged in the activity of remembering in memorial episodes. Experimenters, following the tradition of Ebbinghaus, though not experimenting only on themselves, smuggle in this way of guaranteeing that they know what the past situations to be remembered were. So the normative aspect of remembering is concealed. To remember is to recollect the past correctly.

If we turn to real life and ask how remembering is done, the phenomenon turns out to be dynamic, social, and complex. The one device that is almost never available is that used by the laboratory experimenter, namely a guaranteed material relic of the past. Very little material evidence for past situations and happenings survives even for 24 hours. This fact is obvious enough in courtrooms, but has been overlooked by psychologists. How then is correctness assessed, if it is not by some sort of quotidian archaeology? Individual people entertain themselves with their recollections, scarcely ever bothering to check them out. When an old diary does surface in the back of the drawer it makes startling reading. Very little was as it is now remembered. What matters, it turns out, and as might have been expected, is that the "facts of the past" are settled by social negotiation (Middleton and Edwards 1990). People propose various possible recollections and these are discussed, assessed, and negotiated amongst those involved in a memorial episode. Furthermore, Marga Kreckel showed (Kreckel 1981) that in most memorial episodes there is a fairly clear distribution of memorial power. Some people have greater standing as determiners of the past than others. While the psychology of memory continues to be a laboratory-based study, with developments into psychoneurology (the biochemical basis of recollection), the topic of remembering as a psychological phenomenon, as a feature of discursive practices, is neglected. Note the grammar. Memory, the noun, is used by those psychologists who think that the topic of research is finally states of the brain. Remembering, the

gerund, is used by those psychologists who think that the topic of research is how people recall the past. The asymmetry is itself interesting, in that while people interested in remembering would regard the work on individual neurological processes of recollection to be one leg of a dualistic research project, those who are interested in memory tend to be naive reductionists and to pay no attention at all to the real-life processes by which putative rememberings are sorted and certified. Remembering is in important respects a conversational phenomenon, existing as a feature of discourse. In these respects it is not an attribute or state of individuals, which comes to be expressed publicly. It is a public phenomenon.

8 What Do the Results of New-paradigm Research Look Like?

Episode-focused studies should come up with dynamic models of joint action that would simulate the episodes we find in real life. To achieve this we need to know what acts are to be performed to accomplish the overall project of the episode, or nested set of episodes. We also need to know the rules and conventions that are realized in the way acts are sequenced in episodes, and the positions and roles of the actors who are their proper performers. In short, we need to bring out the “semantics” of actions and the “syntax” of their building up into intelligible episodes. In laying out the task of social psychology this way, we have extended the notions of semantics from words to utterances, and of syntax from sentences to discourses. At the same time we have extended the notion of discourse from conversations to episodes of many other kinds. But, as I have argued, that is the essence of scientific method: drawing on well-understood sources to create working models of that which we do not yet understand.

8.1 *The semantics of social acts*

To recruit the notion of meaning to discuss the act/action distinction seems entirely natural. What better way of describing the relation between farewelling and purposively waving than to take the former as the meaning of the latter? Acts are the meanings of actions. Well and good. But “meaning” is not an uncontroversial term itself. Disillusioned with referential or denotative accounts of meaning that purported to be quite general, Wittgenstein (1953) famously proposed that meaning should be understood in terms of practice, that is in terms of use. This suggestion fits well with the act/action distinction. What is waving for? To farewell someone. What is saying “Look out!” for? To warn someone. And so on. Meaning seems to be well treated as social function. And this fits in nicely with the Austinian insight that most utterances are speech acts rather than descriptions.⁷ To give the semantics of a repertoire of actions just is to carry out an analysis of their social roles, facilitated by the analysis of the second-order discourses or accounts with which ambiguities are cleared up, unfortunate actions remedied, and so on.

8.2 *The syntax of social episodes*

The conversational model serves as both a first- and a second-order account of the orderliness of social episodes. In accordance with the tool/task metaphysics and the substitution of “skill” for “cause,” we need to find an expression to catch what it is skilled actors must know to produce a sequence of acts that do accomplish the social task which they intend. The commonsense notion “they know the rules” can be recruited to a more strictly defined role. To act correctly a person must have explicit or implicit knowledge of the relevant norms, and this knowledge can be expressed as a set of rules.⁸ However, the psychology of rule conformity is complex. This is because there are two ways that the concept of “rule” has been used. In Wittgenstein’s terminology there is the case of following a rule, a way of acting in which the actor attends to a discursive presentation of the rule, and treats it like an instruction or order, doing what it says. But there is also the case of acting in accordance with a rule. Here we are using the word “rule” metaphorically, to express an insight about the norm that seems to be immanent in the practice. Failure to keep the distinction between literal and metaphorical uses of the word “rule” has led to some serious mistakes, particularly prominent in cognitive psychology. It has been assumed by Fodor (1975), for example, that acting in accordance with a rule is just like following a rule, only the following takes place unconsciously. There seems to be no good ground for this claim, and it has been roundly criticized by Searle (1995) and others.

We can write down rule systems to express *our* hypotheses about the norms relevant to the kinds of episodes we are studying, but we must bear the above distinctions in mind when we interpret them psychologically, in the task/tool/skill framework. The following of an explicit rule is a different kind of skilled action from acting in accordance with rule, which should properly be assimilated to habit.

9 Conclusion

Social episodes are not unconnected sequences of stimulus/response pairs. They are structured and accountable action/act sequences given meaning and warrantability by complex normative constraints, some immanent in the action and others explicitly formulated as rules of procedure. Following the general principles that govern good scientific work in the physical sciences, we must set about constructing working models of social interactions, analogous to them and, at the same time, analogous to some phenomenon we do have some understanding of. The fact that social interaction is accomplished symbolically immediately suggests adopting a generally discursive approach to the understanding of social life. The most natural model to choose is the conversation, refined in relation to various sources, such as ceremonies and dramas. There are other possibilities too, for example the court of law, and certain games, of which, for me, that of tennis is the most powerful model, since it is itself both a material practice and a discursive episode. By shifting to the episode as the unit of analysis, we open up social interaction to a more sophisticated research methodology than the simplistic “experimental” method of the old paradigm, which enshrined so many errors, not least the commitment to a certain unexamined political ideology.

NOTES

- 1 For a textbook treatment of discursive psychology in general see Harré and Gillett (1994).
- 2 To someone coming from a 900-year-old tradition of democratic management of universities the extraordinary degree of authoritarian rule in US universities comes as a great surprise. But the clash between macro- and microideals of governance is visible everywhere in the United States.
- 3 The same can be seen in the recent trend of blaming tobacco companies for illnesses that are the result of one's own self-indulgence and weakness of will.
- 4 Marga Kreckel (1981) noticed that there were two codes of conduct in play in family life. The family she studied shared a homodynamic code with other families of the local culture, but also made use of a heterodynamic code all their own.
- 5 Despite taking his start from Austin, Searle (1979) has only recently taken full account of the fact that speech acts are joint actions (Searle 1995).
- 6 Working from Goffman's way of expressing these distinctions, Tannen has developed the concept of discourse framing (cf. Tannen 1993).
- 7 Austin came to change his mind on the depth of this distinction, since he realized that even in describing something to someone one is engaged at one level in a social act, roughly: "Trust me!"
- 8 The one respect in which I would go along with transformational linguistics is the emphasis on syntactic knowledge ("competence") as knowledge of rules.

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