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THE DISCOURSE OF COMMERCIALIZATION (2010)
Discourses of Deficit

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Introduction

Christopher N. Candlin & Jonathan Crichton

1. Introductory

In this book we explore how people routinely in particular professional domains and at particular sites are discursively constructed as deficient in ways that may affect their life chances. We see ‘deficit’ not as restricted to particular disciplinary formulations or theoretical orientations but as multiply interpretable, depending on the particular locations, research orientations and modes of collaboration between participants and researchers. By taking this approach, the collection as a whole seeks to enrich and explore the potential of ‘deficit’ as one among many overarching constructs that can inform a new approach to applied linguistic research, identifying salient and multifaceted themes and issues that cut across a more traditional focus on fields and domains of use and their specific interactional orders. In addition to that of deficit, among such relevant and domain-influencing themes would be, for example, those of risk, quality and trust. We offer in this Introduction some discussion of how the constructs of discourse and deficit are explored in the book, and how these may be researched. This allows us to supply contexts for the particular foci of the individual chapters, and how they may be harmonised within an overall orientation to particular issues and themes arising from these specific domains and sites.

We have actively encouraged contributors to explore how the notion of ‘deficit’ is salient to their particular locations and research orientations, in the manner and detail set out in section 3 below. This exploration includes, but is not restricted to, deficits and discourses associated with particular interpretive repertoires, social or institutional settings, and in relation to specific communities of practice. As with all such situated explorations, constructs are closely connected and linked
with other related conditions, naturally implicating further constructs depending on particular sites of engagement and their characteristic interaction orders. Among these further constructs we can identify from the contributing chapters those of ‘exclusion’, ‘blame’, ‘disadvantage’ and ‘disability’.

Principally, though, the attention of the book is focused, as its title suggests, on the discourses of deficit – where discourse is seen both as discursive formations (Foucault 1972) and as practices in terms of situated and empirically verifiable interactions (Bourdieu 1977; Goffman 1983). We refer to this distinction in section 2 of this Introduction below. Both understandings of discourse are necessary; indeed, the contributing chapters as a whole exemplify how the two are held together in a dynamic tension whereby discursive practices of deficit, as essentially bottom-up phenomena, engage with theoretically grounded definitions of deficit as potential governors of possible action.

To mention discursive practices raises issues of boundary. The chapters in the book make clear that researching deficit is of its nature an inter- and multi-disciplinary endeavour where boundaries are fuzzy-edged and epistemologically both complex and varied. It is to be expected, then, that the chapters will exemplify studies from researchers and practitioners drawn from a selective range of sites, with each one demonstrating the potential for the display of distinctive modes of engagement combining and emphasising in different ways professional and discourse-analytical insights. The agenda explored and exemplified through the book is thus of its nature interdiscursive as well as interdisciplinary, the aim being to clarify the constructs of ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ by engaging each with the other, within and across the selected sites. Such interdisciplinarity of practice and its concomitant interdiscursivity is itself complex, evidencing through the chapters at least three forms:

- **within** the researchers in question, that is where they can be regarded as both professionally engaged as researchers in discourse analysis and as researchers and/or practitioners in the particular professions and organisations within which they conduct their discourse-based research;
- **between** researchers within a particular profession or across professions;
- **among** researchers in discourse analysis or in particular professions and the participants with whom they work in their various sites of engagement.
It is the overarching argument of the chapters in the book that such deficits are informed by tacit models of professional understandings, discursively realised, which invoke ‘standards’ which in turn come to presume deficits against which people are judged, and their identities constructed, at particular sites. In short, deficit is a form of cultural categorisation (Sarangi & Candlin 2003a). From this it follows that what is required in the exploration of the discourses of deficit is the development of a research agenda which focuses on the interdisciplinary identification and analysis of such deficits – involving a collaborative process of ‘joint problematisation’ (Roberts & Sarangi 1999: 473) among participants and researchers. Such an endeavour offers a means of elucidating underlying issues, unlocking and making available expertise relevant to the understanding of deficit, as well as holding out the promise of emancipation and enfranchisement of persons engaged in such sites. Finally, and now of more general applied linguistic relevance, it is by reference to the particular modes of inter- and intra-professional engagement among researchers, and their interactions with participants at these sites, that the meanings of ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ (and indeed of those other significant constructs we name earlier, i.e. risk, quality, trust, although these are not the focus of this book) are to be constructed and interpreted in such research.

In developing this argument, the book addresses the methodological question relevant to each site of how one might go about such inter- and intra-professional investigation, and explores the interrelated question of how we are to understand the ways in which methodology can be ‘commensurate’ with such a focus. An important consideration, therefore, for the chapters is the extent to which their studies explore the variable modes of engagement associated with the different ‘motivational relevancies’ (Sarangi & Candlin 2001: 368ff) of researchers and participants, and how, hermeneutically, both parties interpret and negotiate the practical relevance of their research. Thus, researching the discourses of deficit is at once interpersonally and institutionally focused. Our intention is to suggest ways in which the diversified construct of deficit can achieve some unity of perspective and of purpose, principally by employing a discourse-analytical lens in which the place of linguistic, semiotic and interaction analysis is set within a macro-/micro-analysis perspective, both around and within the particular site of engagement in question (Cicourel 2007; Fairclough 2010). Accordingly, questions explored in the chapters include how ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ can be understood and articulated by both researchers and participants; what their respective stances may be vis-à-vis each other.
and in relation to such constructs; how it may be possible to align what Roberts & Sarangi (2005) refer to as the focal and analytic themes of such sites and such research; and what the nature of the engagement can be between researchers and participants in relation to the shared selection of particular and relevant data, in terms of the manner and means of analysing such data, and in relation to the evidential warranting of claims made, especially concerning issues of practical relevance deriving from the research (Sarangi & Candlin 2003b).

2. Defining deficit(s)

‘Deficit’ is construed in this book to include a loss of attributes or capacities which diminish in various ways the life chances of persons, as well as invoking understandings of how such attributes and capacities are ‘normalised’ against what is expected or required of persons in given circumstances. Such a definition is consonant with uses of ‘deficit’ as a category label across many professions and disciplines, where it typically connotes related categorisations such as ‘loss’, ‘lack’ and ‘failure’.

‘Deficit’ is typically drawn on as a metaphor to describe and categorise what might be called a measurable insufficiency. Such a categorisation, and the judgements underscoring it, is often associated with the exercise of expert knowledge or the actions (or non-actions) of involved participants. For example, in the domains of economics and management studies such a metaphor typically addresses financial, monetary or organisational shortfall, whereas in the domains of medicine, healthcare or psychology it refers typically to loss of physiological or cognitive function, as for example, in references to neurological deficit. In the domain of social work, in contrast, it typically relates to some lack in care, either on the part of caregivers such as parents and family, or in terms of some failure of appropriate surveillance on the part of authorities. In general, then, deficit is construed negatively, implicating certainly loss and lack, and in particular contexts, failure, but with an implicit invoking of potential repair.

The domain of education offers one key example of the complexity of the construct. Alongside deficit as a metaphor for a shortfall in individual capacity – in this case a capacity to learn – measured in, for example, developmental, physiological or cognitive terms (see Floyd & McIntosh 2009), we can note a second use where students are described as having a deficit in capacity to learn that derives from their membership of a social or cultural group. One such example would be where deficits in performance are associated with policies which seek to standardise or
emphasise education according to ‘core’ values/knowledge/curriculum, or with failures in provision at the level of the school (see Hirsch 2006). Not that such attributions are themselves without critique; indeed ‘deficit models’ of students which blame students’ low performance on some ‘intrinsic’ quality of the student or their families, for example their ethnicity, culture, linguistic competence or even their race, rather than on the conditions of learning in the school or on structural influences from the broader social context, have been heavily critiqued, as has the associated notion of ‘deficit thinking’ (see Harry & Klingner 2007; Valencia 1997).

This brief focus on ‘deficit’ in the educational domain is especially useful as an exemplar for the chapters in this book: firstly, it juxtaposes the cognitive and the social, especially highlighted here in the domains of communication disorder and medicine; secondly, it emphasises the tension in the relationship between the institutional and the personal in the construction of identity as evidenced in the domains of healthcare, law, and marketing; thirdly, it foregrounds contestations between standardising authority and the promotion of diversity, as in the domains of education and institutional appraisal; and finally, emphasising the connotation of diversity with failure, it locates deficit in terms of expectation, requirement and responsibility, as in the domain of social work.

3. Defining discourse(s)

As we suggest above, our orientation to discourse in this book is twofold. Firstly, it is allied to Foucault’s (1972) construct of the order of discourse (ordre du discours), where his focus on the ‘statement’ (énoncé), referring to what may be said or not said, or what may be meant or not meant in given contexts, is associated with entire systems of ideological position, knowledge, belief and value, all conventionalised over time into permissible and impermissible behaviours and actions. It is this that he refers to as the archive:

Instead of seeing . . . lines of words that translate invisible characters’ thoughts that were formed on some other time and place, we have the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call ‘archive’. (1972: 128)
In this archive, *statements* as findings are not isolated and found objects but signifiers of relationships between utterances (texts of all semiotic kinds), social institutions and their social processes, involving participant interactions and understandings, which are, or have been, subject to systems of normative behaviour. Such statements *position* participants in particular ways by means of a range of *discursive practices* associated with the domain and site in question.

These positioning statements reveal discursive practices in a system network of other interconnected statements. It is this interconnected system that Foucault refers to as a *discursive formation*, implying both the performance and the interpretation of statements, and the connectivity between enunciation and action. This connectivity provides one grounding of our understanding of the discourse of deficit, and is related to our second orientation, namely to the link between discursive practices and social (institutional/professional) practices. Here key constructs are those of the *field* (or, alternatively, in Bourdieus’s [1993] terms the *marketplace*, within which these practices are realised and achieve their value), and secondly, the *interaction order* (Goffman, 1972, 1983) which governs the way in which these valued ‘goods’ are exchanged in such fields and such marketplaces.

Both are intimately related. What we may term the institutional order and the interaction order are engaged in a form of mutual imbrication involving both affordance and constraint, as suggested by Berger & Luckman (1966):

> The primary knowledge about the institutional order is knowledge on the pre-theoretical level. It is the sum totals of ‘what everybody knows about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths and so forth – every institution has a body of transmitted recipe knowledge, that is knowledge that supplies the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct. (1966: 83)

Both orientations are consonant with Cicourel’s (1992, 2007) call for a co-engagement of the social formation (in the macro sense) and the interaction order (in the micro sense) as a warrant for achieving *ecological validity* in applied linguistic research.

Further, these orientations carry with them methodological requirements: to provide adequate *descriptions* in terms of capturing and setting down as fully as may be possible what people communicate semiotically
in a range of modalities; to provide grounded *interpretations* of the meanings associated by participants of these displays; and to offer critically motivated *explanations* of what is displayed, or not displayed, and what may or may not be meant, in relation to those institutionalities these participants are members of, and whose *orders of discourse* their interaction orders both reflect and work to maintain.

Two further related observations are appropriate to inform the chapters of this book. Firstly, as Sarangi & Roberts (1999) make clear in the context of their discourse-analytical work on medical encounters in the context of professional appraisal, participants are always cast in the role of navigating a complex path through and across *three* discourse modes: that of their *professional* allegiance, that of their *institutional* membership, and that of their own *habitus* of *personal experience*. Secondly, and as a consequence of this complex plurality, no discourse is singular: it is always hybridised and interdiscursive.

### 4. Researching discourses of deficit

For ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ to be drawn upon in an explanatory way, they need to be researched from the perspectives of those ‘making sense’ of those domains and sites where deficit is discoursed if decisions and necessary remediating actions are to be warranted. Constructs, as here that of ‘deficit’, need to be framed from the perspective of those institutional members who draw upon them as social categories to characterise situations of everyday life.

We have suggested earlier that researching the discourses of deficit in a range of domains and sites raises both challenges and opportunities for applied linguistic research more generally. Key to such a research agenda is the call for ‘ecological validity’ (Cicourel 1992, 2007), in research practice:

Validity in the non-experimental social sciences refers to the extent to which complex organisational activities represented by aggregated data from public and private sources and demographic and sample surveys can be linked to the collection, integration and assessment of temporal samples of observable (and when possible recordable) activities in daily life settings. Fragments of discourse materials always are shaped and constrained by the larger organizational settings in which they emerge and simultaneously influenced by cognitive/emotional processes despite the convenience of only focusing on extracted fragments independently of the organizational and cognitive/emotional
complexity of daily life settings. . . . the challenge remains how daily life activities simultaneously constrain and shape more complex organizational structures. (2007: 736)

Seeking to achieve this ‘ecological validity’ raises a range of issues canvassed in the chapters which follow. For example, how participants in these ‘daily life activities’ are positioned and subjectivised, and how tacit models of professional understandings, discursively realised, invoke ‘standards’ against which people are judged, their identities constructed and deficitised in particular domains and sites. Further, how differential understandings of these ‘cognitive/emotional processes’ – of which deficitising is a key exemplar – in which persons are involved, are to be understood and explained. Finally, what the nature, purposes, procedures of these organisational structures can be that work in crucial sites to constrain and shape what Cicourel terms ‘cognitive and emotional complexity’.

Characteristic of such a research programme is that no single methodology, however well grounded and finely applied, will be able to match its descriptive, interpretive and explanatory demands. The interdiscursivity of the domains and sites will make a parallel interdiscursive methodology necessary, seeking to connect organisational-structural contexts and their institutional and professional histories with the micro management of their equally characteristic interaction orders.

Such a research programme will require a considerable broadening of traditional research planning in applied linguistics and discourse analysis focused on professional and organisational discourse. Following Candlin (1997), Sarangi & Candlin (2003b) discuss this issue of research programme design, suggesting that it will need to include: textual and semiotic analyses of discursive performances on site; interpretive, ethnographic and grounded studies of professional and organisational practices; accumulated accounts of expertise by ratified members of the communities of practice in question together with first-hand accounts of interpretations of experience by actively involved members. Such performances and accounts will need to be located within particular domains – say, healthcare, law, business and management, social work, organisations and bureaucracies, and within these in specific sites.

Such an approach is represented in Figure 1. In this Venn diagram, to the left side, the analyst’s perspective identifies the motivational
relevancies of the analyst and the practical relevance of the study as emerging from collaborative engagement between the analyst and the participants. Each of the overlapping circles represents a distinctive but mutually implicating analytical perspective, all of which are relevant to the investigation of discursive practices at a particular site. The mutuality of these perspectives is indicated by their convergence at the centre of the circles. The different perspectives foreground descriptive, interpretive and explanatory modes of analysis that may be brought to bear in the investigation, and the overlaps between them highlight the interdiscursive nature of research that seeks to combine these perspectives in the exploration of a particular discursive site. Entry
points to the analysis will vary in relation to particular sites and their relevant focal themes (Roberts & Sarangi 2005) and to the particular research questions that are being addressed, but no perspective is prime. What is central is that all perspectives are necessary and mutually informing.

An extended discussion of the relevance of such a diagram to the multi-perspectived analysis of a particular institution and site is provided in Crichton (2010), illustrating how such a mutuality of perspectives can yield not only a descriptive and interpretive, but also an explanatory account of focal themes relevant to a particular professional domain.

The chapters in this book go some considerable way towards achieving the aspirations of such a programme of multi-perspectived and interdiscursive research with their specific focus on the diversity of discourses of deficit in a range of sites. The chapters display diversity in their choice and combination of analytical perspectives commensurate with their specific orientations to the themes and issues surrounding deficit in their particular domains and sites. As the figure suggests, they present a range of candidate methodologies, principally qualitative, that offer pathways towards Cicourel’s ecological validity in the connections they make between participant-focused micro-interactional analysis and system-focused macro-sociological accounts. These extend over interactional analysis involving discourse and conversation analysis, narratives of experience and accounts of behaviour, the hermeneutic analysis of interpretation, semiotic and textual studies of salient documents, critical and mediated discourse analyses of text and the talk/action relationship, membership categorisation analyses, conceptual framing studies of identity, ethnomethodological accounts of members’ methods, social-psychologically oriented studies of participant role, and social-theoretically based analysis of the institutional, historical and social orders. Characteristic of the chapters, taken together, is an agenda that points towards the interdiscursive methodology enshrined in the diagram.

Such analytical perspectives find their focus and subject matter in the accounting of site- and domain-specific activities and events. They have, however, a wider, and from the perspective of the chapters of the book and its overall theoretical orientation, a more significant implication, one that we indicated earlier, namely that of addressing a range of more pervasive and general focal themes which may be associated with particular domains, but not necessarily and not exclusively so. It is the confluence of these themes and issues with the identification of specific
domains and sites which we identify as an organising principle for the chapters which follow.

5. Discourses of deficit as a conceptual network

The themes we refer to above can be understood as a conceptual network whereby issues surrounding the construct of deficit can inform a research programme for inter- and intra-professional exploration of particular discursive realisations in different sites. Here we outline a range of these themes and the issues they raise for such an agenda. Further, we foreground the issues we see as relevant to each section, but not in any exclusive manner, since they are actually, or can potentially be, represented across other domains represented in the book, and more generally. Equally important for such a research programme, the issues are identified in terms which invite multiple interpretations and points of relevance to researchers and to participants.

I Characterisation

Draws attention to processes by which qualities salient to particular activities and domains are ascribed and portrayed, and the categories that are drawn upon. In doing so, the theme invokes issues raised by the types of characterisation available in the construction and performance of identities, and how these are differentially consequential, situated and managed.

II Responsibility

Evolves issues associated with lines of accountability and questions of liability and obligation; grounds for attributing/withholding credit and blame; ways of estimating and communicating risk, managing boundaries, for example those of expertise; and explores modes of justification and how and for what purposes these are invoked.

III Identity

Foregrounds the relationship between the self and issues of gender, class, age, ethnicity, history, language and culture. Raises issues of ethics and moral behaviours and expectations, bringing to the fore questions of the relationship between the person and the body, of the lifeworld and its relation to social/institutional structures and processes, and of how and why these are constructed at particular sites and
with what consequences. Associated with the theme are the social and institutional sources of the self and how particular identities are jeopardised, constrained, enabled and constructed.

IV Relationships
Brings into view issues of inter-subjectivity and social role, of the place of mutual knowledge and reciprocal interpretation in the management of interaction, what interpretive repertoires/perspectives are drawn upon, what (mis)framings are involved, how knowledge is differentially distributed, constructed and managed between lay/expert, researchers/participants; the risks posed to participants and the place of trust; and the roles available to participants and how these are subject to shifts, negotiation and (dis)enfranchisement.

V Capacity
Invokes issues of measurement and standards against which (in)capacity and (dis)ability are judged. The theme directs attention to the sources of such methods and how they are themselves constructed, implemented and evaluated; how they inform further practices and judgements and for what purposes; what modes of reasoning and argument are drawn upon; whether they are tacit/explicit; how and why they are understood by, and what the consequences may be, for the various participants.

VI Recognition
Foregrounds questions concerning the grounds by which people are judged (not) to be entitled to acknowledgment or consideration. The theme directs attention to the methods by which people are constructed and identified as such; how such judgements are warranted; the social/institutional sources of such warrants and how these are constructed; how and why they may (not) be maintained or disputed; and the consequences for individuals and groups.

VII Agency
Highlights issues of personal, institutional and societal influence and instrumentality, and how these are differentially distributed, enabled, constrained, sourced and constructed. The theme raises questions of the relationship between individuals, interactions, institutions and society, between action and structure, and between micro and macro social phenomena, and how and why these are (not) subject to change.
VIII Membership
Raises questions of the nature of groups, of the purposes and consequences of inclusion and exclusion, and the risks, costs and benefits incurred; of the identities thereby conferred and constructed by membership; the implications for control of self/others, of differential knowledge, expertise and status of members and non-members; and of the methods for deciding, demonstrating, ranking and rescinding membership.

6. Locating discourses of deficit: themes, domains and sites

Enlarging on the potential for such a conceptual network to connect distinctive domains and sites, we provide here a brief account of the chapters of the book. They include studies located in the domains of law, social work, healthcare, management, communication disorder, education, marketing, and institutional appraisal. They all reflect particular engagements with the themes and issues of deficit we foreshadow above. For the most part, the chapters are grouped in pairs. Each group focuses on how deficit can be explicated through engagement with specific issues within a particular domain. Such issues are specified as focal themes within the research at the particular site.

Each chapter provides a synopsis of the researchers’ focus on ‘deficit’ and its discursive realisation within the particular domain/site, contextualised within an account of the relevant literature. Research methodologies and analytic tools employed in the studies are identified, and illustrative examples provided, of analysed practice so as to substantiate the claims made. The chapters conclude with an account of the practical consequences of relevance where these are achieved or foreseen, and an indication of the potential for further research both within the particular domain and site in question, and comparatively with other domains and sites.

Part I CHARACTERISATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LAW

Ch. 1 Constructing Vulnerability: The Experience of Children and Other Groups within Legal Discourse
Michelle Aldridge & June Luchjenbroers

Against a backdrop of recent legislation in the UK to protect vulnerable witnesses within the legal system, Aldridge and Luchjenbroers examine whether there has been a real shift in discourse opportunities or whether
these vulnerable witnesses still present, and are constructed, as deficient within legal discourse. The authors focus on interactions between police and victims in videoed interviews, an option available to vulnerable witnesses and which are later presented in court as their evidence-in-chief. The analysis draws on cognitive linguistics, in the form of conceptual frames, as well as mental spaces theory in order to reveal the conceptual links to unspoken information that underpin participants’ discourse contributions.

Ch. 2 Learning and Unlearning Being Guilty: On the Contingent Ascription of a Deficit Category

Thomas Scheffer

Scheffer uses an extended case study to trace the moments and phases during which the category ‘sex offender’ is fought over by adversary parties. Observed from the point of view of the lawyers for the defence, the case shows how the attribution of the deficitising category is shaped by an ongoing struggle through which participants and attitudes towards the category shift constantly, eventuating in the process of deficitisation expanding beyond the courts to the media and broader community. The chapter provides a contextual explanation for the ‘justice gap’, especially in sex crimes in adversarial jurisdictions. It evidences how rules to protect victims fail due to the determination to dispose of the allegations, and what the personally deficitising consequences can be of adopting far-reaching, moralising and degrading categories.

Part II RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK

Ch. 3 Categorisations of Child ‘in Need’ and Child ‘in Need of Protection’ and Implications for the Formulation of ‘Deficit’ Parenting

Christopher Hall & Stef Slembrouck

Hall and Slembrouck focus on child welfare and concentrate on the work of professionals who provide support to families in their homes, for example professional care workers, health visitors, midwives. Their central issue is the management of the borderline between empowerment and deficit in constructions of families with particular needs, in particular how this border is managed, and when it is crossed, how deficiencies are thematised in the contact with the client. Whilst family support, empowerment, etc. are seen as benevolent, the authors ask at what point do the latent aspects of surveillance become manifest and work
with the family moves from being benign to being constraining. The chapter forms part of a collaborative project in which home-visiting professionals respond to discourse analyses of their own professional practice. Central to the exploration of the topic is the active engagement of the professionals in the notional construction of professional work.

Ch. 4 ‘She is not coping’: Risk Assessment and Claims of Deficit in Social Work

Arthur S. Firkins & Christopher N. Candlin

Firkins and Candlin examine how a discourse of the ‘deficit parent’ pervades risk assessment surrounding child neglect. The chapter presents data from the site of child protection and draws on an approach to discourse analysis grounded in ethnomethodology to analyse social worker accounts of neglect. The chapter argues that the discourse of deficit is consequential to the social workers’ framing of risk. Drawing on the social theory of Ulrich Beck and the cultural theory of Mary Douglas, the authors conclude that deficit serves a wider cultural function of blame and accountability and provides the basis for justifiable state action.

Part III IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HEALTH CARE

Ch. 5 Narrative, Identity and Care: Joint Problematisation in a Study of People Living with Dementia

Jonathan Crichton & Tina Koch

Crichton and Koch’s chapter provides an account of how two researchers from applied linguistics and health collaborated with each other, and with a family and care facility staff, to explore the narrative identity of a person living with dementia. Drawing on the notions of ‘practical relevance’ and ‘joint problematisation’, they trace how the person’s identity is constructed within her support group whilst living in the community and is subsequently reconstructed through the process of becoming a resident in an aged care facility. Their interest is in what accrues to a person’s identity and how it is deficitised in this transition, and how, through a process of ‘re-storying’, the person’s identity can be carried forward from the support group into the care facility.

Ch. 6 ‘We’re just going to be talking about you...’ Identifying Deficits and Achieving Quality in Nurse–Patient Discourse

Sally Candlin
Candlin examines the discourses of nurses and patients in clinical situations, focusing on the inequality of the relationships as reflected in the discursive characteristics of their interactions. She shows how discursive evidence of deficits in the knowledge of participants about each other’s world is a reflection of imbalances of power between them, and how these deficits are influenced by the site of the interaction, the level of education of the nurse, and, above all, the degree of the nurse’s expertise. All of these factors significantly impact on the management of their relationship; asymmetries between the expertise of the nurse and that of the patient being both defining of this relationship and at the same time the source of its potential fragility.

Ch. 7 ‘You don’t want to look like that for the rest of your life’: Contested Discourses of Loss in a Normative Societal Context
Lesley Stirling, Lenore Manderson & Jennifer MacFarlane

Stirling, Manderson and MacFarlane draw on and develop their research with women who have survived breast cancer. They explore how, in addition to the decision-making required in the course of treatment for the disease, women who have undergone body-changing treatment for breast cancer are faced with the task of reconceptualising their identity within a normative medical and societal context. Drawing on narratives elicited through interviews with women who have had breast cancer, this chapter explores how ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ can be understood in relation to the experience of mastectomy.

Part IV RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF MANAGEMENT

Ch. 8 Identity Work in Consultancy Projects: Ambiguity and Distribution of Credit and Blame
Mats Alvesson & Stefan Sveningsson

Alvesson and Sveningsson address identity constructions in the context of consultant–client relations in consultancy work. Their focus is on how consultants and clients manage categories of credit and blame, and how these are used strategically to deficitise each other. Drawing attention to the evaluatory and moral aspects of identity constructions in ambiguous, boundary-spanning work contexts, they explore how consultants and clients alike, in and after a change project, try to
create and maintain positive accounts of their own performance and expertise by engaging in various forms of identity work, in order to maintain and secure a valued self in uncertain and contested working relations.

Ch. 9 On the Discursive Construction of Knowledge Deficits in the ‘Alter’

Peter Kastberg & Marianne Grove Ditlevsen

Kastberg and Ditlevsen conduct an in-depth analysis of one of the prime means of organisational knowledge communication, the corporate in-house magazine, focusing on ways in which a corporation’s management decisions are communicated to its employees. Against the background of corporate knowledge management and communication, their analysis of such an in-house magazine serves as a point of departure for identifying, describing and discussing what ‘qualities’ of knowledge deficits may be constructed in the ‘alter’ (and what ‘alters’ may be constructed) as well as the motives underpinning such discursive constructions.

Part V CAPACITY IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION DISORDER

Ch. 10 The Discursive Construction of Language Disorders

Dana Kovarsky & Irene Walsh

Kovarsky and Walsh’s chapter juxtaposes traditional processes of speech therapy intervention where intervention is premised upon deficit being located within the individual, and where the mediated manner of such interventions in respect of such presumed deficit may act to exacerbate the display of deficit in the client, as against more conversational contexts involving participants outside the therapy room, where deficit is seen more as a product of a particular interaction order. In their view, to more fully and accurately characterise the nature of language disorders and deficits, these must be situated according to the emergent social contexts they help constitute. Such interactional studies leading to more constructivist characterisations of language disorder and deficit can provide the impetus for novel therapeutic discourse practices.
Ch. 11 Public and Private Identity: The Co-construction of Aphasia through Discourse

Elizabeth Armstrong, Alison Ferguson & Lynne Mortensen

The chapter by Armstrong, Ferguson and Mortensen addresses emergent and critical themes in the field of communication disorder, in particular highlighting contentious issues surrounding the manifestation of deficit and the responsibility for its labelling. They raise questions concerning individuals’ awareness of their own (dis)abilities, how conversational partners perceive such abilities, and how the identity of aphasic persons as competent communicators is intimately constrained by the contexts of interaction in which they engage. By comparing how the identity of aphasic persons is constructed, through an exploration of written texts about aphasia drawn from public and professional internet sites, and from comparing such texts with data drawn from interactional contexts involving people with aphasia, and with aphasic and non-aphasic persons, they are able to ‘frame’ aphasia from the perspective of role negotiation in context and the accomplishment of competent identity in contexts of communication difficulty.

Part VI RECOGNITION IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY

Ch. 12 Epistemic Injustice and the Power to Define: Interviewing Cameroonian Primary School Teachers about Language Education

Edith Esch

The focus of Esch’s chapter is how Bourdieu’s construct of symbolic power is instantiated by a historical process whereby local dialects in Cameroon are regarded as inferior to official languages (French and English) as used in the field of education. Drawing on a database of interviews with teachers in Cameroon, informed by a study of official documentation over time, Esch argues that the interactional difficulties observable in these interviews reflect the long-term consequences of the imposition of European languages in colonial and post-colonial education with the concomitant assertion that only these languages were and are able to express knowledge. Such an assumption of deficit in relation to speakers of dialect constitutes in her view a case of epistemic injustice, while at the same time opening up possibilities for educational research into the production of knowledge and for second language
education practices grounded in close sociological and sociolinguistic analysis.

Ch. 13 Absence as Deficit in Assessing Intercultural Capability

Angela Scarino

In the context of the internationalisation of higher education, Scarino examines the deficitisation of students that results from the absence of a discourse which recognises their intercultural capabilities. She argues that this absence is evident across multiple domains, including international education, the disciplines in general and the discipline of assessment on which they draw. Through a critical examination of the assessment literature, and drawing on interview data from a study that sought to develop the assessment of students’ intercultural capability across three disciplines, she shows how a lecturer seeks but is unable to overcome this absence in his own discourse. The absence of such a discourse from the disciplines creates, she argues, a deficit which has the consequence of limiting the educational experience of both overseas and local students studying in higher education, and in doing so of deficitising the disciplines themselves, leaving lecturers caught between these deficits.

VII AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF MARKETING

Ch. 14 Discourses of Deficit and Deficits of Discourse: Computers, Disability and Mediated Action

Rodney Jones

Rather than begin from an assumption of deficit in the context of disability and asking what technology can or cannot do for the disabled, Jones’s chapter suggests an alternative focus on the concrete social actions the disabled take with computers and the social consequences of these actions. He describes a qualitative study of computer-mediated communication and disability undertaken in Hong Kong, drawing on in-depth interviews with, and observation of, informants, as well as transcripts of informants’ on-line interviews with their friends and associates. The framework of mediated discourse analysis he applies to the data explores how an approach focusing not solely on technologies, nor solely on their users, but on examining specific social actions which technologies make possible, can help us understand how technology
affects issues like agency, selfhood and the experience of the body and of the material world.

Ch. 15 Young Peoples’ Binge Drinking Constituted as a Deficit of Individual Self-control in UK Government Alcohol Policy

Chris Hackley, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Christine Griffin, Willm Mistral & Isabelle Szmigin

The conflation of collective and individual responsibility in UK alcohol policy, captured by the contrast between ‘binge drinking’ and ‘promoting a sensible drinking culture’, reflects the contradiction and the associated attribution of deficit the authors explore in this chapter. They suggest that the public discourse imbricated in the UK Government’s policy document *Safe, Sensible Social: The Next Steps in the National Alcohol Strategy* carries a moralistic subtext which produces excessive drinking as a deficit of individual self-control and personal character, while ignoring the possibilities for other rational motives, such as pleasure in drinking. In the way that the document constructs the UK’s alcohol problem, the individual responsibility of the consumer is highlighted as the key to both the problem and the solution, while the influence of UK Government legislation around alcohol licensing and promotion, and the marketing practices of the alcohol industry, are effectively played down.

Part VIII MEMBERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF INSTITUTIONAL APPRAISAL

Ch. 16 Measuring Deficit

Tim McNamara

Drawing on data from the OECD’s PISA tests of first language reading abilities in the OECD member states, McNamara’s chapter identifies testing as a key technology for enforcing discourses of deficit. Such international ‘league tables’ work to highlight real or perceived deficits in educational accomplishment among states and among learners within those states. More generally, the chapter discusses current contestation in language testing theory and practice on the issues surrounding test effects and test consequences, especially in settings of social competition, and explores how social and political conflicts arise necessarily from what Derrida calls ‘the terrifying ambiguity of the shibboleth’.
Introduction

Ch. 17 A Neo-colonial Farce? Discourses of Deficit in Australian Aboriginal Land Claim and Native Title Cases

Michael Walsh

Walsh’s chapter places issues of deficit in the context of engagements of indigenous peoples (here Aboriginal claimants and witnesses in Australia) with the predominantly Anglo-Australian forms and practices of the law. Such deficits arise from encounters which are both linguistically and culturally disjunctive, exacerbated by the complex interdiscursivity of such interactions involving matters of bias, misunderstandings and misinterpretation. The chapter identifies another, related set of encounters of deficit – those involving alleged transgression of professional territory, as lawyers downgrade the competence of experts from the contributing disciplines of linguistics, anthropology, history and social science. Consequent discord among the lawyers, among the experts, and also among the Aboriginal claimants and witnesses, leads many claimants (and experts) to question whether the cost of participation has been worth the occasional rewards.

References


Part I
Characterisation in the Context of Law
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1. Introduction

It is well established that within the legal system there is one mainstream discourse that is controlled by a dominant, authoritative figure (e.g., police officer or lawyer) who determines the form and function of all contributions between him or herself, the layperson and the court. It is similarly well reported that all witnesses new to the legal process are not familiar with the rules of the various legal settings in which they find themselves (in terms of rules of interaction, vocabulary, and so on). In this sense, their discourse skills represent a deficit or a deficiency when they are engaged in police interviews and/or in the court. Recent legislation in England and Wales has been introduced with the purpose of widening access to justice and the legal process for people in general, to enable them to participate within the legal system. However, as an increasing number of participants from different socio-economic backgrounds, and in different kinds of legal cases, take part as witnesses and/or victims, it remains to be established to what extent an increased access to the legal process has improved their ability to negotiate their way to justice.

The introduced legislation has also identified particular groups of people (such as children and disabled people) as ‘vulnerable’ in the workings of the legal process, to the extent that they are disadvantaged by the established process, making justice a sometimes unachievable goal. The changed legislation has thus offered these groups the opportunity to apply for ‘special measures’ to assist them through the legal system. One such option is to have their police interview video-recorded and for this to later be presented in court as that witness’s evidence-in-chief.
Such changes are aimed to shift the ‘deficit-discourse’ inherently part of such dealings with the legal process, and to remind the system that the claimant is (allegedly) a victim. By providing victims with some measure of control over their testimonies, the potential blame attached to them by a legal system that treats them as ‘inadequate’ or deficient in the dominant legal discourse is meant to be either removed or diminished. Despite this laudable objective however, in this chapter we offer a number of examples that illustrate how the antithesis is in many cases, sooner true. These examples are drawn from analyses of police–child witness video interviews, the analyses of which were conducted to measure whether the introduced procedural changes are either successful or sufficient to offer protection to vulnerable, child witnesses in the legal domain. In particular, we have examined whether there has been a real shift in discourse opportunities or whether the testimonies of these vulnerable witnesses still present as deficit within the legal discourse.

The methodology we use comes from cognitive linguistics, particularly in the form of conceptual frame theory (see Fillmore 1982; Minsky 1975) in order to reveal the conceptual links between what is said in a legal proceedings and unspoken information that will be part of both the victim’s as well as the investigator’s discourse contributions. In practice, frames capture for each discourse participant the relation between words and ‘the world’. However our experiences in ‘the world’ are much greater than what can be captured by individual words, and as such words under-represent speaker-meaning (Fauconnier 1985/1994). We therefore rely heavily on context to narrow speaker meaning, but nevertheless much additional, unspoken information ‘comes along for the ride’. Speaker and hearer sensitivity to this associated meaning is of particular interest in this chapter, and a lack thereof can truly mark a discourse participant as having a deficit.

2. Background

It has been well reported that there is a power asymmetry between the professionals within the legal system and the lay-persons presenting as suspects, witnesses and/or victims (Drew 1992; Shuy 1993, 1998; Tiersma 1999). It has been illustrated, at length, that owing to the professionals’ linguistic features such as archaic vocabulary, closed questions, multiple questions and the use of silence (Conley & O’Barr 2005) police officers and/or lawyers can dominate the linguistic interactions and reveal a deficit in the layperson’s discourse abilities.
This deficit in linguistic performance is particularly well-reported within certain populations such as children, disabled people and rape victims (Aldridge & Luchjenbroers 2007; Aldridge & Wood 1998; Brennan 1995; Erhlich 2001; Matoesian 1993; Walker & Warren 1995). Such groups of people often have immature language abilities, especially within the legal setting, and typically struggle to tell their story within the British adversarial system. Historically, according to Goodman (1984: 2) children were viewed as ‘highly suggestible, unable to differentiate fantasy from reality’ and possessing what today we would call very ‘malleable memories’. Indeed, very few cases involving children, disabled people or rape victims have been successfully prosecuted in court. Statistics, for example only 21 per cent of reported cases of rape make it to court (Regan & Kelly 2003) and 5.6 per cent of reported assault cases result in a conviction, confirm the low conviction rate for vulnerable witnesses.

In recognition of these inequalities within the criminal justice system, a number of changes to legislation in England and Wales have been introduced. A significant change (1992) was to introduce the option of video-recording the interview between the police and the child witness; and further, to present this video as his evidence-in-chief in court. Since then, this opportunity and others (known as ‘Special measures’, YJCEA 1999) have been extended to other ‘vulnerable’ groups such as disabled people and rape victims. Over the same time period, police officers have been specifically trained to interview vulnerable witnesses in ways that will give those witnesses the opportunity to provide their best evidence. This includes guidelines on planning and preparation for interview as well as advice on how to build rapport, elicit a free narrative, ask appropriate questions and so forth (see Achieving Best Evidence 2007 for details). It has been assumed that if witnesses were given the opportunity to tell their story in their own words, then the causes for the ‘deficit-discourse’ that is inherently part of the criminal justice system would be reduced and these witness groups would have better access to justice. There is no doubt that these changes have helped vulnerable witnesses and important progress has been made, as the following studies illustrate. For example, Hamlyn et al. (2004) report that 76 per cent of the child witnesses they surveyed were satisfied with special measures; indeed, 44 per cent of these felt that they would not have been able to give evidence without them; and Plotnikoff & Woolfson’s 2004 study also highlighted the importance of the live link opportunity.

We fear, however, that many cases are still failing because a discourse of deficit persists in investigative interviews, and below we review our
recent research which illustrates the various sources of deficit including the inability of police officers to ask appropriate questions from the child's perspective; children's inability to understand what is happening to them; and importantly, children's inability to tell their story because of immature lexical, discourse and narrative skills. We will begin by summarising relevant background concepts and methodologies.

3. The discourse of the investigative interview

A great deal of training is being carried out to advise interviewing police officers on the type of vocabulary they should use and the likely outcome of different question types (see Achieving Best Evidence 2007: section 2). There is no doubt that this focus on sentence structure has improved interviewing techniques and children are now being interviewed much more age-appropriately. For example, rather than asking a series of specific wh-questions such as what, where, how, which can restrict the child's focus and narrative account, the child is now given time to reply to open questions such as please explain/describe/tell me what happened. However, this attention to detail has overlooked the interview as a discourse and it is here we believe that many of the problems occur.

An important key to understanding each other is that discourse participants need to have a sufficiently consistent knowledge of the world, including knowledge of social relationships and interactional dynamics, to be able to perform as they do (Cook 1989: 68). The production and reception of discourse between members of a speech community consistently manages to proceed almost without error: hearers interpret personal, temporal, and spatial deixis, recover the objects of anaphoric mention, and produce responses which demonstrate that they know what's going on in talk. It is generally accepted that discourse participants follow Grice's (1975, 1978) Cooperative Principle – i.e., participants aim to be true, brief, relevant and clear in the delivery of their contributions. This then enables hearers to reliably reconstruct speaker-meaning. Furthermore, speakers need to be sensitive to the kinds of associated information that is captured in our frame-based knowledge of our experiences in the world, for example calling someone 'slender' as opposed to 'skinny' (the former is socially desirable while the latter is not). It is safe to assume that normally the sender intends the receiver to perceive the associated meaning and make the resulting adjustments to any assumptions regarding speaker-meaning, and discourse will continue. If, however, the associated adjustments are not intended, as we
believe is the case in our police interview data, then communication will break down and a ‘deficit in discourse’ occurs.

In recent years, our understanding of the role of frame-based knowledge in discourse production and comprehension has been significantly stimulated by findings in the field of psychology and cognitive linguistics. In brief, frames are conceptual representations of experience that define a situation (in memory), and provide an event structure that enables us to comprehend how the parts fit into a whole; how an event is unfolding; and to predict what will come next (Hoyle & Ribeiro 2003; Ribeiro & Hoyle 2009). For example, when a rape victim ‘corrects’ a lawyer’s characterisation of the type of establishment she had been to on the evening of an alleged crime (e.g. she replaces the lawyer’s lexical choice ‘bar’ with ‘club’ (Drew 1985), she is rejecting more than just the name of an establishment; she is rejecting the entire social scene and conduct associated with a ‘bar’. Similarly, other branches of cognitive linguistic research, such as mental space theory (Fauconnier 1985/1994; Fauconnier & Sweetser 1996) illustrate how linguistic forms under-specify speaker-meaning and that meaning construction involves associations between the lexical component of talk and a listener’s conceptual representations in working memory (Luchjenbroers 2006: 89).

The examples given below show that a discourse of deficit will persist in investigative interviews between an interviewing officer and a child witness as long as there is a gulf in ‘experience’, where experiences provide the contextual fibre of the conceptual frames needed to fully interpret speaker-meaning and message significance. Our interpretation of any utterance is based on our knowledge of the world, which of course changes all the time, and we can anticipate that an adult’s understanding of the ongoing discourse may be very different from a child’s. Consider the following examples:

(1) Mum (M) to her 7-year-old son (S)
   M: That baby is an angel
   S: No, she’s not, she’s alive!

Examples like (1) signal that a complexity of features may be associated with a lexical choice, and that different individuals potentially draw on different features as central to the use of that term. In this case, the child’s understanding of ‘angel’ must comprise the feature [+dead] while the adult’s interpretation will reliably ignore the child’s expected denotation of this lexical item and focus on other ‘heavenly’ attributes.
Similarly, when a mother says ‘my daughter is an angel’, she is not saying that her daughter ‘has wings’ (Lakoff 1987), and no (adult) member of our speech community will assume that she is saying that. Therefore, there will be a range of features potentially drawn upon by speakers, and with experience in a speech community a greater consistency in what features will be required for comprehension may be achieved. The point here, however, is that children cannot be expected to have that level of experience.

The example given in (2) also reveals that access to speaker-intended meaning requires a more fluid understanding of ‘speech community’. In this case, the mother uses ‘wicked’ in its traditional sense of ‘bad’ while the child has a more recent intended sense of ‘wicked’ meaning ‘cool’:

(2) Seven year old son (crying)
S: He’s horrible to me, He won’t let me play on the playstation
M: Oh, I know, he’s wicked!
S: (even more upset): He’s not wicked, he’s horrible!

In both examples, the on-going discourse breaks down as a consequence of a lack of shared perspective of what the speaker means, and we see similar problems in police interviews – consider (3) and (4):

(3) Police (IR) interview with a 12-year-old girl (IE)
IR: You said he was kneeling down and one hand was doing what you described, what was his other hand doing?
IE: I don’t know

(4) Police (IR) interview with a 9-year-old boy (IE)
IR: You said that he rubbed her head
IE: Yeah, going like that on her face
IR: So, he kept doing that with one hand, what was he doing with the other hand?
IE: What?

In both examples (3) and (4), the alleged perpetrators are reported to be touching children – in (3) ‘down below’ and in (4) a young girl’s face. Clearly (3) is sexual while (4) is possibly abusive but not obviously sexual. In this context, however, hearers (note not the child addressees) may generate an assumed answer for the police officer’s question, ‘what was the other hand doing?’, relying on the frame-based associations
they can draw upon, from their world knowledge of masturbation. The police officers’ questioning is therefore developed from an adult perspective of what they expected was happening but the child presumably does not share this knowledge (based on their answers). Hence, the development of these testimonies has proceeded beyond the conscious participation of these witnesses. Another example, comes from an interview with a 14-year-old child witness:

(5) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Did anything else happen to his penis? Did you notice anything different with his penis when he was wanking?
IE: It went up
IR: Then what happened after that?
IE: He just started… and I was screaming and he kept saying don’t or I’ll cut you
IR: Ok, did he put his penis near you?

Examples like (5) reveal a toning down of the speaker’s conveyed meaning. The interviewer misses that penetration has been reported. The interviewer interprets ‘it went up’ as a description of an erection in keeping with his ‘wanking’ frame but the child is describing the activities that took place, namely intercourse. In cases such as this, the child’s testimony is compromised and the child witness lacks the discourse experience to put it right.

In some cases however, the child witness does exhibit a greater awareness of the relevant conceptual frames than the interviewing officer, consider examples (6) and (7):

(6) Police (IR) interview with 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: So you went back to his flat?
IE: No, I didn’t go into his flat

And later:

(7)
IR: When you’ve come off the boat and you’ve gone back to the flat with him
IE: He went to the flat, I stayed on the stairs

The expression ‘back to a flat’ often has the associated expectation of ‘going in for sex’. In contrast, this witness rejects this potential interpretation and is careful to distance herself from an interpretation that is
contrary to the case. Instead she makes it clear that although she walked back with the alleged accused she did not go into his flat; she did not satisfy any expectation of intimacy.

The above examples have considered briefly problems in communication resulting from incompatible conceptual frames or children’s incomplete conceptual frames for the discourse process. However, more recently there has been a growing concern that how the police conduct these interviews is the key to discourse-deficits for vulnerable witnesses. In effect, ‘children’s apparent lack of credibility may have as much to do with the competence of adults to communicate with them as it does with their (in)ability to remember and relate their experiences accurately’ (Saywitz 1995: 115). In the following section we will consider ways in which the interviewing officer has contributed to a deficit in discourse.

4. Problems with interviewing police officers’ language

Current procedure in England and Wales with regard to vulnerable, child witnesses is that when a charge of abuse (whether sexual or physical abuse) is made, an interview is arranged and the interview is then video-recorded. This evidence is ultimately given to the CPS (Crime Prosecution Service) to assess the case, but is also used in court as the witness’s evidence-in-chief. Therefore, the interviewing officer must try to gather information about the case, but also remain conscious that if successful, and accepted as admissible by the CPS, that the video will be presented in court as the child’s evidence-in-chief. It therefore has to withstand the challenges of a cross-examination and ‘prove beyond doubt’ the child’s story to the jury. Thus, while gathering information from the witness, the officer needs to fulfil the requirements of the CPS and also act as the prosecuting lawyer. While, as we’ve seen above, the police are trained to listen and speak with children, our analysis suggests that their performance is somewhat hampered by thinking about the over-hearers (Goffman 1974), namely the CPS prosecutors (who will decide if the case can proceed) as well as the jury who would hear the trial. In our opinion, much of the deficit of discourse occurs because the interviewer is trying to satisfy, when questioning the witness, what expectations the CPS and jury might have, while the witness is ‘simply’ interacting with the interviewer and can be thrown by some of the questioning. To put this into context, let’s consider the requirements of the CPS by looking at ‘truth and lies’.
There is no legal requirement with child witnesses to administer the oath or admonish the child, but since the video may be used as evidence in court, the interviewer must demonstrate that the child is aware of the importance of telling the truth, and Achieving Best Evidence lists various ways in which this is best achieved, along with the warning that ‘if a child shows no proper appreciation of the distinction between truth and lies, then this may seriously jeopardise the evidential value of the interview’ (Achieving Best Evidence 2007: 24). This requirement can lead to exchanges such as the following. A 9-year-old child witness has described that her uncle has touched her ‘lady’ with his hand. The following exchange then occurs:

(8) Police (IR) interview with a 9-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Right, what happened to you, did it really happen?
IE: Yeah
IR: You’re not getting mixed up with something you saw on telly?
IE: No
IR: Or you’re not making up a story, cause you saw something on the telly?
IE: No
IR: You’re not just trying to get X into trouble?
IE: No, I’ve told you what happened!

Such exchanges are, of course, trying to satisfy the police agenda of demonstrating that the witness is aware of telling the truth. The dangers of such exchanges, however, are two-fold. Firstly, on watching the child on video, we can see that she is losing confidence in the interviewer and beginning to think that the interviewer doesn't believe her. This is evident from the fact that her initial chattiness is replaced by one-word answers. Secondly, while trying to demonstrate that the child is a credible witness and is telling the truth, the jury has been offered an alternative account that the child may be copying something she’s seen on telly and may, in fact, be telling stories. This clearly is not a positive message for the prosecution and also presents an exchange that would not have occurred in a written statement, illustrating that the video-record may not always be in the witness’s interest.

Examining further the potential impact on the jury of watching this interview, we need to consider the rape myth. The jury, of course, should be influenced solely by admissible evidence but, inevitably, they enter
the court with their own belief systems and society will have encouraged them to have certain expectations about what a rape victim is and how s/he should behave. As Larcombe notes, society has an old-fashioned conception of the rape victim, which is a decent young married woman providing no advances and no provocation whatever when subjected to what can only be described as a completely unjustified and thoroughly outrageous experience (Larcombe 1994: 133). It is assumed that victims should show reasonable resistance; they need to be seen to do everything in their power to prevent the act from taking place. Were there alternative options? Are her actions representative of social expectations? And it is assumed that you can only really be raped by ‘an armed stranger jumping from the bushes’ (Estrich 1987: 8). The interviewer also needs to challenge the rape myth that victims are often responsible for what happened; such myths are perpetuated by comments such as ‘I am not saying that a girl hitching home late at night should not be protected by law, but she was guilty of a great deal of contributory negligence’ (Judge Bertrand Richards, 1982).

Akin to such assertions as Judge Richards’, there are many instances in the transcripts where the interviewer is trying to illustrate that the witness is ‘the type of person’ who could be raped. As an example, consider the data in (9):

(9) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)

(a) IR: Can you tell me what you were wearing last night? (time of alleged rape)
IE: I was wearing my cream Reebok jumper and my check shirt and my blue jeans and my trainers
(b) IR: Has X ever seen you with your uniform on?
IE: Yeah, once when I went to see my dad
IR: Right, so he’s seen you in your uniform?
IE: Yeah
(c) IR: You haven’t lied and said you were 16?
IE: No X and Y (his fiancé) know I’m 14

In the data samples given in (9), the interviewer focuses on the witness’s appearance to check whether she may have some measure of responsibility for the (alleged) rape. The fact that the officer asks for specific detail regarding the child’s attire (9a) in itself conveys the significance of a child rape victim’s clothing choices. The following
section (9b) is more specifically focused on whether the accused could be mistaken regarding her age, and the final couplet checks whether she may have misled this man into assuming she was older than she is. Furthermore, the victim’s behaviour is also often brought into the frame, as given in (10):

(10) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
   IR: Going back to when you were in the boat. How much of the brandy did you think you had?
   IE: Just half a mouthful
   IR: What about cigarettes? Did you have a cigarette on the boat?
   IE: He gave me one drag on one of his

The police officer’s questions typically check the victim’s conduct, and fortunately, in this case, the child witness was able to convey that she wasn’t inebriated by alcohol or drugs and was, thus, in control of her actions. Nevertheless, questions such as these draw on conceptual frames that capture social bigotries – such as, under-aged girls who use alcohol and smoke cigarettes may be more cavalier with sex. And with this conceptual frame enters the possibility of ‘consent’, despite the legal fact that under-aged children cannot legally consent to sex. In effect, jurors, who would be vulnerable to the power of social myths and social bigotries, can be distracted from the fact that the victim is a child. Whatever pressure police interviewers may be under to squash the potential expectations of the legal process to explore these avenues of investigation, principally jurors need to be reminded that the witness is a child: she’s under 16, she cannot consent, she cannot be responsible for any sexual activity, and thus, what she looked like or how she behaved is irrelevant.

In adult sexual assault cases, there should be no mention of sexual history (Criminal Justice Act 2001). Moreover, sexual history should be irrelevant with child witnesses, as they can not consent to sex before the age of 16; but in trying to prove the witness’s innocence the following type of exchange typically occurs. The 14-year-old child witness details that the accused has ‘fingered’ her and she has performed oral sex on him; the police officer continues:

(11) Police (IR) interview with a 14 year-old girl (IE)
   IR: Have you ever done anything like that with anyone else before?
Here again, fortunately for this child, her replies bring her persona closer to the social myth of what types of women (thus also girls) can be raped – i.e. virgins. However, there is an implication to the over-hearers (i.e. the jury who will listen to this video evidence should it reach court) that the questioner thinks this girl could be sexually active, so could be an active participant. Indeed, the police officer makes the child the agent (‘have you ever done…?’) rather than the patient! The interviewer continues:

(12) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
    IR: Have you ever had sex before?
    IE: No
    IR: Have you ever had any boyfriend fondling you or anything like that down below?
    IE: No

Again, the child is the agent (‘have you ever had sex before?’), the accused is not mentioned. Similarly, by using the term ‘sex’, the interviewer normalises the event (the alleged rape) rather than the action being discussed as some type of attack (see Coates et al. 1994). Of further concern is that the interviewer has changed the child’s word ‘fingered’ to ‘fondled’, which most would interpret as being more consensual and less aggressive. A careless use of vocabulary can be seen throughout the interviewer’s questioning. Consider extract 13:

(13) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
    IR: If he hadn’t have brought the knife out, would you have agreed to do these things with him?
    IE: No
    IR: Have you ever fancied him?
    IE: No, he’s 35
    IR: I have to ask this. Have you ever sort of wanted to have a sort of kiss or a cuddle with him?
    IE: No, I didn’t feel comfortable in the same room with him, the way he used to talk, he’s been in jail you know
The verb ‘agreed’ again conveys consent, as does the fragment ‘do these things with him’. Given that this dialogue will be presented in court to make the case for the prosecution, we might have expected that the accused would have featured much more as the agent. The theme of the child’s active involvement continues; consider (14) and (15):

(14) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Ok, so he’s started to finger you, he’s *asked* you to suck his penis
IE: Nods

(15) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: So you’re in this second part of the cabin now and he’s *asking* you to lick his penis.

We wonder why the verb ‘asked’ is used which implies the child had an option and could have refused. Interestingly, when questioned further, the child tries to repair the potential damage and uses ‘told’ as in (16) and (17):

(16) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Whereabouts was he when you sucked his penis?
IE: He was sitting on the edge of the bed and he was standing up and then he *told* me to get in the bed and he did it all again

(17) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IE: He started licking me and then he started fingering me and he started *telling* me to suck his penis

The poor choice of the interviewer’s vocabulary is not unique to this case. Consider the following data extract (18):

(18) Police interview (IR) with 8-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Can you tell me how it happened?
IE: X came in my bedroom
IR: Em
IE: And he… and he pulled my knickers down
IR: Yeah
IE: And he *pushed* his finger into my mary
IR: Pushed his finger in your mary?
IE: Yeah
IR: Was it dark when this happened?
IE: The bathroom light was on
IR: Ok, could you see X?
IE: Shakes head
IR: You know when you said he put his fingers in your mary, how did it feel?

In summary, the verb ‘pushed’ has become ‘put’, which although not an acceptable act is much less aggressive and dilutes the witness’s account. In questioning the events, we find that the interviewer typically relies on the conceptual frame (escape) of what the jury might expect if they were in a situation they didn’t like and poses these options as a question (19):

(19) Police (IR) interview with a 14-year-old girl (IE)
IR: Did you not think, oh I could leg it from here, Oh, I could do a runner?

Though we might all think that we would run away from a frightening situation, it is well-reported that rape victims often cannot leave the scene for a variety of reasons, yet by posing these escape options the interviewer might be suggesting (to the jury) that the child was staying put through choice, and thus, that what happened was by consent.

Examples such as those given above in this section illustrate the subversive power of the police interviewers’ lexical choices: the deficit that the vulnerable, child witnesses bear is a lack of control over the powerful associations that follow from those choices. However these witnesses suffer another, more profound deficit, and that is an inadequate selection of what facts they choose to convey. For example, the child’s contribution given in (20) reports on the final aspects of her narrative, and shows an (unfortunate) amount of compassion for someone who has attacked her.

(20) IE: I was thinking that walking back but he was shivering and saying he was going to die. By the time we got there I just waited to see, if he’d have fallen I don’t know what I would have done

And the interviewer picks up on this in her concluding remarks (21):

(21) IR: You’ve been very fair with him really considering what you’ve told me
This is not the most helpful summary for the prosecution as it might leave the listener wondering why would she be nice to him? In effect, she may convey a stronger relationship between the two than admitted in her earlier evidence, which contradicts her story and makes her testimony less than entirely credible.

On the basis of examples such as these, we have observed that children often make poor choices in what to report. A more experienced speaker (such as an adult) will edit their outputs to include only the details that are most consistent with their case (as would the prosecuting barrister when questioning adult victims in court). For this reason we have argued that the video-taped interview between the investigating police office and the victim should not be used as that victim's evidence-in-chief in court (Aldridge & Luchjenbroers 2008).

5. Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed a number of ways in which vulnerable witnesses are disadvantaged in the legal procedure: in some instances the deficit is in the content produced by the witnesses and in others it is the product of the lexical choices made by the questioner. While the special measures introduced to protect vulnerable witnesses, such as children, are a change in procedure, they are limited in scope, and we wonder whether in practice there has been a great deal of change. Consistent with this view, Davies et al. (1995) found no difference between the guilty verdicts delivered for cases involving video-taped evidence as opposed to ‘live’ cases. Indeed, at the time of writing, in British courts acquittals have increased and we must wonder whether the introduction of special measures has encouraged the CPS to proceed with cases once thought impossible yet where once in cross-examination the witnesses still do not present as credible. While the changes in the initial interview are to be welcomed, there remains a problem with the dual function of the video interview (Aldridge & Luchjenbroers 2008), since it has both to gather evidence for use in criminal proceedings and act as the prosecution case. These tasks may be incompatible.

Notes

1. For ease, we will refer to witnesses as male and the interviewing police officers as female.
References


Learning and Unlearning Being Guilty: On the Contingent Ascription of a Deficit Category

Thomas Scheffer

1. Introduction

Scientists of natural as well as social science have studied individual deficits in three ways: positivist scholars in psychology, neuroscience or genetics identified factors that correlate with the probability of actually being deviant (e.g. antisocial behaviour, mental disorder); critical scholars in criminology and sociology identified deficit categories as culturally or socially biased and prejudiced (such as low intelligence); and, thirdly, constructivists study the actual discourse of deficit ascription in particular cases and in certain institutional contexts (such as the judiciary or schools). All these approaches presume the outcome of the deficit discourse, which resembles a structural pattern rather than the contingent result of struggles. Scholars underrate contingency because they start with the category already attached to an individual. I claim that we learn a lot about a deficit category and its powers when visiting the places and moments when it is not fixed yet, when parties fight it, when it is still contested.

Such contingency is recognised in folk models on deviance and deficit. People relate to the categorisation process, before it is set once and for all. They differentiate actual guilt from its institutional attribution, deficits from their public display. ‘Don’t get caught!’ is one folk expression of this mundane constructivism. In this respect, labelling theory fits some – not all – intuitions that members have about their fellow members and about themselves: the label or category deeply affects our identity; it owns you. Or more radically: the label is your deficit. It makes various others know who I am in biographical, moral and social terms. This public knowledge will be stronger than personal efforts to
behave otherwise. The category, thus, performs not just a deficit, but as well moral degradation and social exclusion. The categorised person will no longer be a full member of the community. This is why people invest a lot in actually avoiding the label, to get rid of it, to escape its attribution. The label is a real threat.

The concept of labeling brings another aspect to the fore. The categorised person will not just be degraded and excluded; he or she will at one point identify with the category: ‘The person becomes the thing he is described as being’ (Tannenbaum 1938: 20). Tannenbaum’s labelling concept attracted scholars in sociology and psychology, in criminology and discourse analysis. ‘Labelling theory’ became the major field of studying deficit discourse. This approach focused on the discriminating consequences of labelling, while the ascription of the label was black-boxed. Labelling became synonymous for a self-fulfilling prophecy. From a sequential angle, the process of labelling looks different. A label or deficit category starts working much earlier. It produces frictions, fears, and defences already before it is fixed.

In the following, I use the reconstructive case method to trace the moments and phases during which a deficit category, the ‘sex offender’, is fought over by adversary parties. The case shows how the deficit is shaped by the struggles over its attribution. As opposed to ex post explanations, the reader will find herself in the midst of an ongoing labelling struggle. The analysed case of ‘indecent assault’ was dealt with in an English criminal procedure before the Crown Court. It involved the usual oppositions: defence and prosecution, defendant and victim, witnesses for one side or the other. The case is studied from the point of view of the defence casework. During its various moments and phases, e.g. the filing activities, the client–lawyer consultations, the exchange of letters, the telephone conversations, or the lawyers’ negotiations, the attitude towards the label and the outline of the label change drastically. During the late procedural stages, plea bargaining and court hearing, the deficit discourse involved more than the two adversaries; it involved relevant observers such as the presiding judge, but in addition the beat reporter or the local community.

The stepwise case analysis provides us with insights into the changing labelling situations, and the interplay of categorisation (‘being charged with indecent assault’, ‘being a sexist’, ‘being guilty of a sex crime’) and the replies (overall rejection, admission of illegal acts, announcing guilt and perhaps regret). The ongoing, still open labeling process demonstrates the dramatic reorientations not just in terms of the deficit category itself, but in terms of the client’s attitude and expectations.
The one threatened by the label seems to adapt quickly. The reorientations go along with the willingness to utilise basically everything ‘in reach’ against the allegations. The situation resembles increasingly the folk expression: ‘the drowning man will catch at a straw’. This resistance carries implications in another direction. It provides contextual explanations for the ‘justice gap’ especially in sex crimes in adversarial jurisdictions (see Matoesian 1993). Rules to protect victims fail due to the determination to dispose of the allegations and the far-reaching, moralising and degrading label.

2. Learning the case in criminal procedure

Niklas Luhmann wrote his groundbreaking sociological study on legal procedure in 1969. It mixes micro-sociological, sometimes even ethnographic, and system-theoretical insights about juridical, legislative and administrative procedure from a decision-making and communications point of view. How, Luhmann asked, does procedure produce legitimation in a post-traditional environment? How is it possible that everybody accepts procedure to deal with all these existential issues? How is it that the parties are increasingly prepared to give in and to accept the procedure’s outcome? Luhmann’s answer emanates from social psychology. Legitimisation, in Luhmann’s sense, relates to the parties ‘own decision-making’. In order to participate in procedure and to advocate their cases, the parties make decisions along the way and find themselves bound by these decisions. Each contribution pushes the participant closer to acceptance and closer to a realistic view on what she could still hope for or give up on. The procedural course creates some willingness to accept whatever likely outcome along on the way. Habermas summarises Luhmann rightly by stating that disappointed parties ‘cannot refer to an institutionalized consensus but are required to learn’ (1992: 575, my translation).

Could we apply Luhmann’s soft power mechanism to our case of deficit discourse? Do our protagonists get increasingly entangled in their own positions, claims, and accounts ‘against’ the labelling? Luhmann’s procedure makes participants contribute on their own behalf, on the one hand, while on the other moving them to accept even unwelcome decisions as a consequence of these contributions. This acceptance parallels learning, the successive adjustment of expectations to the likely outcomes. Luhmann calls this the ‘hidden theory of procedure’: simply ‘by entanglement in role play, it is possible to capture personality, transform it, and motivate to accept decisions’ (1969: 87, my translation).
Luhmann’s social psychology of legal procedure emphasises duration, involvement and learning. These elements seem helpful to trace and analyse the ongoing labelling process in various deficit discourses, including our indecent assault case. How, I ask in the following case study, do expectations, positions and the deficit label itself develop in one procedural course?

3. Moving from ‘not guilty’ to ‘admissions of guilt’

The case study collects and discusses labelling instances on the basis of various empirical sources: the defence file kept by the solicitor, my own ethnographic field notes, the official documentation, information added by the lawyers. These sources lay the empirical foundation for a ‘trans-sequential analysis’ (Scheffer 2010) that relates various events and processes of case-making in the order of their occurrence. Relevant are all moves by which Tim Blue is provisionally or definitely labelled and all moves by him or his representatives to respond to this labelling. What is more, the incidents are linked to a developmental story on how Tim Blue learns, is taught, does not learn, or unlearns ‘what the case is and could be’ at a particular time. The developmental story will show some early collaboration, replaced by a rather competitive or adversarial attitude. At the ending, Tim Blue will compromise according to the advice of his defence team. He will accept a narrowly defined label. However, he will learn as well that the ‘narrow label’ is rather excessive outside the procedural context.

3.1. First stage: excuses and admissions

Once the solicitor was hired by Tim Blue, the latter had already entered a version of ‘what happened that night in his house’. Tim Blue gave evidence to the police in a suspect interview one day after the victim gave evidence. The ‘alleged aggrieved’ told the police that this ‘father friend’ touched her indecently and would not stop even when she told him to do so. The police officers confronted him with this account. He answered their questions without former legal consultation. The police officer showed already after the first half of their interview how they would like to utilise his responses:

DC So we are quite clear now that on several occasions, she’s told you to go and told you not to do it, hasn’t she?
BLUE YEAH (15.12.)

The police officer forms a conclusion that includes all participants in the interview (‘we are’). The sentence starts modestly (‘quite clear now’),
but extends to rather broad claims (‘on several occasions’; ‘told you to
go’; ‘told you not to do it’). But instead of just concluding this, the
police officer involves the suspect in this operation. The phrase ends up
with a request for confirmation (‘hasn’t she?’) and by doing so, attaches
the conclusion to the suspect. The last exchange – yes/no question plus
affirmation (‘Yeah’) – turns the conclusion into an admission.

Tim Blue’s ‘yeah’ carries vast legal implications. The police can move
the case forward to the Crown Prosecution Service and officially indict
him of indecent assault. Will he be labelled a ‘sex offender’ ‘just’ because
of his own admissions? The detective’s conclusion is in tune with the
law, here with the altered burden of proof in rape cases. In such cases,
it is for the defence to show that the defendant could have been sure
that the other person consented to his or her sexual acts.\(^2\) This criterion
was introduced in order to counteract a standard excuse in rape cases:
‘I thought she wanted it too!’

But the police interview was not yet over. Tim Blue had to face more
questions, more allegations, and more risks of contributing. The police
interview continued and the defendant reacted surprisingly casually to
the accusations. His standard reply was that he ‘can’t remember doing
that’. He answered as if the accusations were themselves minor. Pages 7
and 8 of the interview provide the following passages:

**BLUE**  ... ALL I CAN DO IS REMEMBER JUST CUDDLING UP TO HER
    AND JUST TOUCHING HER BREASTS
**DC**  Is this outside her clothing or inside her pyjamas?
**BLUE**  INSIDE I THINK
**DC**  ... She then says that you undid your trouser zip and your belt?
**BLUE**  NO – I CAN’T REMEMBER DOING THAT
**DC**  And that you then took hold of her left wrist and pulled
    her hand and put it down your trousers and inside your
    underpants and made her touch your erect penis?
**BLUE**  NO – I CAN’T REMEMBER DOING THAT
**DC**  And you then put your hand down her shorts and began to
    touch her vaginal area, do you remember that?
**BLUE**  NO, NO, BUT I CAN’T REMEMBER THAT BIT. I CAN REMEM-
    BER GOING OUT THE DOOR (15.12.)

The first two answers follow the questions agenda. They respond in the
terms laid out by the questions immediately preceding. The interviewee
repeats the words, and by doing so, shows that he provides proper
answers. This collaboration comes to a halt once the accusations become
more serious. Tim Blue no longer complies once the questions move towards *his* trouser zip, etc. But instead of resisting strongly, he only withdraws his support (‘No, I can’t remember doing that’). Still, his attitude seems rather detached: as if he was a witness to the scene, not the accused; as if he filled out a questionnaire to ‘his best knowledge’.

The resulting protocol resembles the ‘binding procedural past’ (Scheffer *et al.* 2010) and a substantial challenge to the defence. All later contributions will be interpreted in light of it. The defence will attempt to undermine the allegations. The protocol also suggests the terms of later negotiations. What can be conceded? In our case: When exactly did he – follow her demand to – stop? These factual questions decide on the extent of technical and moral guilt attributed to Tim Blue. They decide whether he will be sent down as a rapist, a molester, a sex offender. The protocol provides first answers to these questions in a remarkable and strangely ‘distanced’ – even technical – manner. The questions do not indicate the legal relevance (‘consent’) of the enquired issues. Tim Blue’s switch from collaborative (‘inside I think’) to reluctant (‘No – I can’t remember’) answering denotes that he realised the significance (only) in general terms.

3.2. Searching for a way out

The defence file provides excellent material to follow up on the next practical steps. The file serves in part only as a bureaucratic means; at other times it resembles a provisional scrapbook (Kozin 2008) full of ideas, sketches and outlines. It is in here that we find traces of resistance, first attempts actively to work against the labelling. In a series of meetings or telephone talks, the hired solicitor searched for clues or telltale signs that might be of any assistance in undermining the prosecution story. For instance, the following item of gossip served as a candidate for undermining:

Complainant was suffering from a sexually transmitted disease. Client says he would not have risked trying to have sex (...). Complainant was out clubbing between the date of the alleged incident and the date that our client was arrested which of course was about a four week period. (...) He said that he believes she now has a new boyfriend. She has left Crime-town and now lives in Court-village. (16.1.)

The note mentions a series of ‘promising’ points. However, none of the points is directly about the alleged incident at Tim Blue’s home that night when he allegedly entered the guestroom where the family’s
friend had just gone to sleep. These points seem at best crabwise related to the legal issue at hand: the complainant’s alleged sexually transmitted disease at the time of the incident, frivolous behaviour since, or a newly entered relationship. What is more, these ‘slippery’ propositions have no author attached to them. It is all just hearsay, picked up from acquaintances. Here, the label is attacked on a personal level: the victim’s integrity. The deficit category of being a sex offender is far from being accepted. The category is rather fought with everything at hand – and a social alliance encouraged Tim Blue in doing so: his partner, his solicitor, and some family friends.

The solicitor’s casework utilises this dirty data in order to create more stable grounds for a defence case. It attaches further tasks to the claims in order to develop them into something that a legal professional can work with. This casework means hope from the point of view of the client. The solicitor can explain what needs to be done next and what might come out of it. My field notes show lists of such little projects. Each is meant to fight the allegations:

The solicitor dictated a Diary Note for himself: ‘Look into the family history of the complainant.’ (16.1.) In a letter to client: ‘Claire’s mother (mother of client’s partner, TS) may know something of this and I would be grateful if you would contact me to discuss that.’ (19.1.) The solicitor files information entered by the defendant’s partner: ‘She split with her ex-husband and father of her daughter and with the boy-friend after as well.’ (23.1.)

Which presumptions, suspicions, defamations, etc. can be extended into legally permissible statements? The first ideas are discarded for a number of reasons: some are not relevant; others are not supported; even others would damage the defendant’s own case. Some are invested in, even though they are hearsay and as such not permissible in court. Why? Does the lawyer hope to turn them into stronger aggregates? Could they be used in another, rather unofficial, fashion that circumvents the strict rules of evidence? The broad and intense search for undermining ammunition indicates a hard-fought labelling struggle.

3.3. Following one hopeful line of defence

The next stage is reached once the solicitor instructs a barrister who would represent the case in the Crown Court. At this point, a few ‘promising’ ideas left the solicitor’s office in order to provide the barrister with some material to work with. The barrister was asked to
assess the material for its usability. The solicitor entered some of the aforementioned ‘rumours’: e.g. those pertaining to ‘the mother’s changing partners’. I traced this point through the file. The list shows a brief succession of investments into an item’s procedural relevancy. The investments materialise in various media (file note, letter, etc.), social relations (solicitor–client, solicitor–barrister, etc.), and modalities (factual, evaluative, etc.): see Table 1.

The results of these efforts, promising or not, enter into the instructions to Counsel. The solicitor casts the barrister in the authoritative position to decide what claims would deserve further investment (of effort, work hours, legal aid). The barrister, in return, announces that this or that idea is ‘of not great help for trial’. By doing so, he makes the solicitor advise the client what can be expected in due course. The distant and authoritative figure of the barrister seems to help the solicitor to communicate rejection and disappointment to the client. There is, at the moment, not much that counts in favour of the defence. There is not much that stands in between the client and the ‘sex offender’ label.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content on</th>
<th>16.1 in</th>
<th>25.1 in</th>
<th>26.1 in</th>
<th>23.3 in</th>
<th>25.4 in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Dubious family background’</td>
<td>File note on meeting with client &amp; partner</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Check family history; ask his wife Lydia for more information’</td>
<td>Diary note</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Lydia mentioned some irregularities in the…More details?’</td>
<td></td>
<td>Letter to client</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Changing partners of complainant’s mother’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>File note on phone talk with Lydia</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘This information of not great help for trial’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instruction to Counsel</td>
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The barrister displays his selections of useful and useless claims with an eye on the relevant and general Other: the jury. This anticipation is completed by calculations on what would work, and how, on the court stage. This leads to further enquiries, delegated to the client and his partner who are keen to help:

The solicitor asks the client to ask his partner if he has got any recent photographs of HER in her normal dress and if that can be compared to the way that she dresses when attending Court: ‘She will probably dress down for the Court hearing.’ (27.5.)

Barristers call a ‘fishing device’ any enquiry or test that takes place on purely speculative and expectant grounds. The lawyer explores whether something unexpected will happen, some mistakes are made, or some confusion is caused. The excessive use of such devices implies that the defence operates without a case; it simply counts on the general contingencies of case-making such as witnesses unwilling to turn up or jurors unwilling to convict. However, there was a shift in activity rate and tone, once a more concrete item of gossip was put in circulation:

The client’s partner stated that after the allegation was made she had, in fact, been contacted by the alleged aggrieved, as they are close friends and have been for several years, and she indicated that the aggrieved was having second thoughts about the allegation and furthermore she was also, apparently, able to state that the aggrieved was willing to drop the allegation if she were to receive the sum of 1,000 from our client. We may be able to obtain further evidence about the particular aspect of the matter and enquiries are being made in that respect. (1.6.)

This was the first point that received a rather good prognosis by the lawyers. The client could be somehow hopeful again. The solicitor could be somehow encouraging again. The solicitor and barrister agreed on further investments into the case.

Trying everything possible for the case is at the core of the lawyers’ professional ethics. Trying everything possible means to motivate the client to contribute to the case, in order to avoid the yet unthinkable: conviction. It is this detour that pushes aside questions of guilt and moral responsibility in the client–lawyer relationship. Up to this point, an alternative interpretation is in play still: the client is innocent and everybody around him is convinced that he should be acquitted. The deficit category is far and close at the same time.
3.4. Recruiting allies

The defence picks up on another point that the complainant was in a rather ‘good mood’ the morning after and that she did not mention the alleged events, although she would have had the chance to. The client revealed this point first to his solicitor. Tim Blue was able to name individuals who would confirm this, a fact which in turn made the point interesting to the solicitor. The solicitor invited the two informants and noted down their statements. His conclusion for the record does not sound very cheering:

> Both cannot believe the allegations. They will give evidence about the morning after the alleged incident. Warning of making false statement on oath. (15.7.)

Concurrently, the solicitor updated the barrister and asked for his opinion. A number of acts are necessary to move the statements closer to the court stage, to render them legally relevant:

> On the 23rd of July, a diary note reminds the solicitor, to draft the two witness statements. In a letter to client six days later, the solicitor ensures, that ‘the witness statements are readily drafted’. One the same day, he is sending the typed versions to the ‘two witnesses’. On the 3rd of August, one informant writes back: ‘I do not agree with anything in it’

Eight days later, the Hearing was meant to take place. The Hearing was adjourned from 12 August to 19 August.

> Two weeks after the one witness asks for changes in the written version, the solicitor dictates in a file note what he just completed: ‘Preparing amendments to statements.’ (17.8.) The same day, he writes to the two informants: ‘Please sign and date the typed version.’ In a file note, the solicitor adds: ‘On the next conference, we will decide who of the two should attend court.’ (17.8.) The conference will take place the day after.

These activities try to elevate second-hand and second-class information into proper witness testimonies. At this point, the sex offender label moved further away. It seems no more than an adversarial position to fight against. There is no mention of the possibility of conviction, no ‘what if’ talk that would prepare the client for the worst. This is reflected
in the general unwillingness to consider a guilty plea. The lawyers seem
to calculate that this is avoidable. But there is another possible interpre-
tation: the lawyers exclude this issue until they have tried everything.
‘Trying everything’ demands that the client is willing and motivated
to provide them with ideas, gossip, contacts, etc. After all, these inputs
provide the basis for their casework.

3.5. The defence vis-à-vis the prosecution
Until now, the defence operated on the procedural backstage. No idea
or claim was communicated to the adversary. No official declaration
was made that informed the prosecution about what to expect from
the defence. Claims were still reversible, due to their internal character.
However, in order to render them effective, the defence had to choose
the most promising claims to represent their case in the procedural
open: vis-à-vis the adversary, the court, the public.

At this stage, the defence starts openly discussing the question of guilt
and the extent of guilt. Here, guilt is the measure of the case’s relative
strength and the prospects of outplaying the adversary’s claims. Guilt
communicates a gamble of how much of the initial allegations the pros-
ecution would throw in the balance scale before a jury. The stronger the
defence case, the more reduced the actual indictment and the threaten-
ing conviction. Although communicated as a rather technical measure,
the possibility of receiving the label of ‘being guilty of a sex offence’
moves closer. It is now in the picture in tactical terms.

The approaching deadline for the ‘statement of defence’, which offi-
cially informs the prosecution and the court about the scope and issues
of the defence case, triggered extra work in the law firm. The team
considered which claims should be disclosed and how. The ‘sexual trans-
mitted disease’, for instance, threatened to arouse compassion with the
‘victim’. The barrister commented on another item in a similar fashion:

She split up with her boy-friend. The risk of raising this is that a
jury may think that our client took advantage of a vulnerable young
woman. (26.7.)

The barrister selected other claims for the defence statement instead. For
instance, the ‘1,000 Pound’ rumour made it into the statement. By way
of disclosure, this claim was moved closer to the court stage.

The urge to put together the defence statement replaced purpose-
led optimism by realist assessments. The lawyers advised the client to
proceed without expecting overall acquittal. At this stage, Luhmann’s
procedural mechanism is revealed in some clarity. The client is asked to adjust his expectations. The team starts discussions on unavoidable concessions. One letter from the solicitor to the barrister may serve as an illustration:

Our client’s interview with the police does contain some admissions of kissing and touching. Our client does state that there was a point when complainant resisted his advances and yet those advances continued. He, of course, denies all other allegations made by the complainant. […] At the moment then we do not think our client can plead guilty, as he does not accept all of the allegations that have been made. Counsel may feel that given the admissions made by our client in interview, the appropriate course of action would be to discuss the matter with Crown Counsel to see if perhaps a basis of guilty plea could be agreed. (18.7.)

For the first time in the procedure, the defence does consider a guilty plea. The ‘basis of guilty plea’ is presented as a matter of negotiation: ‘to discuss the matter with Crown Counsel’. Interestingly, the main reason for this moderate approach is not new. The solicitor refers back to the ‘admissions of kissing and touching’ right from the start. These admissions were known all along, but they were put aside in order to search for new facts. Here, the solicitor takes the role of a mediator. He avoids misrepresenting the resistant client (‘we do not think our client can plead guilty’), while at the same time allowing the barrister to enter negotiations in the opposite direction (‘Counsel may feel that…’). This dual character represents the procedural state at that particular time. The case was in a tight squeeze between the client’s current stance (‘He, of course, denies…’) and his former contributions (‘given the admissions made’). Labelling obtains a (procedural) history.

The next morning, a new rumour gives way to new hopes. The solicitor files the following exchange after a conference with Counsel:

Client’s partner: The complainant told her that she did not want to get the defendant in any trouble in this matter. She would not go to Court. Client: What happened if she drops charges? Counsel: Crown will have to drop charges as well. A plea of not guilty is the best option. (19.7.)

The rumour encourages the defence to play hard – and to exclude a confession from its agenda (for now). The defence statement formulates a
clear counter-position. On the one hand this provides the barrister with an advantageous bargaining position; on the other hand the document reserves the option to fully benefit from a complainant's drawback. The resulting defence position is ambitious in light of initial admissions made to the police:

The Defendant put his arm around the Complainant and began to kiss her. The Defendant admits that there was contact between the Complainant and himself at this time and the Complainant was not resisting the Defendant's advances at this time. The Complainant was clearly giving her implied consent to this. When the Complainant indicated that she no longer consented to this, the Defendant stopped immediately and he left the Complainant's bedroom. . . . (26.7.)

3.6. Negotiating the deficit label

At the late stages, the deficit attribution is negotiated at various sites in various constellations. The representative triangle of client, solicitor and barrister requires close consultations before the two in-court lawyers meet to consider the final exit before jury trial: plea bargaining. A series of filed positions reflects the internal trade-off:

Client admits to touching her breasts. Counsel then advises a guilty plea, but on a basis of plea, that only the touching of breasts took place. (19.10.)

Counsel has advised guilty plea is the right thing on a certain basis. Admission re: touch breast. Hope she [the complainant, TS] does not turn up next week. If does, then offer plea ltd basis. (20.10.)

The client accepts that in law he is guilty technically and obviously we want to get that on the best possible basis. Counsel has informed client that he will not go on the sex offenders register due to the victim's age and the fact that it was a relatively minor incident. (24.10.)

From one file entry to the next, the client is moved, and moves closer to accepting the attribution of a deficit category including guilt and punishment. Bit by bit, the client seems adjusted to what is technically demanded and procedurally feasible. But this adjustment does not take place without some conditions here and some trickery there. The client can still hope for an acquittal because the main prosecution witness might not turn up; he is assured of a minor sentence below the 'sex
offenders register’. Both excessive hope and minimized risk turn the admission of guilt into just another step, meaning into nothing definitive at that very point of consultation. An illusionary backdoor and professional assurance eases the client’s learning: ‘After all, I am guilty of something!’

The defence file does not document the process of plea-bargaining immediately before trial. There is no material on this, no file note. The actual plea-bargaining is black boxed; the barristers will only report the deal itself to the judge. The judge determines the sentence on ‘the reduced basis’. The judge will request a ‘pre-sentence report’ and deliberate in favour of a suspended sentence, combined with a kind of gender sensitivity training. In this way, the mass of incomplete, partially complete, and complete statements from the casework ends in a concise ‘guilty on the basis of page 5’ (of the police protocol of the suspect interview). These ‘reloaded’ admissions read as follows:

DC Right so you’ve been kissing with her and she’s told you to go and you’ve carried on kissing with her, was that with consent or without?
BLUE WITHOUT I SHOULD THINK – ALL I CAN DO IS REMEMBER JUST CUDDLING UP TO HER AND JUST TOUCHING HER BREASTS
DC Is this outside her clothing or inside her pyjamas?
BLUE INSIDE I THINK
DC And what was she saying while you were doing this?
BLUE SHE JUST SAID YOU HAD BETTER GO. (15.12.)

The two barristers present their agreement in open court. The following exchange took place shortly before the definite plea. The plea was initiated in the usual ritualistic manner; however, the defence barrister had to intervene in order to enforce the bargaining result:

The Clerk: Tim Blue, you are charged on this indictment with indecent assault. The particulars of the offence being that on the 15th day of November 2000 you indecently assaulted Kim Baker, a female person. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?
Defendant: Guilty.
The Clerk: Guilty, thank you. Can you sit down?
Mr Crown: Yes, your honour my learned friend’s made it plain to me that that plea is entered on a basis of the defendant’s interview, it’s really page 5 of the interview.
Judge Right: Yes, let me just have a look at that.
Mr Crown: At 24.08 just above that time where the defendant agrees that he cuddled up to the complainant and touched her breasts inside her clothing when she was saying ‘You had better go.’ That encapsulates the conduct.

Judge Right: The basis —.
Mr Crown: — the conduct.
Judge Right: — of the plea.
Mr Crown: Yes. (19.8.)

The exchange between judge and defence foreshadows some problems that come up when applying the bargain of guilt and truth. The bargaining result is apparently not easy to communicate and to delimit. We will see that truth and guilt will spread with effects beyond the locally constructed deficit. The agreed upon version on ‘what happened’ and ‘what he did’ is going to change its meaning once it is released from the court.

3.7. Epilogue

Two weeks after the legally effective admission of guilt, the parties meet again to attend the sentencing hearing. Now it is the judge who recounts the limitations of the guilty plea:

‘The plea has been accepted by the Crown on a specific basis which of course, I have to accept but I have to say that had the original complaints been substantiated which, of course, were much more serious, I would have had no alternative but to pass an immediate prison sentence on you which I’m proposing now to pass. As I say, I must be faithful to the basis of plea that you have admitted and whilst that was obviously a very unpleasant experience for the woman concerned, it doesn’t seem to me to be in the public interest to call for an immediate custodial sentence.’ (6.9.)

In the sentence hearing the complainant’s allegations recur. The judge renders them absent and present at the same time: absent from the technical plea (‘specific basis’), but present at the heart of the matter (‘the original complaints’). The absent/present ambiguity derives from procedural rules (delimiting the judge’s authority) and the parties’ last-minute manoeuvre (their bargain of truth and guilt). The (absent) original version still echoes in the judge’s sentence speech. This echo appears even stronger in the public’s reception of the case. The following article was published in the local newspaper two days after Tim Blue’s sentencing:
Tim Blue, 52, who had worked for the past 23 years at Madison Sports Club, ‘misread the signals’ from a 26-year-old woman. One night after the woman had gone to bed, Blue appeared at her bedside carrying drinks, said prosecutor Mr Crown. Blue began talking to her and then touched her breasts over her clothing and inside, Mr Crown added. ‘He kissed her, telling her to relax and enjoy it. Afterwards, he said he was sorry.’ Blue told police he had been ‘totally stupid’. (6.9.)

This newspaper article was not the end of it all from the defendant’s perspective. His employer used the bad press to entertain the possibility of firing Tim Blue at no notice on grounds that he had ‘become a liability’. At this point, the ‘sex offender’ label had moved outside the legal realm, causing further consequences. It did not remain within the fine-tuned system of categories as cultivated in the Crown Court context. It travelled to other users that applied their own imaginaries and moral conclusions to it.

The punishment of ‘sex crime’, however harsh or mild, seems difficult to control under conditions of public naming and shaming. In other words, there is no legal monopoly on punishment. Standards such as the ‘sex offenders register’ or the sentencing guidelines hold limited sway. The judge’s verdict can appear the opening not the closing message in a rather communal sentencing process. Here, the court serves as a deficit-ascribing agency (‘sexist attitude’) that exposes the deficit-bearer to a concerted mechanism of retribution. This exposure turns the ‘sex offender’ labelling into an incalculable chain reaction.

4. Conclusion

Labelling shows clear signs of an existential struggle. The protagonists utilise ‘everything’ to escape the threatening categorisation. This urge to avoid the worst has far-reaching consequences for the case-making itself. One can estimate that especially in those crimes with the worst social reputation, such as sex crimes, the participants will invest not just a lot in terms of time and money, but as well in terms of pushing the limits of procedural conventions, material rules, and fair play. At least this is what happened in the case of Tim Blue. All this we could observe already in the meaning of ‘sexual assault’ in relation to an offence, a label that does not symbolise the severe outcome of what counts as sex crime.

With an emphasis on the processual nature of the deficit discourse, the case of Time Blue demonstrated another surprising twist. The procedure, at first, moved the defendant and his party into a radical
denial of what happened. During the first half of the casework, the client and his representatives would be solely antagonistic. Tim Blue set aside his initial admissions. For some time, he did not communicate guilt or responsibility and, what is more startling, nobody asked him to do so.

This radicalisation at the start contradicts Luhmann’s procedural calculus of involvement and learning. The defendant is not made to learn by involvement; the defendant is involved by allowing him to unlearn. The unlearning provided the defence with a fresh start and with an overly motivated and supportive client. The client would supply ideas, accounts and supporters – and the defence would collect all this as if no former admissions had been entered. The restart feeds the defence with novel material against the prosecution case and its main witness.

Learning, in Luhmann’s sense, starts much later. The defendant starts adjusting expectations – and is invited to do so – once the relative strength of the competing defence and prosecution cases becomes clear. This hesitation prevents the defence from injudicious waiver or hasty compromise. A presumption of innocence applies as long as new ideas and information appear on the screen of casework, as long as there is still something to do against the allegations. The defence adopts an attitude of radical opposition until time runs out, until supported and solid results must be delivered to the wider procedural audience. Radical opposition is furnished by the adversarial ethics of competition: do everything that is in your client’s interest! These ethics invite casework at the margins of procedural justice and fairness: handling inadmissible evidence, encouraging and discouraging witnesses, threatening the opponent with ‘personal information’, etc.

The adjustment of expectations or learning is not the anticlimax of the procedural power game, but its manifestation. The parties employ a series of assessments to calculate the relative strength of their claims and positions. These assessments account for potential advantages and disadvantages of anticipated demonstrations in open court. They include various interim-products of case-making: promising ideas, motivated witnesses, discrediting gossip, sticky admissions, etc. The parties operationalise their assessments and negotiations with the help of authoritative inscriptions such as the police protocol. Here, the scope and attribution of the deficit is grounded and anchored in the facts of the case.

Our temporal view on the deficit discourse teaches a central lesson. At the core, this discourse is not a game with categories and definitions, but a series of exchanges of more or less powerful positions or moves. In order to understand how participants act upon this discourse, we
need to grasp its logics and, more so, the currency and values it involves. In this light, the labelling process is a hard-fought struggle with an open outcome. As for the sex crime field in particular, one extra conclusion seems reasonable. This field and the deficit categories it involves are not in their entirety structured by legal definitions or procedural pragmatics. We found a strong extralegal component that suggests other properties of the deficit discourse including mundane imaginaries, morals and categories. Radical opposition, dirty methods and unlearning may as well dwell within this extended, rather incalculable discursive terrain.

Notes

1. I collected all data during ethnographic fieldwork in a small law firm and barristers’ chambers. I visited and accompanied various English defence lawyers and barristers over more than a year. See Scheffer (2010).
2. The pronoun game is problematic here. By choosing a male and a female pronoun I easily neglect the distressing reality of male sexual violence. If I chose just the male form I would perform the stereotype of women being victims by definition. Either way, gender categories are closely entangled with the ‘sex offender’ label.
3. The following excerpt is taken from an authorised court protocol, which in turn is based on an official tape-recording by the court service.

References

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Part II

Responsibility in the Context of Social Work
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3
Categorisations of Child ‘in Need’ and Child ‘in Need of Protection’ and Implications for the Formulation of ‘Deficit’ Parenting

Christopher Hall & Stef Slembrouck

1. Introduction

When children in the UK are referred to child welfare services, social workers are faced with the task of assessing risks and needs and establishing how the case should be managed. Typically there are several categories of disposal (Parton et al. 1997). First, in the majority of cases no concerns are identified and the case is closed. Second the child is identified as having particular needs which should be addressed, identified as a ‘child in need’, and services are provided without formal action. Third, where serious risks to children are identified, it becomes a case of ‘child protection’ and a formal surveillance process is instituted. In the most extreme circumstances, the child is removed from the family and ‘looked after’ (i.e. placed in care) on a temporary or permanent basis. These different constructions of cases are not only used by social workers and managers as part of their everyday explanations; the labels which are applied also set up different trajectories for institutional intervention, (re)assessment and review.

2. Deficit parenting

Whilst many factors contribute to such assessment and decision-making processes, conceptions of ‘deficit parenting’ are key dimensions. However, notions of ‘deficit parenting’ cannot be located in a single property; instead the assessment of the case draws on deficit reasoning which permeates the application of the categories of child welfare work. For example, the template entitled ‘Initial Child Protection Conference
Report’ (DCSF 2003), required by government guidance in England, structures and summarises the evidence which is presented to a child protection conference. The social worker is required to present information on 22 dimensions, concerning the child’s health and development, parents/carers’ attributes and family and environment factors. In each dimension of ‘child development’ the social worker is asked how far the parent has the capacity ‘to ensure the child’s safety, and to promote the child’s health and development’. In the section on ‘parents/carers attributes’, the social worker is asked to write about the parents/carers’ ‘strengths as well as any difficulties’. However the list of topics contains only deficits, for example: ‘illness’, ‘disabilities’, ‘period in care during childhood’, ‘experience of being abused’, etc. The social worker is then orientated to a wide range of notions of parental deficit as a central aspect of child protection work.

Interestingly, ‘deficit’ is often unproblematically named when it concerns a medical or physical condition (e.g. ‘Attention Deficit Disorder’), but in areas where aspects of socialisation are concerned (e.g. the literature on home socialisation of minority students in relation to educational achievement), it is a much more contested and politicised concept. Discourses within the field move, often uneasily, between accepting ‘realities’ (e.g. the deficits are there and they cannot be ignored) and ‘alternative explanations’ which minimise personal responsibility either by rendering the deficit as circumstantial or by rearticulating the noted insufficiencies as ‘difference which is ill-understood’. In social work, concepts of deficit parenting will be mostly implied in categorical distinctions. For example, in the template for the Initial Child Protection Conference, the word ‘deficit’ does not appear.

The complexity of social workers’ depictions of deficit parenting can be contrasted with wider debates about ‘parenting deficit’. Etzioni (1993), for example, locates the problems of society in the overall changes in family relations, in particular the retreat of parents from day-to-day care of their children. More mothers are working and, without an increase in fathers’ care, parenting is delegated to a range of informal and poorly trained substitutes. He is concerned about the absence of parents rather than any deficient practices towards their children, although he does see such trends as neglect and children ‘bereft of dedicated parenting’ (1993: 16). In contrast, a concept of ‘good enough parenting’ has been developed by doctors/psychologists which sees most parents as providing ‘good enough’ care to meet their child’s needs, their physical care and nutrition and protection, as well as their emotional needs: love, care, control/consistent limit setting, facilitating
development (Hoghughi and Speight 1998: 294). Here ‘defective parent- ing’ is located in the absence of such qualities and capabilities, resulting in poor personal development of the child, in delinquent and aggres- sive behaviour or poor educational and social development. Looked at from a societal perspective, Dominelli et al. (2005: 1126) note that the state ‘investigates the actions of failed parents and sculpts a highly intrusive and regulatory regime that re-affirms society’s notions of a “good” parent while punishing “failed” ones’.

In this chapter, we examine how social workers draw on a range of popular and expert formulations of deficit parenting to manage cases: how the different categories are assessed, what forms of explanation and justification are used and how cases sometimes move between different categorisations. In particular we will consider how the characterisations of the parents are used to justify action. Thus, the identification of aspects of ‘deficit parenting’ will be understood as a contingent property of person, situation and circumstance. It is subject to, and implicated in, complex forms of categorisation, the establishment of which needs to be understood in interactional terms, as happening in the course of ongoing professional and inter-professional work. In this respect, our suggested data focus on moments of institutional transition (‘when the case is passed on’) is rather deliberate, as these concern interactional moments where established properties are available to be questioned and examined in the light of a changed situation. First we offer a background discussion of the context of child protection work.

3. Background: child welfare work between rescue and support

Social workers are charged with the responsibility of attending to the health and well-being of the child whilst simultaneously supporting the maintenance of the family unit. Merrick (2006: 2) describes ‘the tension between a legislative duty to intervene into “the family” where there is believed to be a risk of “significant harm” to the child, and also the duty to promote “the family” as the best place to look after children’. This is conceptualised as a distinction between ideologies of child rescue and family maintenance (Fox Harding 1996). Is the orientation of the intervention towards removing the child from the family (on a temporary or permanent basis) or to support the family to provide adequate (‘good enough’) care so the child can remain in the family? Both versions of policy and practice operate in each moment of the work. The tensions that follow from this are central to policy and practice, with many of
the dilemmas of front-line decision-making located in the assessment of children and parents in terms of such questions, as social workers weigh up and implement such options. If the plan is to support the family, then a range of social, psychological, educational or financial supports might be provided. At the other extreme, if the plan is to remove the child, a range of assessments and legal processes are mobilised to establish the case for removal with provisions of alternative care. However, few cases are clearly one or the other, and most of the work involves moving between interventions with elements of rescue and support. The balance between family support and child rescue has dominated policy discussions for many years (Munro & Calder 2005; Parton 2006).

4. Categorisation

At issue in any consideration of social work decision-making is categorisation (Parton et al. 1997; Hall et al. 2006): how social workers decide (and account for) a case to be considered as being of one type or another, and the consequences of such decisions. Whilst categorisation can be considered in terms of individual, interactional and institutional features (Jenkins 2000), it is the link between the interactional and institutional that is considered here: how can a set of circumstantial and personal attributes be considered to constitute a case of a ‘child in need’, ‘child protection’ or ‘looked after child’ (i.e. child in care)? In addition to being subject to policy/institutional responses of support, surveillance or rescue, categorisation is an interactional matter. Social workers on an everyday basis are required to make defensible decisions concerning actual situations in regard of the families with whom they are working. The everyday operation of such categories is clearly influenced by policy and media debates. Mäkitalo (2003: 498) notes the situational as well as wider sociocultural aspects of the categories used by professionals, informed as they will also be by prevailing professional and educational ideologies: ‘Categories have been generated historically and dialogically in order for institutions to be able to handle or get a grip on the “social dilemma” that they are responsible for.’

Early research on categorisation in social work includes Dingwall & Murray (1983), Hyden (1999) and May & Buck (1999: 150). Much of this work viewed categories as formulations, which facilitate routine processes, often to ration resources (Howe 1996: 92). Others (Hall et al. 2006; Mäkitalo 2003) however have treated categorisation as a complex activity, essential to professional talk and interaction. It involves the ongoing manipulation and contention of categories, sub-categories and
their incumbent attributes, and the relative weighing of crucially distinguishing features. The concern with categorisation extends beyond its intervention-enabling effects into the need for professionals to render their practices accountable: not just *this is a child protection case and therefore we will...*, but also *this is a child protection case because...* This orientation to justification and professional accountability invites a complementary analytical focus on the implications of the deployment of categories for all parties involved.

Two studies of professional categorisation are of particular interest. Griffiths’s (2001) analysis of Mental Health Team meetings underlines the tacit and accumulative nature of professional categorisation work. Aiming to limit the number of cases accepted by the team, the categorisations as ‘serious mental illness’ by referrers are challenged by the production of alternative, non-pathological formulations of the case. There is little direct identification of categories; instead references to histories, attributes and behaviours of clients are interwoven into implicit alternative categorisations – ‘a person experiencing life problems but not serious mental illness’.

The second study by Parton et al. (1997) looks at case files in child protection procedures and how social workers report on the progress of incoming referrals. Child protection social workers write about wider aspects of the child and family, rather than child abuse: ‘Given that child abuse does not necessarily require signs or symptoms, and given that very few reported cases present with actual harms and injuries, child protection workers do the only thing available to them – they assess the “snapshot” of the child and his or her relevant family to decide if the child is safe’ (1997: 83). Particular emphasis is on the assessment of the moral character of the parents, particularly the mother: ‘A negative maternal identity constitutes a risk factor in the child protection discourse and as such reinforces a moral which upholds a particular categorization of positive maternal behaviour – one which includes the features described in the files: availability (solely by and for the child(ren)), nurturing and insight’ (1997: 215).

In this chapter, we focus on case-specific formulations towards categorisation, drawing on interviews with social workers. Case illustrations of this kind tend to take a narrative orientation describing how the social worker became involved in the case, how the work progressed and the current situation (Hall 1997; Hall et al. 1997, 2006). Central to the narrative structure is the articulation of a categorisation of the case usually near the beginning of the narrative, often encouraged in this by the interviewer, and setting the scene for the events of the story.
5. Data

The data in this chapter are drawn from recent policy studies in which social workers were interviewed about their experiences with new technology in assessment. Our analytical mainstay is with the longer-term developments of cases through child protection processes. The social workers have been involved with the cases for several months, and we analyse in particular those occasions when they talk about the case changing institutional categories.

Case 1 From child in need to child protection
The first interview concerns a case which changed from a long-standing child in need orientation to a child protection one and then back again.

Extract 1.1

I: Ok and what are the general sorts of themes of your work? Are there any particular sorts of things that sort of summarise the sort of nature of the work you do?

R: Well I guess it sort of goes in two branches. I mean you are going to be involved under a child in need sort of context or a child protection context and because really we don't really deal with looked after children as there is a separate team that does that. So child in need is really vast I mean that can cover anything from parental illness, poverty, mental health problems, domestic violence but that would certainly need child protection, problems with housing that is hugely problematic, education problems where it doesn't quite reach the criteria of an educational welfare officer to become involved and I would say that is probably or certainly usually at least an element about poverty that is involved because primarily our function is to ensure that the children are achieving the five outcomes and poverty seems to be one that is really coming up very often.

At the beginning of the interview, the social worker describes his cases as two types – ‘child in need’ and ‘child protection’. His depiction of the range of the category ‘child in need’ as ‘vast’ is followed by a list of social problems that may come under its heading. In contrast to commentators who see social work as unconcerned with social structural problems (Dowling 1999), here the social worker characterises his work as concerned with big issues. However, there is an interesting distinction
which identifies domestic violence as a feature of this vast group of disadvantage and as an indicator of child protection: the ‘child in need’ part of social work could include many children but part of the categorical work of the social worker is likely to include domestic violence as an attribute of ‘child protection’. This becomes important as the social worker describes the case further.

**Extract 1.2**

Social Worker: Ok yeah, if I go for a child protection because I have got a fairly good example in that so I will start with that (ok). There was a Somali family, which initially came to me as child in need but quite promptly became child protection because it had come from another team because of some restructuring that had happened. And it was being worked as a child in need initially but there were a lot of historical concerns just developed: school attendance and parent engagement and huge, huge overcrowding problems I mean there are ten people in a two-bedroom flat in this case.

Interviewer: Had it been worked with for long?

Social Worker: The case had been known to us for at least nine years.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness

Social Worker: Yeah I think it had been closed for part of that duration but it was reopened a number of times. Just lots of things that were really compounding problems really. I mean obviously there was the issue of the housing that was or still is a huge problem

[...] SW describes the family’s use of drugs from Africa, which whilst not illegal seemed to cause the parents to be very sleepy [...]  

Interviewer: Sorry there are ten people that is eight children is it or there?

Social Worker: Eight children and the two parents. But we were sort of increasingly finding that school had a lot of concerns about the emotional and behavioural presentation of these children and there was as time was going on the parents were really struggling with the fact that they had so many children in such a small space. And I think that was part of a catalytic process you know the parents were becoming increasingly frustrated with each other and then there were two incidents of domestic violence, which led to us moving into the child protection forum. Because one happened, they actually happened in two successive weeks, two consecutive weeks and it was just if we would try to respond to it initially and we tried to sort of have a long discussion with both parents and try
to encourage them to think of ways that they could resolve this issue and then having to tell them that this is likely to lead to us moving into child protection action because this is very serious. And we just felt by the second incident within such a short period of time that we really had to move into child protection with that.

The social worker selects a case which involves a large family with problems concerning housing, school and parental engagement, again identifying social structural and personal matters. The case had been known to the agency for a surprisingly long time, ‘nine years’, but as a ‘child in need’ case in another social work team. However, following changes in the structure of the department’s social work teams, the case was allocated to this worker. The move to child protection status is described using an argument based on increase – school had more concerns, parents were struggling more with so many children, there was more parental disharmony, which culminated in two incidents of domestic violence. The term ‘as time was going on’ suggests the inevitability of having too many children leading to parental disharmony. It is described as a ‘catalytic process’. The response is heard also as staged: first ‘talk to them’, then a child protection response is required. The first incident of domestic violence is suggested as possibly resolved by discussion, the second makes child protection required.

In the next extract we see that the move to child protection was not inevitable. As there were so many children involved, there were two social workers together on the case:

**Extract 1.3**

Social Worker: We both had different points of view at that time and my co-worker had more experience than I did and feels that you know that there might be ways and means for you know for example if we could actively demonstrate that the parents were for example were engaging in an anger management programme or something then that would show insight and that would show that they actually were quite committed to doing the best thing in the interest of their children but that didn’t happen. And my concerns had been mounting just from the reports from the school and historical concerns and certainly a lack of integration because the parents after at least nine years of being known to this local authority had never acquired English properly. So it was just concerning
that they could live here for so long and had not been able to you
know to integrate into the local community in that.
Interviewer: So how did that debate take place? I mean did you have a
three-way discussion with your manager to sort of resolve things or?
Social Worker: Well not really because I think it’s once you start to
sort of get into domestic violence situations then I think it is almost
certain that you are going to go to child protection I think most
managers would probably make that decision. I mean it is interest-
ing because you know depending on each manager’s situations and
each worker you know there are some issues which come up and
people will go into child protection quite readily you know even
on the basis of concerns about the child’s emotional welfare your
children are registered under emotional abuse. So yeah but with
domestic violence I am pretty sure most managers would see cases
of that and would probably move it into child protection.

The inevitability of the child protection route caused disagreement
between the two social workers. The ‘more experienced co-worker’
felt that with interventions like anger management, the family could
demonstrate that they understood the concerns. An important principle
is noted, the family needed to demonstrate that they were ‘committed
to doing the best thing in the interests of their children’. The social
worker does not develop why this alternative did not materialise, but
reiterates and extends his concerns – reports from the schools, historical
concerns and a general lack of integration in UK society. The disagree-
ment is eventually resolved by the manager in discussion with the
child protection officer: an initial child protection conference is called.
No particular process is described but the manager appears to be swayed
by the domestic violence incidents. The social worker notes that this is
not surprising as other team managers and social workers start child pro-
tection responses on the basis of what might be seen as lesser concerns
of ‘emotional abuse’.

So how has the move from ‘child in need’ to ‘child protection’ been
accounted for in this exchange, and what depictions of deficit parenting
are displayed? Given the long-term contact with the agency, it might be
expected that versions of the family had been established which meant
that the case was not seen as serious enough to warrant a child protec-
tion response. There were a series of problems, but none that warranted
a stronger response.⁴ The elements of the social worker’s increased con-
cerns at this point are the school reporting that things are getting worse
and the incidents of domestic violence. The social worker implies that
one led to the other. He also displays his disagreement with the previous view of the case: characteristics which were previously well-known – too many children, overcrowding and lack of integration – now required a different response. He contends that his alternative view of the case should not be surprising as social workers and managers have different thresholds. This suggests that the category of ‘child protection’ has several elements: underlying social and family problems, outside concern, specific incidents and social worker and manager perspectives. In this case, the identification of deficits, and their categorical implications do not involve direct criticism of parenting. In addition to a general comment on the circumstantial causalities of having too many children, the family not being really appreciative of local norms (e.g. lack of integration) and that it is hard to communicate the social workers’ concerns (at another point we learn that there isn’t a word for child protection in Somali), the feature which prevails is that there will never be enough concern to remove the children. These children were subsequently subject to a child protection plan and monitored for about a year. In the end the social worker considered that there had been some cooperation and improvement with the family, but ‘some things are never going to be resolved’. The family returned to being considered a ‘child in need’ case.

Case 2  From child protection to looked after

In contrast to the case in the first data set, the next case moves from child protection to removal of the children. The social worker took over the case after the duty and assessment team had conducted a child protection investigation and the children had become the subject of a child protection plan. Like the previous case, the main concerns were about domestic violence at that stage, as well as concerns about the mother’s mental health.

Extract 2.1

Interviewer: Had you been in the case at this stage?
R: I wasn’t no, the case was actually downstairs [in the duty and assessment team] at the time. I became involved two months after this so I became involved at the point where the children were in mum’s care, they were in her sole care, dad wasn’t allowed any involvement and the children had just been registered on the child protection register. My initial visit I was very concerned, mum at that time was stable in terms of her mental health, she
had overcome this episode and was being medicated and being supported by the Community Mental Health Team but her direct parenting of the children was very concerning in the sense that she didn’t speak to the children at all during my visit, the two younger children were left with dirty nappies, mum had to be prompted to change the nappies, the home conditions were chaotic, there was just really lack of stimulation really for the children and there was no sort of physical interaction between mum and the children. So that was my first visit and I was very, very concerned about that and I was very concerned that it had appeared that dad had been just completely removed from the situation and that the issue of domestic violence had been seen as the main you know the reason why this was. The initial case conference had basically pointed toward you know this instance of domestic violence being the main reason why mum was struggling to parent the children you know if dad is out of the home, if he doesn’t have any contact things would be a lot better, mum would be more stable and also within the order paternal grandmother who had previously offered a lot of support was also included so she wasn’t either able to have contact with the children. So the case basically came to us and I was just very concerned about the direct parenting and I think my third visit I had my team manager come with me because I wanted a second opinion because the case handover did not clearly express the concerns around the parenting and so I was very concerned that this hadn’t been picked up really but it had been sort of touched upon but not really explored. So my manager…

In the previous case where the family were considered to have a variety of social problems, the case had been moved into child protection proceedings because of domestic violence. In contrast, here there is considerable comment on the mother’s care of the children. Detailed observations echo Woodcock’s (2003) findings from interviews with social workers on how they conceptualised parenting. Some of these elements appear here, but we are interested in how the elements are brought together in an accountable categorisation of child protection which warranted court action.

Note how the categorical construction relies on a narrative contrast between two states of affairs, one of the previous social work assessment and that of the present one. The first describes a preferred family structure of the mother with the children and the father excluded. In the second assessment, the mother is seen as providing inadequate parenting.
It is similar to a case described by Hall (1997: 61), using strong contrasts of preferred and dispreferred family structures. As there, the contrast relies on obvious inferences of contrasted states of affairs. Here the two states are contrasted twice in the same long turn. In the first part the initial situation is outlined – mother’s stable mental health, father removed from the family and the children on the child protection register. The social worker’s initial visit however paints an alternative and extreme level of concern about parenting (the mother ‘didn’t speak to the children’, the ‘two younger children were left in dirty nappies’ which she ‘had to be prompted to change’, ‘home conditions were chaotic’ and ‘lack of stimulation’ and ‘no sort of physical interaction between mum and the children’). The list is completed with a summarising comment: ‘this was my first visit and I was very very concerned’.

The social worker presents a view of the mother’s parenting based on direct observations during her first visit to the family home. The elements are powerful and are invoked as obvious deficits which were seen by the social worker, not merely reported by others. The authority provided by talking from the standpoint of seeing the evidence makes available important entitlement (Shuman 1993). Such entitlement is critical, given that the social worker was making a claim for a view of the case that opposed the previous construction. The social worker reiterates the alternative formulation as laid out in the initial case conference – causality located in domestic violence and removal of the father as a solution towards improved parenting. This setting, with a number of professionals present and access to detailed reports, is an authoritative forum which she was challenging. To support her point of view she now visits the family home with her manager, and her concern is extended from what she saw to why concerns had been ‘touched upon’ but not brought to bear on the nature of the case.

The interviewer interrupts the social worker to explore further how she depicts the mistakes of the previous social work assessment by the duty and assessment team:

**Extract 2.2**

Interviewer: Sorry just on that…
Social Worker: No that’s fine..
Interviewer: That is important isn’t it really because what you are saying is that the work of the duty and assessment team had kind of got it wrong as it were. It had kind of not been assessed in the way that you feel that was accurate
Categorisations of the Child and ‘Deficit’ Parenting

Social Worker: They had put all their energy into getting dad, making sure dad was away from the home, they the local authority weren’t aware that mum went and got these orders until and few days after. It was only actually [family support project] that was responsible for that and women’s aid. But they were still maintaining that domestic violence being the main concern and then mum’s mental health and then there were a few well mum is struggling, she has got three very young children, she is on her own, she doesn’t have a lot of support. So that was kind of the way the case was handed over but in fact as soon as I went there I thought no this is wrong, this is about the parenting because there was just basically no parenting at all going on really for these children...

Causal assumptions about problematic agency and remedy has resulted in misdirected intervention. The statement ‘I thought no this is wrong, this is about the parenting because there was just basically no parenting at all going on really for these children’ is heard as a categorical assertion (Palmer 1986). It is similar to what Rosen (1994) calls ‘value-based normative assertion’, typical of social work formulations. This is not to undermine the statement but to assess its rhetorical force. The evocation of active reasoning in the form of ‘reported direct speech’ in ‘I thought no this is wrong’ adds to the strength of a statement, but here it is heard as an internal discussion. The social worker is looking at the situation as it is handed to her, she considers its merits, but opposes its conclusions. The next statement, ‘this is about parenting’, can be heard as a strong critique of the previous formulation. It undermines the blame directed at the father, his violence towards the mother and her mental health as an explanation and instead blames the mother. This is followed by an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986), ‘basically no parenting’. The categorisation of a deficit parent is strong and offers no way back. The turn continues as the social worker outlines the methods of assessment:

Extract 2.3

…so my manager also was very concerned about the situation, we discussed it and felt we needed a legal planning meeting, felt that we needed to refer to [psychiatrist] for a urgent parenting assessment and also that we needed to find a support worker to actually go into the home and do a 12-week piece of work to assess, to give mum support but also to assess whether mum has any sort of capacity and
that to be done sort of jointly with [psychiatrist]’s assessment, which [psychiatrist] was actually doing the parenting assessment and then obviously my own sort of assessment would continue. So we had a legal planning meeting and we were told that we don’t really have a lot of evidence at the moment, that other agencies weren’t expressing the same concerns as me and that we needed to give it time really to do a proper assessment to gather evidence. So I then started doing joint home visits with the health visitor because I was concerned that mum had also missed a number of health appointments with the children. So the health visitor was quite on board and wanted to see the children and she too after doing two visits was very, very concerned about the same things really; lack of interaction, just a chaotic home environment, lack of stimulation, all of the children at this stage were still in nappies and drinking out of baby bottles, there was no routine for the children, mum seen just not to be very with it. So you know obviously the health visitor was still concerned as well. So the family supporter worker went in and did a 12-week piece of work and at the end of it she concluded that mum hasn’t really taken any of the work or support on board, that she found that there had been very little change, she did a number of sessions, such as making mum talk to the children, get them into a routine, get them to have sort of playtime with the children, get some toys for the children, she did all of that with mum and mum basically you know didn’t really take any of it on board. So she was very concerned and the parenting assessment from [psychiatrist] basically concluded that mum had a very limited capacity to meet the children’s emotional needs, that there were concerns around mum being to able to constantly meet their needs as they grow up and also there were issues around mum not really understand what you know the concerns social services had and what was going on around her really.

The social worker embarks on a series of assessments – from the manager, the psychiatrist, a family support worker and a health visitor. The social worker’s problem was that the other professionals still did not share her formulation of the case. Legal advice was that there was ‘not a lot of evidence at the moment’ and ‘other agencies weren’t expressing the same concerns’. It required mobilising a number of allies to counteract the previous formulation, in particular the health visitor. A series of deficits is subsequently reported as the health visitor’s concerns: ‘lack of interaction, chaotic home environment, lack of stimulation, etc.’ This list builds on and extends the previous list. The poor
communication, and lack of attendance to the children’s developmental needs is repeated, but there is now a depiction of the mother as personally deficit, not just a poor mother but a person who is limited cognitively in awareness of what is happening around. This move from attributes of poor parenting to a depiction of a damaged person is similar to a sequence we found in case conference talk (Hall et al. 2006: 65).

The description of the family support worker’s intervention further supports the ‘deficit parenting/inadequate person’ formulation through a series of attempts to show the mother how to interact with her children (e.g. talk to the children, play, use toys, etc.) but mother ‘didn’t really take it on board’. The final condemnation is provided by the psychiatrist with the assessment that ‘mum had a very limited capacity to meet the children’s emotional needs’. Things would get worse as the children grew older and ‘mum not understands the concerns’ of the social services. Such a depiction both highlights the mother’s personal capacities as well as her cognitive abilities.

In the next section, a final depiction of the mother closes off any excuse that the mother’s deficits could be explained in terms of learning difficulties, her mental health or her upbringing:

**Extract 2.4**

....We had also had a learning disability assessment of mum, she hasn’t got, she has actually got quite a high IQ. Her mental health I mean mental health are very clear that mum’s stable and that her mental health shouldn’t be impacting on her parenting. So we have basically boiled down to fact that mum has a very limited capacity. In terms of mum’s own parenting she had quite a nice upbringing there was no sort of serious issues during her own childhood.

The social worker now explores a series of mitigating factors, ‘excuses’ (Scott and Lyman 1968), which might make the mother’s behaviour justifiable. None of these explanations are acceptable. Her IQ is ‘quite high’. Her mental health problems were not serious enough to ‘impact on her parenting’, nor are there any explanations in her ‘upbringing’. So the social worker is able to summarise that she ‘has a very limited capacity’, repeating the psychiatrist’s formulation. ‘Basically’ identifies the phase in the exposition as a summary. The focus has shifted from a view of parenting practices to a depiction of a deficit personality. The mother has no mitigating explanations and no endearing features.

What then is the categorisation of a deficit mother here? In contrast to Case 1, the mother here is singled out for criticism. She is subjected to
a series of evaluations of her parenting practices and personal capacities. Furthermore, excuses in terms of her mental illness or being a victim of domestic violence are challenged. Similarly, there is no description of structural factors. The mother is a deficit character and a transfer from more of a child protection case to care proceedings is being rehearsed, a contextualised decision which invites a definitive case of a failed parent.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis of the two cases examined above relates to commonly occurring aspects of ‘deficit’ talk. As would also be apparent from dictionary definitions of the (non-financial uses) of the term, ‘deficit’ entails inadequacies or insufficiencies (the assumption being that these can be qualified – focus on their nature, and are gradable – focus on measurement and the degree to which they apply). On the other hand, deficit is located in aspects of functioning and cognition (and hence seen as a property of ‘agency’) or in a disadvantageous condition or position (and hence seen as a property of ‘circumstance’). The key notion at stake, it turns out, is that of ‘good enough parenting’: do the actions of the parent contribute to risks to the child’s well-being and development, thereby questioning their parenting skills, or is the prevailing construction one of supporting and empowering the parent to maintain their parental tasks and responsibilities? The two discourses are not mutually exclusive, as there appear to be elements of both in most levels of intervention.

Our chapter has particularly focused on how the border between the two is managed, and when it is crossed (in either direction), how deficiencies are thematised as part of a rationale in assessment and review. Whilst family support, empowerment, etc. are seen as benevolent, at what point do the latent aspects of surveillance become manifest, and work with the family moves from being benign to being constraining? Our analytical mainstay has been with how the client is ‘interactionally worked up’ in terms of ‘accepting good enough parenting’ (empowerment mode) and ‘confronting the lack of parenting skills’ (deficit mode).

Notes

1. In the year ending March 2008 in England there were 226,330 initial assessments. 34,000 children became the subject of child protection plans and of these, 2,800 children became ‘looked after’ (DCSF 2008).
2. ‘Error, Responsibility and Blame in Child Welfare’ (Award number RES-166-25-0048, 2007–2009) was part of Economic and Social Research Council, Public Services Programme and examined social workers’ and managers’ reactions to performance management of assessment systems. Other researchers on the project were Professor Andy Pithouse (Cardiff University), Professor David Wastell (Nottingham University), Professor Sue White (Birmingham University) and Dr Karen Broadhurst (Lancaster University) and Dr Sue Peckover (Huddersfield University). The data collection and analysis methods of the study are discussed in the End of Award Report. http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/ViewAwardPage.aspx?data=v9XrJ6xhFSZQgBqRLRVQ%3d%3d&xu=0&isAwardHolder=&isProfiled=&AwardHolderID=&Sector=.  
3. Current policy and audit is organised around five aspects of child development.  
4. We should be careful not to assume that ‘nine years’ signifies intensive intervention. The period may well have consisted of a series of short-term contacts.

References


‘She is not coping’: Risk Assessment and Claims of Deficit in Social Work

Arthur S. Firkins & Christopher N. Candlin

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we focus our discussion on the professional site of statutory child protection and show how a discourse of deficit is consequential to the framing of risk in child neglect situations. To illustrate our points, we provide case study evidence from one social worker’s account of a child neglect case. We use an ethnomethodological discourse approach (Garfinkel 1964, 1967, 1996) to analyse the social worker’s written risk assessment of a child neglect situation. Risk Assessment Reports are written accounts of how the institutional member, in this case the social worker, perceives risk, and are one example among the many other types of reporting practices evident in statutory child protection (see Hall et al. 2006; Munro 2004, 2008). We argue that the analysis of such an account can therefore be revealing of how the risk situation is constructed by the institutional member, in this case a social worker (Garfinkel 1967; Hall et al. 2006; Sarangi & Roberts 1995).

2. Framing the risk situation through written accounts

Through meeting and responding to the flow of situations in which they have to act, members leave a trail of ‘accounting practices’ in the form of both written and spoken texts (Blumer, 1969/1986: 16; Garfinkel 1964; Buttny 1993; Smith 1984; Miller 1997; Berg 1996; Warner 2006). Accounts are essentially members’ acts of doing, recognising and responding, using knowledge gained through their various institutional memberships and fitting or ‘aligning’ their lines of action to one another in joint action (Scott & Lyman 1968; Blumer 1969/1986: 16;
Garfinkel 1967). Through accounts, institutional members frame ‘a particular definition of situation’, which in turn leaves the situation so constructed open to potential analytical scrutiny through discourse analysis (Buttny & Morris 2001; Orbuch 1997; Scott & Lyman 1968). We define ‘situation’ here not in terms of location but more as a ‘site of engagement’ in Scollon’s terms (Scollon 2001), whose characteristics are collectively agreed upon. A ‘risk situation’ is defined in interaction between institutional members. Situation is therefore a social construct that is the result not only of perception but also of categorisation, definition and framing (Goffman 1971; Sarangi & Candlin 2003; Blumer 1969/1986). The more complex the situation, the more we would expect the discursive resources which have evolved to deal with the situation to be similarly complex and interdiscursive in nature (Candlin & Maley 1997; Candlin 2006; Sarangi 1998a).

We suggest that institutional members, such as social workers and other child protection practitioners, produce professional ‘accounts’ in their daily practice which are actually crystallizations of situations, actions and decisions in time and space (see Smith 1984; Harland 1989). For this chapter we single out ‘reporting genres’ (Bhatia 2004: 81–4) specifically in relation to child protection practice ‘Risk Assessment Reports’ (Firkins & Smith 2001; English & Pecora 1994; Gambrell & Shlonsky 2000; Kemshall et al. 1997; Lennings 2002; Munro 2004, 2005; Scourfield & Welsh 2003; Peckover et al. 2009) as our example, to demonstrate how deficit underpins the social workers’ framing of ‘risk situation’ within a written account (see Firkins & Candlin 2006).

3. Deficit discourses and cultural accountability

A child can be placed ‘at risk’ because of a deficit in some aspect of care, generally a deficit of provision which by implication is a failure of the provider to provide. Provision in this sense is physical, material and emotional in nature and so what constitutes ‘adequate care’ and what is ‘neglect’ remains subjective and controversial (see Turney 2001; Schumacher et al. 2001; Scourfield 2000; Swift 1995a; Janko 1994; Meezan & Rose 1996; Aregona & Eyberg 1981). Neglect therefore rests on the notion of ‘provision’ and who should be doing the providing, generally the parent responsible or an agent to whom the child is placed in care, such as a child care centre, family member etc. (English 1998; Garbarino & Collins 1999; Zuravin 1999; Crittenden 1999; Chand 2001; Jagannathan & Camasso 1996; Kelly & Milner 1996).
Indeed, care provided by parents and institutions can be deficient to the point of becoming dangerous (see Hagell 1998; Castel 1991; Bonner et al. 1999; Howitt 1992; Margolin 1990; Reder et al. 1993), yet at the same time care can be controlled to the point of unreasonable restriction (Holden & Edwards 1989; Donzelt 1980; Jackson & Scott 1999). Neglect is therefore a constructed situation against a defined legislative context (see Firkins & Smith 2001; Prior 2001; Howe 1992; Parton 1997, 1995). However, there is also an extremely fine line between ‘neglect’ which is caused by lack of action by a responsible parent, and ‘neglect’ that is a result of a deprived environment caused by economic or other circumstances (see Slack et al. 2004), although both are underpinned by a discourse of deficit. Hence, risk assessment provides the rationale for intervention into the lives of individuals and families (see White et al. 2009; Waugh 2000; Kemshall 2002; Taylor-Goody et al. 1999; Flynn 2002; Shaw & Shaw 2001; Horlick-Jones et al. 2001; Jones & Grupta 1998; Wald & Woolverton 1990).

At the same time, drawing on the social theory of Ulrich Beck (1992) and the cultural theory of Mary Douglas (1990, 1999), we argue that the foregrounding of deficit in the risk assessment process actually serves the wider cultural function of ‘accountability’ (see Horlick-Jones 2005; Giddens 1991; Douglas 1990, 1992; Beck 1992; Warner 2006; Buttny 1993). Specifically in our case study, framing ‘deficit parenting’ as ‘a risk’ provides the warrant for justifiable state action into the family, a domain of life previously considered personal and private. Hence a discourse of deficit holds the actions of a parent to be ‘accountable’ to the culture as a whole, and ‘discourses of deficit’, including the discourse of ‘the deficit parent’ evident in our case study, are part of the wider cultural dialogue of accountability where ‘every mishap, affords the members of the dialogue an opportunity to call one another to account’ (Douglas 1999, 1990).

4. Risk assessment, neglect and justifiable action

We situate this chapter within a growing interest in applying discourse methods to the field of social work generally and child protection specifically. (see Sarangi 1998b; Hall et al. 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Firkins & Smith 2001; Firkins & Candlin 2006; Slembrouck 2005; Hall et al. 2006; Hall & Slembrouck 2009). Child protection is the practice of intervention on behalf of children who may be subjected to situations of abuse or neglect in care, and is guided by a legislative context, generally an act of parliament (see Munro 2008; Parton 1996, 1997; Firkins & Smith 2001).
The parenting of those under the scrutiny of the child protection system is regulated by threat of sanction (see Meezan & Rose 1996; Weekland & Jordon 1990). Hence, the practitioner’s assessment of a neglect situation cannot be done in the context of a straightforwardly warm and trusting relationship between the practitioner and all family members, and risk assessment begins with the assumption of deficit behaviour on the part of the carer or parent. However, any intervention action must be justifiable intervention and be based on a credible belief that a child may be ‘at risk’ (see Hall et al. 2006; Horlick-Jones 2005; Krane & Davis 2000; Lennings 2002). Our intention in this chapter is to show how the social worker’s framing of ‘the risk situation’ is aligned to a discourse of deficit.

5. Analysis

We argue that deficit is the ‘orienting disposition’ of the social worker’s account of neglect in the example we refer to (see Dake 1991; Yoosun 2005). To illustrate our points on the relationship between ‘deficit discourses’ and ‘risk assessment’ we direct our discussion to one type of written account evident in statutory child protection practice in Australia. The Risk Assessment Report is the written textual outcome of a ‘risk assessment process’ which is generally undertaken by the social worker to determine what ‘the risk situation’ actually is (Firkins & Candlin 2006). We conduct a frame analysis of the social worker’s Risk Assessment Report to reveal how the risk situation is constructed. Accounts of risk, such as risk assessment reports, enquiries into family circumstances, and risk communication information, are indexical of how the institutional member perceives the risk situation (see Garfinkel 1967). Typically, neglect is ‘a risk situation’ which relies on the collation of ‘indicators’ or ‘signs’, which we characterise as ‘situational frames’ (see Hall 1977/1989). No one of these frames is adequate by itself to suggest that the situation may warrant intervention, but several situational frames linked together may constitute ‘the risk situation’. In the example we present below we show how the social worker builds ‘narrative fidelity’ (Benford & Snow 2000) through aligning the risk situation in a way that resonates with wider cultural frames and in a sense builds ‘empirical credibility’ for the state to intervene in the family (Snow & Benford 1988; Cicourel 2007).

The account we analyse is some eight pages long and we break the report into 114 frames. We approach our data using a frame-analysis approach (see Goffman 1974; Hall 1977/1989; Tannen 1993; Tannen & Wallat 1993; Jones 1996; Firkins & Candlin 2006; Toulmin 1958; Snow &
Benford 1992). A frame is a knowledge structure through which institutional members construct, organise and interpret ‘situation’. A frame expresses an idea, an assertion or a claim within such a situation and is identifiable by its ‘evidential boundary’, namely the idea, assertion or claim that it expresses (Goffman 1974). An account, such as the Risk Assessment Report we analyse, therefore evidences a combination of different situational frames (Hall 1977/1989: 129–40).

In statutory child protection, some form of risk assessment is institutionally required to follow the reporting by some professional or member of the public of neglect, of their ‘concerns’ on ‘reasonable grounds’ for the welfare of the child (Kemshall 2002). In our example the report has come from a professional on a ‘Community Mental Health Team’, who reports concerns about the ability of the ‘mother to cope with her three children’. This is framed within the social worker’s report as below.

Frame 1: Initial contact was made by the mental health worker who asked the department to call her as she felt that the natural mother ‘is not coping’.

Frame 2: A phone call was made to the mother who stated she was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, but the mental health team was not currently involved.

Frame 3: The natural mother stated that she was taking medication.

Frame 4: The natural mother stated that tonight the children have all ganged up on her and refuse to do as they are told.

Each of the four frames above represents a separate and distinct ‘situation’. The clustering of these four frames together immediately establishes credibility in relation to the mental health worker’s feeling of concern (refer to frame 1), even though the mother at that point states that she is not actually a client of the Mental Health Team and would be unaware of what the mental health worker had said. The four frames are aligned together to demonstrate enough ‘concern’ for the need for a risk assessment to be conducted. Frames 3 and 4 are ‘stated’ direct to the social worker by the mother and would appear to provide evidential support for the mental health worker’s initial report. The mother’s prior history with both the Child Protection Agency and the Mental Health Team, again clustered together in the introduction of the report, provides enough evidence.

The Risk Assessment Report is constructed throughout in this manner and in such a way as to align frames together that are derived
through the social worker’s disparate conversations; hence a Risk Assessment Report is the ‘recontextualisation’ of spoken to written discourse (Sarangi 1998a, 1998b). These texts sit within client files, become considerably powerful in all subsequent decisions surrounding the child, and are rarely revisited (see Munro 1996, 1999; Broadhurst et al. 2009). In our example, the report is constructed through several telephone conversations with five professionals involved with the family, including the mental health worker, a doctor and the school principal. The majority of the assessment rests on a telephone conversation, and in a sense is unchallengeable, as subsequent decision makers, such as social workers and other professionals, do not have access to the original conversations or evidence from which the report was constructed.

Hence, the piecing together of a Risk Assessment Report is subjected to ‘the jigsaw effect’ (see Firkins & Smith 2001; Munro 1999; Turnell & Edwards 1997). The ‘risk situation’ is framed from information obtained through three key discourse events. Firstly, ‘disclosure’, that is, the mother directly telling the social worker that she ‘can’t cope’. Secondly, ‘observation’, that is, what the social worker directly observes or hears. Thirdly, ‘verbal report’, what is said to the social worker by the children or other professionals. Finally, ‘written reports’, what has been reported prior is retrievable by the social worker from filed reports or information recorded on data bases.

Frame 13: There has been multiple placement of Child X due to mothers’ mental health issues.

Frame 14: Mother appears to have incapacity to care for Child X.

Frame: 15: Mother disclosed that she has thoughts of harming Child X whilst bathing him.

Frame 16: It appears the home environment is chaotic, hearing children screaming at each other and child Y’s refusal to keep Child X away from the heater when requested by the mother.

Frame 17: Mother’s current mental state at time of report and her history of mental illness.

Frame 18: Mother disclosed that she was not coping

In the above frames the risk of neglect to Child X is constructed through each situational frame, rendered visible to the social worker through observation and disclosure. Frames 13–18 establish the ‘situation’ as one of possible risk to the child, with Frame 15 being the primary frame of risk. In a child neglect situation, no single frame establishes enough risk by itself, and there is significant overlap of issues, any one of which by
itself would not constitute justifiable action. For example, just because
the mother has a mental illness does not mean she would neglect her
child. However the situational Frame 15, which suggests the mother’s
illness leads to thoughts of harming the child, would suggest that the
case could possibly extend further than an issue of neglect. Frame 18 is
highly marked in that there is a framing of self as ‘not coping’ and hence
the mother agrees with the mental health worker's original reason for
making the report. The frame cascade (Frames 13–18) establishes a plat-
form of ‘concerns’, which is the legal justification for child protection
intervention into the family. In the following situations the concept of
‘concern’ is explicitly framed by the social worker, rendering the frame
of ‘not coping’ into a ‘risk situation’. The notion of ‘concerns’ is explicit-
ly anchored to aspects of the social environment: ‘thoughts of harm’
(Frame 51), ‘potential for overdose (Frame 90) and ‘threats of violence’
(Frame 91):

Frame 51: It was also stated to the mother that the department has
concerns and would not allow the Child X to return home at this
stage due to what the mother had disclosed to the social worker.

Frame 90: The impact of the mother’s use and abuse of her
medication is of great concern, given the potential for the mother
to overdose herself.

Frame 91: There are concerns given the threats of violence against the
mother made by the elder siblings and actual violence perpetrated
against the mother by the eldest sibling and of the mother being
violent to the other children in return.

Frame 92: Child X has also been the victim of violence from his
sibling is of major concern.

Frame 97: The incidents of violence already witnessed by Child X
are of concern to the department.

Our analysis reveals that the ‘risk situation’ is framed through four sig-
nificant frame cascades, each underpinned by the notion of deficit (see
Figure 1 below). Firstly, that the mother is deficient in provision. Sec-
ondly, that she is deficient in her ability to cope with normal demands
of parenting. Thirdly, there is a deficit in her mental state, and finally,
there is a deficit in her social support. The risk situation is constructed
through the linking of all four areas of deficit (see Figure 1).

The social worker’s account of the situation foregrounds what we
have identified as ‘the coping frame’. The notion of deficit is embed-
ded in the notion of coping. We could define coping as the ability
of the self to respond to what could be considered everyday parenting responsibilities and the pressure placed on the self that being a parent involves. The account of the situation takes a deficit view, suggesting that the mother is unable to cope. Not coping is a factor of ‘self-disclosure’ (Frame 18), the reports of professionals, in this case a doctor (Frame 25), and ‘observed’ situations that indicate not coping, for example dependency on external crutches such as valium in order to cope (Frame 32):

Frame 18: The mother stated that she was not coping at home and that tension at home was escalating due to financial worries and not being able to provide basic things for the children.

Frame 25: The mother received a home visit from her G.P. due to her not coping and her normal medication was not making her calmer.

Frame 32: Last night the mother presented at the hospital accident and emergency allegedly needing tablets because of today’s interview.

Neglect is further framed through the mother’s history of involvement with mental health services, leading the social worker to frame the situation using what we label the ‘mental state frame’. Three key situational frames are linked together: ‘the mother overdosed’ (see Frames 21 and 22), thoughts of harming the child (Frames 23 and 30), and regular hospital admission (see Frame 42).

Frame 21: The mother stated that she was admitted to hospital for overdose of medication.
Frame 22: Mother said that she took an overdose of different medication due to having thoughts of not getting better and having no hope for the future.

Frame 23: The mother said that she cannot deal with these thoughts and has had thoughts of harming Child X when it becomes too much. And advised that she cannot deal with these thoughts.

Frame 30: Mother stated that she was admitted approx. 11 months ago to the hospital for not eating and having thoughts of drowning Child X in the bath. Child X was placed in care during this time.

Frame 35: The mother disclosed that she had seen a friend who gave her two valium and at the hospital she received a further two valium and revealed she had abused this medication in the past.

Frame 42: The mother stated that she was in the process of being considered for admission to hospital to participate in an intensive programme that she believed may help her.

The framing of her mental state is largely through ‘self-disclosure’ from the mother directly, as her mental state is only briefly mentioned by other professionals interviewed by the social worker, who are in fact more concerned about provision of supervision and care to Child X. In actual fact, the mother discloses situations to the social worker which moves the account towards a more explicit framing of ‘deficit parenting’ through the notion of ‘diminished capacity’ (refer to Frames 66, 67 and 68):

Frame 66: During the interview the mother conceded that she was not capable of caring for Child X at that point in time.

Frame 67: Given the information obtained during the risk assessment and the known history of mental illness it appears that the mother would not be able to adequately care for Child X even though her intentions are genuine and her love for Child X sincere.

Frame 68: The mother admitted during the interview that she has a lack of understanding of child development and what that involves but is willing to attend a parenting course to improve her skills.

Frame 99 suggests the mother is absorbed by her difficulties; where a capable parent should share the self with the family, a deficit parent cannot. Frames 23 and 24 suggest that the mother’s capacity is diminished by psychiatric problems and indeed by self-destructive tendencies (refer to Frames 33 and 72).
Frame 99: It would appear that the mother can become so self-absorbed in her own issues that continuity of care for Child X is always compromised.

Frame 107: The mother was very cooperative during the interview and had insight into her own inability to care for her child at this stage.

Frame 23: Mother disclosed that she has been diagnosed as obsessive compulsive which may progress to psychiatric thoughts.

Frame 24: She advised she cannot deal with these thoughts.

Frame 33: Mother went on to state she had thoughts of destructive behaviour of herself and gave the example of having a car accident or cutting herself.

Frame 72: Mother also disclosed of having negative thoughts towards all of her children when they were young and that those thoughts are more prevalent with Child X.

The cohesive family unit that supports each other and helps one another is breached by the aligning of frames that indicate that the mother has no support. Frame 100 indicates that this is seen as a deficit in terms of developing social relationships. The cohesion of the family is at risk due to conflict between members (Frame 66) and violence (Frame 56) and a lack of willingness to help, which is a result of blame (Frame 20):

Frame 20: Mother stated that she pleaded with siblings to bathe Child X to which they would refuse.

Frame 56: Mother said that sibling Y had hit Child X because she was angry at him.

Frame 66: Due to history of the family and conflict between mother and elder siblings concerns for Child X being adequately cared for by siblings is a major factor if Child X is to return home.

Frame 95: The family unit works well for a short period and then it is left to mother to cope alone with a young child.

Frame 100: The child is unable to form bonds with people in the family and the same issue when he is finding stability in his placement then after a period of time is placed back in the family environment which is positive for a while and the family unit breaks down.

Frame 104: Family has demonstrated their ability to access supports and community resources.
The disciplinary parent should maintain order in the family and provide rules and guidance to the children. Accordingly, the parent should be in charge. The alignment of frames by the social worker suggests this is breached. The children attempt to control the mother (Frame 4) and do not listen to the mother’s attempts to discipline (Frames 8 and 19). Frame 60 frames a situation of discipline which the social worker approves of, and which is aligned to the frame of the disciplinary parent. However, there is a fine line between acceptable and non-acceptable discipline, and smacking the child breaches the norms of acceptable discipline and is itself aligned to indicate risk:

**Frame 4:** The mother stated that tonight the children have all ganged up on her and refused to do as they were told.

**Frame 6:** Child Y had taken off to a friend's house and Child Z was refusing to help with Child X.

**Frame 8:** Mother asked Child Z to get away from the heater, she refused.

**Frame 19:** Mother went on to state that her other children would not do what they were told.

**Frame 60:** When the mother was asked if there were other forms of discipline that Child X would receive she stated that he would be sent to his room, put on his chair in the lounge area or shouted at to ‘cut it out’.

**Frame 65:** Mother stated she smacked Child X on the bottom with an open hand and of elder sibling smacking Child X. This is concerning as it appears Child X has no ally in the family.

**Frame 91:** Mother stated that she slapped Child Y across the face for being disrespectful to which Child Y scratched mother and they both kicked each other before stopping.

The tendency towards blame is also evident throughout the social worker’s account. We have labelled these types of frames ‘blame-frames’ and they are underpinned by a notion of deficit:

**Frame 71:** The mother has a negative perception of her parenting and blames herself if Child X hurts himself accidentally.

**Frame 81:** Mother also stated that her other children blame her for Child X’s numerous placements and that they help out initially when child X returns home however this assistance wanes after a while and it is the entirely left to the mother to care for Child X.
Frame 85: Due to the mother’s illness Child X’s siblings are cranky with the mother for Child X being placed in care and blame mother in relation to her illness and her personality.

Frame 93: The nature in which the other children talk to the mother and of being constantly reminded of the blame for Child X placement in foster care is of concern.

Frame 94: There is also concern that the other children have taken no responsibility for their actions of hitting the mother and Child X.

In Frame 71 the mother holds herself responsible, whereas in Frames 81 and 85 the other children hold the mother responsible. We have called these types of situational frames ‘accountability frames’. Douglas (1990) suggests that the structure of society is based around accountability of all its members (see Garfinkel 1967; Buttny 1993). Hence the mother’s ability to cope needs to be set against how the culture holds the behaviour of its members accountable, how parenting is held accountable, and how society censures what it sees as unacceptable through blame. This view is also shared by Ulrich Beck (1992), who suggests, through his theory of reflexive modernisation, that the rise of risk-based practices is a reflexive response to the public’s demand for accountability of the various institutional agents who are both the definers of risk and managers of risk, and to the crises that arise in public trust in the ability of institutions and their members to manage risk (see also, Giddens 1991).

We see in these frames a ‘hierarchy of accountability’, where the mother holds herself responsible, as do the children, and indeed as does the social worker, who evaluates the actions of the other siblings as lacking responsibility and concludes that the ‘deficits in the care of the child’ are so great that he would be at risk should he be returned home. In a sense the mother is held accountable through the process of blame by all of the participants, including herself.

Frames 105 and 106 frame a situation of safety, but again in terms of a deficit, as safety is framed as a deficit situation; safety being framed as anywhere ‘out of the mother’s care’. Frames of ‘potential’, i.e. frames of risk which express evaluation of magnitude (Frame 111) and degree of risk (Frame 110) are aligned to frame the pragmatic space of risk as irrealis space (see Firkins & Candlin 2006). Hence deficit serves a cultural function to justify coercive state intervention, the removal of the child due to the magnitude of potential harm (refer to Frame 111). Frame 111 therefore is the primary framing of risk (see Firkins & Candlin 2006).
Frame 105: Given the mother’s current mental health issues and the child currently being placed elsewhere, the level of protection for the child is appropriate.

Frame 106: The child is in a safe environment away from the potential harm if he were still in the care of the mother.

Frame 109: The potential for future harm is great considering mother’s disclosure of having thoughts of harming Child X in the bath.

Frame 110: Given the evidence and history of the family and the potential harm to Child X the overall perceived risk is high.

Frame 112: The mother’s own disclosure to long-term mental illness going back to when she was 18 years old and of her not having appropriate improvement in her present condition, the prognosis for the situation improving is poor at this stage.

Frame 111: Magnitude of future harm may result in the death of Child X due to mother disclosure of having thoughts of harming Child X and having fears of acting on those thoughts.

6. Conclusion

This chapter discusses one social worker’s account of risk and lays out a discourse-based ethnomethodological approach which examines how situational frames are aligned to construct the neglect situation. Neglect is constructed through the aligning of situational frames clustered around particular frames relating to ‘competent parenting’. Our analysis reveals that a discourse of deficit is implicitly embedded in the social worker’s framing of the risk situation. The framing of the risk situation, and hence the construction of ‘deficit parenting’, is dependent on the breaching of deeply embedded cultural frames. Drawing on the cultural theory of Mary Douglas (1985, 1992) and the social theory of Ulrich Beck (1992), we suggest that claims of deficit in this institutional example culturally function to justify intervention action in the otherwise sacred domain of the family. We therefore suggest that discourses of deficit are a part of what Douglas calls the ‘cultural dialogue of accountability’, the normative debate that goes on constantly within society about what is and what is not acceptable.

References


Part III
Identity in the Context of Health Care
5

Narrative, Identity and Care: Joint Problematisation in a Study of People Living with Dementia

Jonathan Crichton & Tina Koch

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we share our disciplinary collaboration between discourse analysis and health, and with Laura, a person living with dementia, her support group and care staff. We draw on a conception of research advocated by Sarangi and Roberts (1999) as guided by an ‘ethic of practical relevance’. This takes as a priority an interest in harmonising discourse-analytical research with the aim of advancing the needs of practitioners in the professions. In the study, our interest was in narrative. We sought not only to recover a narrative as evidence of Laura’s identity but also to play this back into her life and the lives of her carers so that her identity would not be foreclosed in the transition into care (Crichton & Koch 2007; Koch & Crichton 2007). The narrative in this sense was intended to have moral significance for those who care, to act as an invitation to understand themselves and Laura as active participants in her life, an ongoing resource for Laura, her family and health professionals as her memory was challenged and decision-making capacity reduced, and so provide a basis for proactive care through ongoing identity work. We anticipated that this approach could reveal the ‘person behind the patient’ (Clarke, Handson & Ross 2003) as one who can be acknowledged and valued. Our interest in this chapter is in how this agenda foregrounded the need for ‘joint problematisation’ (Roberts & Sarangi 1999) in seeking a mutual understanding of the narrative among the researchers, Laura and her family, and her care staff.

Our use of narrative draws on its potential as a primary means by which people constitute who they are in interaction within others. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned
Narrative in this sense is a ‘mode par excellence for the construction of self’ (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 2000: 75), reflected in the widespread use of narrative both as a source of data and as a mode of research for understanding how people interpret and present themselves in authoring their own experience (Clandinin 2006). As well as providing the means by which people make sense of their lives through time (Ricoeur 1991), narrative is viewed in this literature as a co-constructed performance of self enacted in the telling (Mishler 1995; Riessman 2008). In other words, a narrative involves an interpretation of experience, an act of narrating and an enactment of self in which ‘identities are situated and accomplished with audience in mind’ (Riessman 2003: 7). Identity understood as referenced to narrative in this sense is multiple, evolving and fragile (Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Holstein & Gubrium 2000; Lemke 2008). Moreover, the interaction between narrators and their audiences is perforce open-ended (Mattingly 1998) and any narrative ‘unfinalisable’ (Bakhtin, 1981) because ‘life always opens up more options…, includes more meanings, more identities, evokes more interpretations than even the number of all possible stories could express’ (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001: 8).

The deficit we focus on results from the fact that current diagnosis, treatment and institutional care neglect the changing identities of the person living with dementia, a diagnosis which may in any case threaten the person’s sense of existence, ‘resulting in fear of losing the ability to retain their personal identity in the future’ (Steeman et al. 2006: 731). The practical interest in the study arises because those living with dementia are, in virtue of their condition, increasingly unable to maintain a coherent account of their own identities, which become progressively dependent on, and therefore vulnerable to, how others perceive and interact with them. Increasingly, the person begins to rely on others to voice, and therefore unilaterally to construct, their past, present and future self. The risk is that the transition into a care facility involves the loss of the person’s previous identity through its reconstruction according to categories of institutional care.

2. Identity and narrative in care

The importance of attending to identity in care is a major theme in the literature and has been particularly associated with the move towards ‘person-centred care’ (Kitwood 1997). The central argument of this work is that attention to identity is significant for the sense of well-being and the care people receive (Cohen-Mansfield et al. 2006; Epp 2003;
Leeson et al. 2004; Payne & Seymour 2004). This literature emphasises that the way in which others interact with the person with dementia can have a significant impact on the individual’s own sense of self. For example, Epp (2003: 1) writes that the development of positive relationships between the person with dementia and carers is central to the quality of care, and that this may be achieved through understanding the person’s life and identity, and ‘on fostering these relationships’. The need to maintain and affirm the identity of people living with dementia in care situations is also supported by research on communication with people with dementia which has foregrounded the value for care and well-being of social or ‘external’ influences on the preservation of self or personhood (Golander & Raz 1996; Kitwood & Bredin 1992; Ramanathan 1994).

Studies have also emphasised the importance of collaborative confirmation of the person’s sense of self-identity in interaction (Norberg 2001; Sabat & Harré 1992; Shenk 2005). Episodes of lucidity can be prompted (Kitwood 1997) and it is possible for carers to support and communicate about the person’s memories, thereby collaboratively developing their sense of self-identity in an on-going way. When talking with a person with dementia, such understanding is cued through the minutiae of interaction (Ramanathan 1997) and failure to seek such communication with the person is congruent with denial of their personhood (Ryan 2005). There is also agreement on the need to acknowledge and address the communicative disenfranchisement of older people, shown, for example, in patronising communication when healthcare professionals and/or carers talk down (Koch & Webb 1996), and ‘speak for’ or ‘speak past’ their patients (Coupland & Coupland 2001). When, in addition to merely being older, the person has dementia, the dominant carer’s view is reflected in the language used to describe the person’s condition. The problem is exemplified when an institutionalised person with dementia behaves in ways which may not be comprehensible to care staff. She may, for example, be labelled a ‘screamer’ when calling out ‘help me, help me’, words which are often heard in the later stages of dementia, and accordingly the category ‘behavioural disturbance’ is routinely used to record the utterance for care management purposes. Such categories transform the actions of a person into incidents, implying that the behaviour does not express meaningful experience and thereby foreclosing on the need to understand the person (Norberg 2001).

To improve communication with people living with dementia it has been proposed that healthcare professionals should be prepared to be
involved in developing initiatives to enhance the quality of interaction, for example, through caregiver communication enhancement interventions and training programmes (Orange 2001), positive care interactions (Kitwood 1997), and ‘conversation as care’ (Ryan et al. 2005). However, while agreeing with the direction of these initiatives, we would argue with Mattingly (1998, 2006) that the development of a shared narrative is a precondition of meaningful interaction and should therefore be a priority in any such initiative. Identifying this fundamental role of narrative, Mattingly (1998: 46), in a meticulous study of the work of occupational therapists, writes that they were ‘constantly reading the actions of others… trying to discern what motivates the behaviour they can outwardly see. They try to “find the story” which makes sense of what they observe’, and in doing so ‘struggle to identify those narrative contexts which render the particular actions they observe meaningful’. More specifically, it is our contention that generating a narrative that can accompany a person with dementia through life allows the carer to understand the person behind the dementia (Clarke et al. 2003). Particularly relevant here is Hamilton’s (2005, 2008a, 2008b) work on naturally occurring conversations with persons with dementia. Hamilton suggests that we need to focus on extended conversations with friends, family members, speaking with people familiar and unfamiliar to the person herself, and that a priority is to provide the ‘shared background information’ (Hamilton 2008b: 79) that is a condition of social interaction. We have sought to enhance and carry forward into residential care this shared background information about a person living with dementia. We have engaged in extended conversations to develop a narrative with people who are within Laura’s social circle, including those who have come to know and care for her since being diagnosed with dementia. In so doing, we pause ‘long enough along the way to translate our findings into applications that help’ (Hamilton 2005: 243).

3. Joint problematisation and narrative

Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 2) recommend that applied linguistic research be informed by an ‘ethics of practical relevance’ in which the analyst works with participants to achieve purchase on their problems as they understand them. This requires the development of a shared understanding of these problems on the part of the analyst and participants, a process which Roberts and Sarangi (1999: 473) call ‘joint problematisation’. The phrase emphasises that seeking to reflect participants’ perspectives in research is not simply a question of how
analysis is conducted and represented. Rather, it concerns the analyst’s relationship with the participants and their capacity collaboratively to achieve a ‘mutuality of perspective and with membership’ (Sarangi & Candlin 2001: 382). The challenge raised here is how to develop a perspective which is shared by both the analyst and participants. This is what Sarangi and Candlin (2001 383) term ‘an issue of access to mutuality’.

Our focus in this chapter is on how Laura’s narrative developed through a process of joint problematisation at three stages in the study: in interviews with the family, in reconstructing the narratives for care staff, and in participation by care staff. We illustrate how seeking and making accountable this mutuality of perspective with our participants has involved bringing together and keeping in play the perspectives of both participants and researchers. The value of this interplay is captured by Riessman, who writes that

the research relationship is an unfolding dialogue that includes the voice of the investigator who speculates openly about the meaning of a participant’s utterance. Readers see her subjectivity … the investigator adopts an active voice (although she is never the only voice) … the investigator joins a chorus of contrapuntal voices, which the reader can also join. To put it differently intersubjectivity and reflexivity come to the fore as there is a dialogue between researcher and researched, text and reader, knower and known. The research report becomes ‘a story’ with readers the audience, shaping meaning by their interpretations. (2008: 137)

Using examples from the study we trace how the joint problematisation of narrative was differently realised at different stages in the study, and how this process informed the interpretation and juxtaposition of ‘contrapuntal voices’ that supported Laura’s transition into care. We argue that such problematisation was not only important for the collaboration in the study but also for understanding and supporting identity as on-going, co-constructed and, crucially, not to be foreclosed in the transition into care.

4. The study

Laura was diagnosed with dementia in 2003. In 2005 she was living with her husband, Ron, at home in a suburban house he built himself many
years ago. Interviews took place over six months in 2006 with Laura, Ron (her husband and her full-time carer), Ellen (her daughter), James (her son), Myrtle (a friend and occasional respite home ‘sitter’), Marjorie (her hairdresser) and Laura’s General Practitioner. Each interview began with the researcher asking: ‘Tell me your story …’ or ‘Tell me Laura’s story …’. The authors and the family collaboratively combined these stories into a narrative to accompany Laura in everyday life, present and future. Almost a year later, Laura was admitted to hospital and thereafter was made a permanent resident in a residential aged care facility. The combined narrative accompanied her into this care setting and was included in her care planning documentation. Three months after she entered care, we interviewed residential aged care facility staff about how they had interpreted the meaning and relevance of the narrative.

We first focus on the interviews with, respectively, Laura and Ron, Ellen and James; next on how the interviews were represented in the combined narrative; and finally we discuss the interpretations and responses of the care staff.

5. Interviews with Laura and her family

In conducting the interviews with Laura and the member of her support group, we as researchers soon realised that the narratives we elicited were not going to be reducible to a single story which could be passed on to care staff. The problem for us was how to interpret what was going on in the interviews in a way that acknowledged that in each interview the telling of the narrative was irreducibly referenced to our presence as interviewers, to the narrators’ understanding of us and each other, to their different relationships to Laura, and to their and our understandings of future audiences for the narratives.

In seeking this shared understanding, we came to see that as tellers of the narratives the interviewees were performing their own ‘preferred selves’ (Riessman 2003). At the same time, they were constructing identities for themselves and Laura as characters within their narratives. To understand this interplay between their performances as narrators and the construction of identities within their narratives we drew on Schiffrin’s (1990) work on how tellers manage the four speaker roles associated with Goffman’s (1981) notion of ‘footing’, namely:

- animator (the person who physically produces the talk)
- author (the person who creates the content of the talk)
- principal (the person responsible for the talk)
- figure (a person portrayed in the talk)
Schiffrin (1990) shows how a teller can present herself in these different roles both as teller of the narrative and as a figure within the narrative she is telling. For example she can stand in all four roles as teller but as a figure may cast herself as quoting another’s talk, in which case she is only the animator with the person quoted as author and principal. The options for the teller increase if she is not just presenting *herself* as a figure but other people. The teller is then able to manage the footings of these others in the world of the story (Coupland & Coupland 2001; Schiffrin 1993).

The following examples are from interviews with Laura and Ron, Ellen and James. The first shows how Ron and Laura co-construct narratives by choreographing their footings in response to Tina’s question. In doing so, they enact the intimate intertwining of their relationship as husband and wife, carer and cared for: an example of how couples perform their relationship as a ‘duet’ (Coates 2005) in interaction:

**TK:** Laura what were you most proud of when you were nursing, what sort of things do you remember?

**L:** I used just love delivering the babies and I did general nursing as well even though I did so many years of midwifery [pause]

**R:** What’s the story about somebody giving the first penicillin or something? [pause] Weren’t you involved with that when somebody gave the first penicillin injections or something?

**L:** Oh yes, I forget that story, what was that? My mind’s not too good now [pause]

**R:** Not to worry.

Following Tina’s question, Laura takes the lead as animator, author and principal, but doesn’t continue. She shrugs and smiles, a gesture she has told us means that she is unable to continue. Ron then takes the lead in a turn in which he creates opportunities for Laura to contribute with the footing that she is best able to manage. Ron provides Laura with a range of options, managing the onus on her to be accountable for her talk as principal while still supporting her as a contributor. There is attention to face (Goffman 1967) at every point, in which Ron is always on hand to provide what Labov (1972) calls the ‘so what’ of the narrative, a key accountability of the principal. In the first offer Ron introduces a ‘story’ which he knows well and which we know from our interview with the daughter is a point of pride for Laura. He provides Laura with opportunities to elaborate the story, both by asking her to tell him ‘what’ story and leaving unspecified aspects of the story which Laura may remember, thereby orchestrating opportunities for her to take the role of principal.
in telling the story by completing it. When Laura does not respond to his first offer, he cues Laura to her role as a figure in the story while again leaving open opportunities, using ‘somebody’ and ‘something’ to take up the narrative herself. Moreover, the use of the closed question enables Laura to respond with ‘Yes’, without being obliged to elaborate the story.

In the next extract, Ellen constructs a dialogue in which she animates Laura as principal of her own talk at moments of self-awareness in ‘Just said something really silly’ and ‘Now am I anybody else’s mother?’ The dialogue supports Ellen’s position that she uses humour to interpret Laura as a competent principal of her own talk, and that this in turn provides grounds for others to understand Laura.

TK: How would you like them to talk with her?
E: I don’t think it matters whether in fact she takes on all of the information as long as they are treating her in a way that is respectful of her intelligence, her would-be intelligence. Because a lot of times what I see and if you go and visit her that she still, she can still laugh at herself and she still has a really strong wit about what is happening. A couple of weeks ago, some days she is better than others, but we were talking about my godparents… and we were chatting away and she looked at me and said ‘So who’s your mother?’ and I said ‘You’re my mother’ and she sort of went… ‘Just said something really silly’. And that’s fine because she still kind of knows and she doesn’t get upset, she’s not…. Some people I have known with dementia get quite angry and all that. She still actually can say ‘that’s really silly’. But then she went on watching television for a while and then she looked at me, she said ‘Now am I anyone else’s mother?’ We both just cracked up. I still see that wit, sense of humour. I suspect it won’t ever go. It is an ability to always see someone who can laugh at herself. I don’t think that will ever go no matter how unwell she is. I still look at her across the room and I still see the twinkle in her eye. That doesn’t go even though she can’t remember this, that or the other. Doesn’t really matter.

Within the dialogue Ellen further supports this interpretation with a reference to ‘some people I have known with dementia get quite angry’. Here she is speaking not only as Laura’s daughter but as a nurse, which we know is her profession and which references her experience to that of Tina’s.
Finally, we had been told by Ellen that James had had trouble coming to terms with Laura’s dementia. In this extract James has just been explaining how Laura has sometimes not recognised him:

TK: There’s a lot of humour in that too?
J: There is in a way, it is quite. And me, I’m a cartoonist so I quite often see quite funny things happening there and I think I shouldn’t be laughing about this but there’s that sort of weird picture. I went and sat with her one afternoon while Dad went off to a bowls thing and I reckon I was with her for about three and a half hours and I reckon she asked me in that time about ten times ‘Where’s Dad?’. I said ‘He’s off at bowls’ ‘Oh that’s right’ and quite often I’ll be sitting with her and she’ll ask where her Mum’s gone, which I always find very interesting. I said ‘What do you mean, Nan’s been dead for years Mum’. ‘No, no she was here just a while ago, she was in the kitchen’. And I thought ‘Wow, this is an interesting one’, is she starting to see things or is it just that she’s going back to the time that she’s obviously enjoyed and felt comfortable.

Tina’s question was prompted by Ellen’s emphasis on the importance of humour in interaction with Laura. In James’s reply, humour does not provide a way of understanding Laura. Rather he uses it to frame his ongoing search for a way of explaining her as accountable for her own talk. He constructs dialogues which enact his own doubt about Laura’s capacity as principal, and of the possibility of interpreting her otherwise. In these dialogues Laura asks questions which involve assumptions that he refutes/repairs. Similarly, his emphasis on her repetition in the same turn sequence ‘ten times’ raises doubts about her role of principal or even author, opening the possibility that she is only an animator of talk, what Goffman (1981: 144) calls the ‘machine’ that produces talk. The important point for us, and one that James stressed elsewhere, was that despite his struggle to understand Laura he, like Ellen, had not foreclosed on her as a person capable of being accountable for her own talk.

6. Combining the narratives

In developing the combined narrative that was to accompany Laura into care, the challenge was to create a document which would be sensitive to these multiple, co-constructed stories and meaningful for Laura and her family, but at the same time acknowledge care staff as an audience
and invite them to participate in Laura's life. The combined narrative is 6,500 words long, and interweaves themes identified by the family and ourselves as important in Laura's life, exemplified by how these are enacted in the interviews. We talked through two drafts with the family for discussion and feedback. Though discussed, the different ways in which participants had presented themselves and Laura were not explicitly referred to in the combined narrative but informed the selection of extracts and the commentary which Tina took the lead in drafting and addressing to future care staff, resulting in a juxtaposition of ‘contrapuntal voices’ along the lines proposed by Riessman (2008). The following is illustrative of the document as a whole.

Laura expressed her delight in her career as a midwife: ‘I used to just love delivering the babies and I did general nursing as well even though I did so many years of midwifery . . . . I loved it and seeing them and then waiting for them to cry. Really I used to love handing them to the mother all dressed up and then to the father, that I used to think of as wonderful’. In talking about her time at the [name of hospital], she said, ‘Well it was lovely really; I loved every minute of it’.

Filling in the gaps in Laura’s story comes naturally to Ron. We begin to understand how their lives are intertwined. When asked about ‘love and all that’ he said ‘she did write a letter to her mother and said she’d met a bloke over there (she was doing midwifery in [name of city]) and her mother wrote back and said “Oh don’t worry about him; it’s too far away”’ . . . .

What is known about the person with dementia facilitates ‘making’ conversation and such dialogue may well have therapeutic significance. You have to stimulate the conversation – otherwise quite often Laura will just sit there and say nothing. ‘You have to know how to bring up the conversation’ Marjorie said. ‘Laura forgets what we’ve talked about but that doesn’t matter. I think they used to like going fishing, they’d wait for the boys to come back in again, they’d cook their fish that they’d caught for the day. She loved that. Knowing what will ignite a conversation is important. I have to bring it up in conversation and then she will perhaps elaborate’.

The document seeks to make explicit, and therefore accountable to readers, Tina's interpretation of the interviews as herself a health professional familiar with the world of care staff. The aim here was to create not a single finalised account of Laura’s past but an invitation to the
reader to interpret and participate in the ongoing narrative of her life. With this aim in view, we anticipated that the narrative and its interpretation would continue to evolve when read by care staff in different circumstances and in different relationships to Laura and her family.

7. Interviews with care staff

The admissions processes for residential aged care in Australia are standardised according to Federal funding and accreditation requirements and are the primary means by which a person living with dementia becomes understood as a resident. As part of the admissions process, a designated member of staff interviews the person herself and her carer(s), depending on her ability to be interviewed, to supplement the information already gathered on the person’s medical condition through a government-prescribed ACAT (Aged Care Assessment Team) report. The interview is typically based on a proforma designed to record the person’s interests and other personal information considered relevant to the person’s well-being in care. Following the ACAT assessment, it represents the first opportunity for the person and her carer(s) to give an account to care staff of who she is – an account which, along with the ACAT report and subsequent assessments, will shape who she is understood to be in care. The final process in this sequence is the development of a care plan, based on assessments conducted by facility staff relating to the types and levels of care required by the resident.

When Laura became a permanent resident in a residential aged care facility the combined narrative accompanied her and was available to staff in addition to the standard information gathered. Three months later interviews were conducted with five staff involved in Laura’s care, including the Director, Julie, and ‘lifestyle coordinators’, Bev, Fiona and Diane, focusing on how they had interpreted the combined narrative, how they had understood what we were trying to do, how it had affected their understanding of Laura and her family, and how they might evidence this for us.

Staff reported that reading Laura’s narrative had enabled them to understand and interact with her and her family as ‘people’ in a way that would not normally be possible, in particular emphasising how they had used the narrative as a window on relationships integral to Laura’s life, her family and support network. Bev said:

Laura started coming more alive to me as ... a person, not just an aged care resident who has come to live here. I saw her in a different light
because I was able to know more about her. And especially know her past history when she used to be into her bowls. So I kept that going on bowling days, and for people who’d come in I’d say ‘now this is Laura, she has won fifteen interstate bowling events and, they’d all give a bit of a clap and you’d see her smile and acknowledge it all. I think it gave her a sense of self-esteem. And she was still able to bowl quite well, and I really kept that up with her.

Another interviewee added:

I found that’s where that story was great, because our basic data check lists are quite sterile. ‘Were you in the war?’, ‘Were you in this?’, ‘Were you in that?’, whereas in this story we know how the hairdresser felt about her, how the doctor [felt] … whereas using our social history gathering we would not have been able to get that sort of information.

Elaborating this theme, interviewees emphasised the value of the storytelling approach and the narrative accompanying Laura as a means of affecting the way that they understood and interacted with the resident and her family. In the following example care staff are explaining how they interpret the relationship between Laura and her son, and how they had arranged activities in which he could participate with her with a view to helping him to understand and support her in the future.

B: Yes, yes. And see, knowing that, we can then understand how the son feels, and we can give him a little bit of support and understanding.
D: Yes.
F: Mmm.
B: And we can sort of, gently train him, in a round-a-bout way …
F: Yeah
B: … to interact, with her …
D: … with his mother.
B: … and make them more comfortable together.
JC: So you’re not just helping the son, through that process, you’re helping the mother, you’re helping the …
B: … helping the whole family, yes, yes.

Within a working life that is extremely pressured, and task-oriented, the idea of person-centred care cannot often be realised. Through the
interviews, and exemplified by the ‘gentle training’ foreshadowed by Bev, we found evidence of narrative acting not just as a reminder, but as a resource which has a moral significance for those who care. Perhaps conceived of as a condition that gives substance for them to the notion of person-centred care, we sense that staff welcomed this approach and that it was not considered to be an imposition. Moreover, in the following extract we see how this point has informed a critique of how residents are categorised, and thereby diminished as persons, through the standard admissions process:

D: We get what we call an ACAT, have you….?
JC: No
D: … no. It’s the Aged Care Assessment Team, so they go out and they do a snapshot of why they need to be in here, so it’s all medical. So we sort of know if… Um, I’m sure this is okay on here… know if they’re already incontinent, we know if they’re walking fine, we know if they’re a lifter.
JC: Right
D: Um, but we don’t know that they love to cook.. or..
F: Mmm.
D: … yeah
F: We don’t know anything about the actual…
JC: Which would be…
F: … person…
D: So, so with our ACAT thing, we’ve already got a preconceived idea; you look at that and think, ‘Oh my God, they’re going to be difficult’…
D: Whereas if we have this little side issue, we can see them as a person…
F: Mmm.
D: Not as this incontinent, decrepit old lady, yes.
F: Mmm.

The practical consequences of this critique have included revisions to the admissions procedures, modelled on the process by which they understood the authors to have produced the combined narrative. The new admissions process includes what staff described as a ‘conversation’ in which the onus is on the family to speak to each other and with, for and about the resident. The resulting stories are combined by staff, shared with the resident and family, and developed in an ongoing
dialogue between staff, residents and families. The approach is captured in this extract:

D: Yeah, so, and, and when Laura came in, we’ve actually improved on our social gathering history, some of it to do with how we managed to get more information about Laura, cause it was very, very generic. And we don’t use those forms anymore; we sit like we’re doing at the moment, and have a conversation.

... and it’s a lovely social gathering as well, so even though we’re giving...

JC: So you, you get as many of the...who do you get in, for the conversation?
D: As, as many...
F: Anybody who wants to come.
D: ...sometimes it’s only one...
JC: Yes.
D: ...but as many as we can, to get a good interpretation of their life.
F: Or sometimes you might interview different members of the family at different stages, and then you put the whole story together.
D: Yeah, yeah.
F: Cause everybody knows something different about mum – what the boys know about mum and what the girls know about mum is two different things.

JC: Okay, and on the generic form as well, something I hadn’t thought of is that the generic form assumes that there’s only one story about mum.
B: Yes.
D: Yes.
F: No there’s not, there’s a million stories about mum.
B: Yeah, heaps.

The interviews suggest that this approach facilitates understanding while reducing the risk of constructing as deficient or prematurely foreclosing, as it were, on who the resident is. The acknowledgement of multiple stories and narrators means that staff are no longer only eliciting the voice of one member of the family, who is then obliged to speak for the person only in accordance with the categories that the aged care facility has identified as important for the provision of care. The staff explained that they not only encourage multiple participants
to speak for, with and about the person, but also that their stories may be confirming, disconfirming and elaborating of their understanding of the person. All are collated by care staff in an account which they are using to guide their interactions with residents and family members.

8. Conclusions

The decision to seek residential care for a person living with dementia is typically stressful, even traumatic, for the members of the support network, usually the family, and for the person herself. It is in effect a decision to remove the person from the life-long relationships and people who have sustained and been sustained by her, to acknowledge that such support is no longer possible, and to hand over the person and her care to people who, however well qualified, are strangers.

We have come to see joint problematisation as not only important for the collaboration in the study but for understanding and supporting identity as on-going, co-constructed and, crucially, not to be foreclosed in the transition into care. The on-going, collaborative (re)interpretation of the narrative through the study resonates strongly with the juxtaposing of ‘contrapuntal voices’ advocated by Riessman (2008) and underscores the open-ended fragility of identity foregrounded in Mattingly’s (1998) work on the ‘narrative contexts’ by which health professionals understand those in care. At each stage in the development of Laura’s narrative the question of how it, and therefore Laura, was to be understood among the different participants, including the researchers, came to the fore. And this understanding itself changed as the study progressed and Laura entered the care facility, culminating in the interviews with care staff, whose interventions to support Laura’s relationships with her family and revision of the admissions procedures had not been anticipated by us, Laura or her family. More generally, we would argue that the study supports a view of narrative as having a moral significance, as crucial to how we render and create meaning out of people’s lives (Ricoeur 1991) and therefore critical to the ‘shared background information’ identified by Hamilton (2008b) as essential for positive care interaction.

References


We’re just going to be talking about you…’: Identifying Deficits and Achieving Quality in Nurse–Patient Discourse

Sally Candlin

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the discourses of nurses and patients in their developing relationships, drawing upon my research and teaching in linguistics and discourse analysis, as well as on my nursing practice experiences, specifically within gerontic nursing and nursing education. Each has informed and been informed by the other in an attempt to illuminate some of the issues which arise in discipline-related situations, particularly within the area of the nurse–patient relationship. There is an increasing awareness of the nature of communication in the workplace and its impact on, and by, professional practices. Recognition of the importance of communicative practices in healthcare settings is evidenced by the work of, for example, Sarangi (1990), Candlin & Candlin (2003), Candlin & Candlin (2007), Crichton & Koch (this volume) as well as those texts which address education and communication issues for practitioners (e.g. Faulkner 1992; S. Candlin 2008).

My focus on the relationship between nurses and patients is warranted not least because nurses constitute the majority of healthcare workers. The healthcare situation provides challenges for both parties, and for any study to make a positive contribution to understanding the developing nurse–patient relationships requires individuals’ strengths and deficits to be identified in their discourse, since these not only affect the quality of interactions and relationships but also the professional activity itself. Further, because such a situation is one where an individual with needs has sought the help of others who have skills
to meet those needs, there is the potential for imbalances detrimental to the relationship. We need therefore to search for, and analyse discourse-based evidence of such deficitising imbalances and attempt to understand their causes and effects. Evidence of any imbalance might be observed, for example, in the management of the interaction: how topics are selected and controlled, how turn-taking is managed, and how these and other pragmatic and discourse-analytical features impact on the coherence of the discourse. Participants need to maintain a delicate balance in such an asymmetric relationship as they negotiate their way through complex face-threatening situations. Analysis will demonstrate too how face management strategies are enacted, because it is within the strategic management of discourse that these deficits are constructed. Moreover, drawing on such research, nurses in professional development and training contexts, reflecting on observations of their own discourse, might glean insights into the complexities of professional discourse so as to develop their reflective skills as expert practitioners. Their new understanding of discourse can then underpin strategies to facilitate effective communication between nurses and patients. It is for these reasons that I wish to focus in this chapter on discourse features and other contextual factors, such as the site of engagement, the professional activity, and how these impact on our understanding of the construct of deficit.

2. Background to the discourse site

Nurse–patient relationships can be considered to be representative of many professional–client situations, but particularly within the multi-professional/disciplinary context of healthcare, where professional, social and discourse goals interconnect. Given our concern with discourse, activities such as a nursing health assessment that are specifically discourse-based (S. Candlin 1990) suggest themselves as key sites. The primary goal of assessment is to identify health needs, establish goals, and plan appropriate nursing interventions and outcome measures which are acceptable to, and agreed by, the patient. This is in line with Sarangi & Roberts’ (1999: 473) term ‘joint problematisation’, but not uncontroversially, since what is a ‘problem’ for one person may well not be a ‘problem’ for another. Indeed, many older people have lived with long-standing ‘problems’, so much so that these are not seen as problems or deficits but simply as situations to which they have had to adapt. The problem for the nurse in such encounters is to deal sensitively with situations, not allowing her perceptions to override the patient’s need
to be in control of his/her own life – in short, to avoid ‘deficitising’ the person. Such assessments are multi-dimensional, addressing physical, social, psychological and spiritual domains, including topics such as past health history, social support, dietary needs, dental health, mobility, perceptions of health, understanding of health information/needs, spiritual well-being. It is not always appropriate to address all topics if they are irrelevant to the individual at that particular time, and neither do they need be addressed in any given order. If, for example, conversation around one topic leads the patient into talking about a topic which comes later in the assessment proforma, then it may be more appropriate to address it earlier. The proforma is thus a tool demanding of participants’ discourse skills, but importantly is patient-centred.

The clinical situation can be considered to be one where power – in one shape or form – is a key factor, but this need not in itself be indicative of domination in the relationship. Indeed, the relationship may be seen as an exercise in mutual cooperation and a sharing of power, resources and information. Foucault (1980) takes the view that power is never static, but circulates capillary-like among people. Health assessment can be just such an event, exemplifying the sharing and circulation of power. For this to occur, however, interlocutors must observe the maxims of cooperative conversation because health assessment seeks information about such a wide variety of topics, some of which the patient may consider to be ‘personal’ or ‘private’. The nurse who identifies the appropriate moment to approach such topics sensitively (e.g. bodily elimination habits, family dynamics, grief), relinquishes power and control of the topic to the patient, who can then determine what she wishes to disclose. As a health professional with a body of specialised knowledge, the nurse holds a certain legitimate power sanctioned and endorsed by society, the professional institution of nursing and the employing institution. As such she is not only a professional with specific skills and specialised knowledge but at the same time an institutional representative. The patient also has a body of knowledge drawn from her own experiences of health and illness, from information obtained from others’ experiences, from the media, and more recently from the internet. These sources augment her culturally based life experiences. Such assessment encounters thus carry the potential for tension since it cannot be assumed that either participant knows anything about the other’s particular knowledge-base and experience.

Assessment can take place in any situation where healthcare is delivered, including aged care facilities and a person’s home in the community. Wherever the location, it represents a crucial site wherein
we may expect to encounter participants negotiating critical moments (Candlin 1997b, 2002) where discourse will be strategic and purposive to ensure that relationships are harmonious and chances of communication breakdown are minimised, and that information elicited is accurate, so as to enable multiple goals to be mutually identified. The elicitation and provision of information raises potential discourse problems because of the face-threatening nature of such demands, which often involve the patient in making painful self-disclosures (PSDs) (see Coupland, Coupland & Giles 1991). PSDs, or indeed any admission of need, might be considered to indicate weakness, with the potential to threaten patient’s face. In developing a trusting relationship with the patient, skill and sensitivity is demanded on the part of the nurse if information vital to the assessment process is to be disclosed without this threat to face. The site is crucial not only because it is where critical moments are negotiated, but because eliciting information from a stranger, albeit by a professional who is institutionally sanctioned, risks disturbing the social order and upsetting the power balance. One might argue that the social order is determined by power relations, with individual perceptions of professional boundaries or professional authority not necessarily shared. The quality of the information elicited and/or volunteered is also, therefore, in part determined by these perceptions.

A person’s ‘face’ can be defined as the need of such a person to show her ‘best side’ to the world, to demonstrate strengths and minimise deficits (Goffman 1967). Accordingly, a person may go to considerable lengths to ‘save face’. Maintaining face is related to a desire not to impose on others. It implicitly demonstrates that the person is somebody who can be relied upon and will not make demands on another. Loss of face, on the other hand, exposes a person’s vulnerability. Maintaining the balance of any relationship, but particularly that involving the nurse and the patient, where one partner by definition is vulnerable, provides challenges to the discourse skills of participants. As we indicate, they will need to make considerable strategic adjustments to negotiate numerous critical moments in their engagement with each other if face is to be maintained. Ensuring this is crucial to the production of what one might term ‘quality’ discourse, since it immediately minimises the deficits of one’s interlocutor in that they have no need then to produce defensive discourse. Cooperative communication can be ensured with more chance that the patient will volunteer appropriate information. The assessment situation is a key example of where an interplay of discourse strategies enables facework to be managed effectively without compromising the identification of accurate goals by the patient attempting to maintain face by concealing deficits. Note that
these deficits may relate both to the physical dimension of health and to its psychosocial, emotional or spiritual dimensions. While displays of emotion may be of little consequence to some, to others they can be deeply embarrassing, disturbing the interaction order. Displays of perceived weakness (for example if the patient acts out the role of the ‘deficitised participant’) if handled insensitively by the nurse may lead to a lack of disclosure of patient information. Face management by the patient might result from a desire not to impose on the nurse, or to hide embarrassment. The avoidance of embarrassment is work which is always present in the delivery of nursing care since loss of face of either participant risks jeopardising nursing interventions and outcomes.

Discourse strategies used in any situation are unique to the individual, but particularly in health assessments which are value-laden, potentially face-threatening, and where power relations can be upset. They reflect each person’s own values and agenda, which may not be understood, or known, to the interlocutor, and while the overall goal of the interaction might be mutually agreed, each individual’s goals may be differently prioritised depending on their understanding and interpretation of health, the system, health experiences, and cultural expectations _inter alia_. A mismatch of priorities can create contexts which might pose difficulties in the assessment process, and be potentially fraught with tensions, the causes of which are complex, and, arguably, derive from the asymmetrical relationship. Tensions may result too from competing expectations of both participants in relation to situational processes, in turn impacted on by changes in the socio-political-cultural environment in which relationships are constructed and enacted (see S. Candlin 1997). A complex situation indeed.

The health assessment situation is clearly then a ‘risky’ business, as Candlin and Candlin (2003) asserted. It would not be surprising if we were to observe deficits in participants’ discourse, where deficit is interpreted here in terms of communication problems resulting from power inequities in the interaction, or difficulties in managing situations which are, or have the potential to be, face-threatening. Conversely, we may expect to observe indicators of quality discourse where the discourse of the nurse results in responses rich in appropriate information.

2.1. Health assessment as the site of engagement and research

My interest in assessment as the site of engagement has its genesis in a concern that nursing care of older people in Australia is often delivered in settings where much of the care is given by Assistants in Nursing (AINs), usually women, who may have considerable life experience and
an affinity with this age group, but little formal training. My study (S. Candlin 1997) demonstrated deficits in the discourse strategies of some participants when interacting in an assessment situation. It must be emphasised that AINs were not being assessed on their ability to perform assessments *per se*, for which they are neither trained or sanctioned to perform, but *solely* on their communication skills. It was agreed that using a discourse-based assessment proforma as the research tool might provide a degree of uniformity in the discourse. The following provides some background to this study, and in the light of those experiences we will re-visit some conclusions drawn at that time, with a view to making further recommendations. The discussion will focus on four of the sixty participants, i.e. two dyads out of a total of thirty, supplemented by data from the complete corpus.

*The aim of the study* was to evaluate the communication skills of nurses across various levels of nursing: AINs with minimal or no nursing training to university-educated/hospital-trained Registered Nurses (RNs). The aim was *not* to assess the nursing ability of participants, since discourse analysts do not have such skills, and while AINs are not trained in nursing health assessment skills they *are* expected to communicate effectively with patients.

*The participants* were AINs, and RNs. AINs are (typically) women wishing to work in a caring capacity, in this instance with older people, but who have no formal professional education or training that leads to a recognised universal qualification. There is then no certainty that these AINs had any knowledge of communication theories, other than folk theories acquired informally through everyday interactions. RNs have either previously undertaken a three-year hospital-based training programme, or, in Australia since the mid 1980s, undertaken programmes of preparation for practice in the tertiary education sector leading to an undergraduate degree which is approved by the Nurses Registration Board. The programme may have a ‘communication component’ which addresses issues related to therapeutic communication and the professional relationship.

*The research site* is the health assessment of patients performed in any location where healthcare is delivered, for example, an acute care facility, an aged care facility, or the patient’s home in the community. For the purpose of the study, assessments took place in an aged care facility and a patient’s own home.
Deficit and Quality in Nursing Discourse

The research tool used is a discourse-based assessment proforma (S. Candlin 1990), not demanding the use of ‘clinical equipment’ to record observations such as vital signs – blood pressure etc. In line with the multi-dimensional view of health taken in nursing, the proforma includes over forty health-related topics.

The process: permission to conduct the study was given by the university ethics committee and participating institutions. Discussion with the nurses about the research and the use of the proforma took place before the start of the study. Nurses in turn then talked to patients, some of whom wanted to be involved, others did not wish to participate. Informed consent of both nurses and patients for their participation in the audio-recording was then obtained (S. Candlin 1997).

3. Discussion and analysis of data

The following two examples of data derive from the assessment in her home of Mrs Y by Sara RN; and Mrs B, a resident in an aged care facility by Naomi AIN. Mrs Y had been receiving nursing care in the community for some years, not necessarily from Sara. Mrs B had lived in the facility for an unknown length of time and had contact with many members of the staff.

All names are fictitious to preserve the anonymity of participants and places.

Transcription conventions: // // overlapping speech = = latching one utterance onto another
                              (.) seconds of silence (∗) seconds of expressive sound

Example 1

Sara (RN) assessing Mrs Y’s health needs in her home in the community

1 Sara: what we’re going to do is just talk a little bit about your
        and you
2 you tell me a bit about what’s happened to you since the
   nurses
3 have been coming to you
4 Mrs Y: since the nurses have been coming
Mrs Y: I can’t remember exactly how long it would be nine or ten years
Sara: oh gee that’s a long time
Mrs Y: a long time yes. My niece who was a matron of a hospital she came
to stay with me and then she was shocked that I had sponged myself
stand up and sponged myself. I’d been doing that ever since my husband died you see
Sara: right right
Mrs Y: and I’ve got a caved in chest she noticed that
Sara: right
Mrs Y: and she was really shocked
Sara: right
Mrs Y: so I told the em Jean who was in charge of Day Care so she got
in touch with a nurse
Sara: oh right so that was to get someone to help you have a shower

The assessment continued, talk focusing on living arrangements until Sara skilfully changes footing (line 485) to focus the conversation on Mrs Y’s past health history:

Mrs Y: ...we put all this on the back. I was determined to have a big room
Sara: right it’s lovely // too // um J
Mrs Y: // and // I did but um (..) yes we settled down here
Sara: so when was that you came to live here?
Mrs Y: what was that?
Sara: when was that you came to live he//re/
Mrs Y: //nineteen sixty four
(***** unclear)
Sara: we knew there were going to be shops down there because we
Sara: right right yes
Mrs Y: but this area that's a village (. ) that was supposed to be going to
a playground
Sara: // ah right right //
Mrs Y: / (** uncertain) // parks and things like that
Sara: so up until when you came to live here I guess you never had
much time to be sick did you?
Mrs Y: well eh ( . . ) eh I've seen I've had several operations and um
( . . ) I have I have been sick as a matter of fact the last two
chest x-rays I've had they've said that I've had TB

Example 2

Naomi, (AIN) talking to Mrs B in an aged care facility

Naomi: good afternoon Mrs B. (. ) I'm Nurse S
Mrs B: (...) good afternoon Nurse S
Naomi: and I'm going to interview you if you don't mind
(.) on a few questions about yourself is that all right
Mrs B: well it depends what you're //going(laugh **)// to ask
Naomi: //@(laugh ***) //
Mrs B: don't ask me to drag anything out of the wardrobe
Naomi: no not at all and your first name Mrs B.

The 'interview' continues with Naomi maintaining the focus on the proforma and continues the assessment of Mrs B's physical health:

Naomi: mm physical assessment you're bed bound now aren't you
Mrs B: yes
Naomi: (. ) no outdoor ability have you
Mrs B: no
Naomi: none
Mrs B: unfortunately

Naomi: and your hygiene well that's very good you're a very clean person
Mrs B: ( . . ) um your teeth are they your own teeth
Mrs B: no they're false
Naomi: (laughs*) dentures dentures right (......) and your diet's good isn’t it

Mrs B: yes

Naomi: and your weight

Mrs B: I have no idea

Naomi: (......) no you’re not underweight, moderate now, how are you with your bowels you know when you want to go

Mrs B: oh they’re shocking no

Naomi: you don’t

Mrs B: //no

Naomi: so=

Mrs B: = I can see that light’s on and now what I say goes say goes down and

I can’t explain

Naomi: no that’s all right that’s fine what about your bladder well you’re not controlling that either are you

Mrs B. no

Naomi: we’ll put that down for that um (.) you’ve got no problems with discharge or bleeding have you? Energy level how’s your energy level?

Mrs B: nil

Naomi: nil (......)

Mrs B: I manage to wash meself

Naomi: do you sleep well at night

Mrs B: oh with help I take a very strong tablet

Naomi: do you

Mrs B: mm

Naomi: so you need help there. Now (......) how do you class your health do you

think it’s bad poor or excellent

Mrs B: well I couldn’t tell you but I’d say it was awful

Naomi: poor alright

Mrs B: I couldn’t find the words to put there

Naomi: no that's all right um (.) so you feel poor (.)

Mrs B: I can’t find (.) I’ve said before I told you it’s impossible for me to state

because I couldn’t describe it only to say that I feel you know like
234   Naomi:  (…) now well you feel well but you feel well
235   Mrs B:  no I don’t feel well
236   Naomi:  no all right
237   Mrs B:  I get giddiness most of the time
238   Naomi:  illness I’ll put in illness there well you’ve got none have you

3.1. The asymmetrical relationship and the management of discourse

From the two extracts we can see obvious differences in the nurses’ approach to assessment and also in the exercise of power, the first being in the framing of the event. Sara frames the assessment as ‘talk about you’, suggestive of a patient-centred approach to care with the lexico-grammatical structure ‘we’ indicating an equal partnership. She creates a relaxed environment where Mrs Y can feel at ease. Naomi, on the other hand, chooses to talk about an ‘interview’ and ‘questions’, with her lexico-grammatical choices immediately placing her in a dominant position. ‘“I’m” going to interview “you”’. From the outset there is an asymmetry about their relationship, with Mrs B immediately being disempowered. Questions are directed by Naomi who gives the appearance of ‘being in charge’. The discourse has the hallmarks of an interview where the agenda is known to the ‘interviewer’ but not the ‘interviewee’. As such, Naomi is the one who ‘calls the shots’. This corresponds with Sarangi’s views (Sarangi 1990) that questions in a social situation do not necessarily have to be answered, but in both interviews (and assessments) there is an expectation that answers and information will be forthcoming. He states:

...(in) an interview we would expect to find an asymmetrical distribution of questions and answers, the interviewer initiating the questions and the interviewee providing the responses… (1990: 127)

Mrs B has no idea what the questions are about (line 5) and Naomi doesn’t tell her. It’s a wait and see situation, but further, there are instances where Naomi also provides the answers (for example, lines, 190, 214–215, 217–218). And when Mrs B attempts to correct Naomi (lines 232–235) we can only guess at Naomi’s response on the proforma since Mrs B’s correction is not taken up in the discourse. We noted earlier that while we should not expect Naomi to make a professional judgement, it is reasonable to assume that she should interact with
patients, and this presupposes communicating effectively and sensitively, for example by listening and making appropriate responses. Her seemingly inadequate responses (e.g. line 239), and her attempts to provide answers to the questions before posing them (e.g. lines 169, 202, 217), suggest that she is not really listening to what Mrs B wishes to say. This not only dis-empowers and deficitises Mrs B, but also reveals deficits in both Naomi’s social and discourse skills as she demonstrates inadequacies in her discourse. This is a doubly focused view of deficit as we see Mrs B appearing to make Naomi reveal her interactional deficits, and Naomi deficitising the patient by not taking account of Mrs B’s knowledge and experience. Each question might be regarded as a critical moment (e.g. lines 167, 169, 190, 200–201), but they are posed as questions to which Naomi also gives the answer, not encouraging expanded answers, and when an expansion is offered (line 228) in response to the question ‘do you sleep well at night’ (line 222), Naomi doesn’t take it up in any meaningful way. However, when Mrs B takes the floor in lines 232–233, following attempts to get the message over that she feels that her health is ‘awful’, Naomi still doesn’t appear to be listening ‘... but you feel well’ (line 234). This results in what might be regarded as a moment so critical that it jeopardises the on-going interaction when Mrs B insists: ‘No I don’t feel well’ (line 235). It appears to be resolved when Naomi in line 236 makes a strategic repair, saying ‘No all right’ – which in itself can be considered to be grudging, as we see in line 238 that Naomi is still insisting that Mrs B has no illness. She is not only ‘calling the shots’ by asking the questions but again is also providing the answers. Silverman (1973) makes the point that:

... answers are taken to stand for underlying patterns relevant to future decisions rather than to present talk – while questions will be read as seeking to elicit what “lies behind” the talk of the respondent in order to settle practical outcomes. (1973: 38–9)

In this assessment we see evidence in Mrs B’s answers for future decisions, but we cannot confidently assume, by Naomi’s questioning strategies, that practical outcomes will be settled. The discourse can only be considered to be motivationally relevant (Sarangi & Candlin 2001) in relation to the overall completion of a proforma, but not to settling practical outcomes, i.e. needs as identified by Mrs B or, importantly for this discussion, the establishing of a coherent discourse. By conforming to what she interprets as the institutional agenda, Naomi demonstrates deficits in both her understanding of the assessment proforma (not unexpectedly) and her communication skills, evidenced by her ignoring
Mrs B’s contributions and giving Mrs B little opportunity to introduce topics, so much so that one wonders if she sees any purpose or relevance to the event. The impression is that Naomi has gleaned very little information, appearing not to have learned very much about Mrs B as a person. She is exercising the power vested in her by the institution, but in this instance it is misplaced, since it does not make for the interaction to be motivationally relevant to the assessment. We see then an example of double deficiting. Naomi, in spite of Mrs B’s attempts in her extended responses to make relevant the assessment to her health needs, does not appear to respond in any meaningful way. She does not, for example in this extract, appear to show interest in her interlocutor, the impression being that the relationship has not moved forward and does not form the basis of evaluation and decision-making (line 213). What we are seeing is an inappropriate use of power enabled by and articulated through the exercise of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1993) held by the nurse and mis-recognised as legitimate by the patient. It represents Naomi using her capital, not ‘capital’ in the Marxist sense, but capital in non-material form – cultural, symbolic and social.

Sara, however, has legitimate power conferred on her by the bureaucratic institution and her professional body as a result of her professional education and training, and demonstrates quite different discourse strategies. She not only frames the assessment process as ‘just talk…’, the low modality of ‘just’ immediately reducing any anxiety. She might equally have said ‘it’s no big deal’! She continues in this relaxed vein, implicitly inviting Mrs Y to initiate topics. Mrs Y also seems to be quite relaxed, if this can be measured by length of turns and time taken holding the floor. Sara shows her interest in Mrs Y’s life by interjecting to ask for clarification (e.g. lines 18, 473 and 475) and offering minimal and encouraging responses (lines 13, 15, 471, 480). Nevertheless, the asymmetry of the interaction is not in doubt since it is the nurse who in this instance takes responsibility for the conduct of the assessment in her framing of the interaction. This asymmetry is not inappropriate, since the patient’s on-going health state has necessitated her utilising the statutory services. As such, she recognises Sara’s professional authority, and the legitimate power vested in her by socially prescribed regulations. This is justified, since throughout the assessment process Sara demonstrates professional competence, taking the opportunity to keep the discourse focused on health. However, Mrs Y does not passively accept Sara’s dominance, rather she confirms it by offering information (lines 7–9, 476–479, 487–489), appearing to think it appropriate to occupy the floor for longer, since she has information which Sara doesn’t have. This feature occurs throughout the interaction, with
Sara’s turns being succinct and relevant. While her turns are short, and certainly shorter than Mrs Y’s, they are nevertheless crucial for the elicitation of information. Indeed by not imposing her agenda on Mrs Y, the patient is encouraged to disclose whatever *she* regards as important and is of concern to her (see Faulkner 1992).

At no time then is Mrs Y dis-empowered, there seeming to be a sharing of control. Any deficits in Mrs Y’s knowledge-base or discourse appear from the outset to be ‘neutralised’ by the cooperative discourse behaviour engendered by Sara’s introduction – handing apparent control to Mrs Y (although as we later see, Sara takes firm but gentle and polite control of the discourse situation). Sara’s discourse strategies instance this, e.g. when framing the event as ‘talk’ she simultaneously gives guidelines to Mrs Y (lines 2, 3) so that Mrs Y is not left guessing about Sara’s agenda. Mrs Y hears that the interaction is all about herself, with the implication being the focus is on her health: ‘since the nurses have been coming to you’. Why else would the nurses be visiting if it were not to do with her health? There is a sharing of the discourse space as Sara demonstrates sensitive listening by her encouraging minimal responses. By appropriately taking the opportunity to change footing, thereby initiating new topics (e.g. lines 18, and 485), she maintains the patient-centredness of the situation, indicated by Sara’s listening skills, and use of information (e.g. lines 465–486), and later in the assessment, confirming its motivational relevance, which eventually facilitates evaluation and decision-making, for example:

749  Mrs Y: so anyhow I was going to a tea party and when I came back
750       there was my piano
751  Sara: oh lovely, right right you must get a bit lonely you must get
752       a bit lonely now do you when you’ve had such a full life

In line 752 we see Sara taking the opportunity to change footing to evaluate Mrs Y’s social/emotional needs, taking her cue from information in lines 749–750 ‘going to a tea party’ and ‘my piano’, an instrument well-known in Mrs Y’s earlier days to be central to many social activities. Simultaneously she is moving the conversation forward and establishing coherence in the discourse, not only exemplifying effective discourse skills, but demonstrating all the hallmarks of both the expert nurse and the expert discourse practitioner. She does not rely on ‘analytic principle’ to guide her situational response, but on her ‘enormous background
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of experience’, intuitively homing in on the problem (Benner 1984: 32). Far from deficitising Mrs Y, Sara, by demonstrating her expertise evidenced in her strategic use of discourse, is able to zero in on what is of value to Mrs Y (lines 470–471), that is, the establishment of her home.

3.2. Managing discourse in face-threatening situations

The data indicate that in order to maintain face, Sara in particular, utilises quite subtle strategies. While she appears to have professional deficits in her knowledge of Mrs Y’s health history, she manages not to admit this overtly, rather she turns it into a suggestion for the conduct of the interaction (line 2) ‘you tell me a bit about yourself’. Each disclosure of Mrs Y triggers a strategic response from Sara, for example a minimal response ‘right right’ (line 11) mirrors Mrs Y’s matter-of-fact statement about sponging herself. The conversation continues until Sara ascertains that Mrs Y’s relationship with the community nurses was triggered by a need for help with personal care. It appears that the situation is not a problem for her and is not a cause for Mrs S to be embarrassed. Whether this disclosure would be made so willingly to a non-nurse is conjecture, but as discourse is situation- and interlocutor-specific, we might assume that the topic of personal care and hygiene is not one for everyday social situations but is considered by the patient to be a ‘nursing topic’. Similarly an exchange between Cheryth RN and Mrs S around the topic of elimination, is treated matter-of-factly by both participants, with information being given (line 70) resulting in a despairing ‘no’. This in turn elicits a sympathetic response from Cheryth (line 72) before Mrs S volunteers more information (lines 74–76) which results in further health advice and a token of gratitude from Mrs S. (line 82), thereby enhancing Cheryth’s face.

Cheryth RN is assessing Mrs S in the community after she has sustained an injury requiring pain relief

70 Cheryth: did the doctor tell you they’ll probably make you constipated
71 Mrs S: n //oo/
72 Cheryth: //(∗∗) sympathetic laugh// they will so// kee//p a good eye on that
73 Mrs S: // ooh/
74 I get very I’ve got a lot of trouble like that because I’m on
75 (X medication) as well
Cheryth: right well do you take anything normally for your bowels?
Mrs S: no
Cheryth: you don’t you might need to take something so keep a good eye on it /em... you probably need some (X) with (Y) or something like that
Mrs S: okay //thanks for telling me that//
Cheryth: // you just need to be aware// of that early because people go for days and then all of a sudden realise

Cheryth maintains the patient’s face by engaging in what might be considered to be nursing discourse, i.e. eliciting health history and giving health advice. Interestingly, when Cheryth asks earlier about Mrs S’s accident, she responds with a joke (lines 5–6), whether she is embarrassed at falling or does not want to impose on Cheryth, it is obviously painful to disclose:

1 Cheryth: now Mrs S can you let me know what happened initially
2 Mrs S: I was going to get some pot plants from (?). It’s a fern house.
3 My friend is here for three weeks. I was putting them in the
car this morning and I just missed my footing and finished
up in the rock lilies and the azaleas. I’ve hurt the rock lilies
but not the azaleas…

After attempting to make light of her situation, Mrs S continues in a matter-of-fact manner with her account of the fall and visit to the hospital, with Cheryth ignoring Mrs S’s light-heartedness. This is in contrast to Mrs B’s situation, where Naomi is less subtle, seeming to gloss over situations which might cause embarrassment, by answering as well as posing the question (Example 3.2, lines 169, 190).

4. Conclusion: achieving quality in social and discoursal outcomes

An overall comparison between the discourses evidenced in the examples suggests that at the crucial site of nursing assessment in healthcare
locations we can identify critical moments. The discourse of each moment is unique to each nurse and patient and, as a consequence, there may be different relationship and assessment outcomes. The approaches of the experienced nurses are strategic, with each moment in the discourse being motivationally relevant in terms of the assessment. Deficits in knowledge of the patient might be expected, hence the need for an accurate assessment to address such deficits. Sara strategically and expertly neutralises the patient’s deficits by appearing from the outset to relinquish control of the interaction to Mrs Y. This immediately provides for the development of a trusting relationship, not only facilitating the disclosure of appropriate information, but allowing the nurse later to strategically change footing. Face loss, in the revelation of patient deficits, is minimised as face-saving strategies are utilised effectively. The behaviours of both nurse and patient allow for a display of cooperative discourse behaviour as they each dance to the tune of relationship-building while identifying and achieving discourse and health goals (see Sarangi & Roberts 1999: 473). This mutuality is a feature also identified by Crichton and Koch (this volume). Of remaining concern is that deficits identified in the discourse of the AIN may impact negatively on the relationship, and therefore on patient care. This highlights a need for situational change, specifically for improvement in the nurse’s discourse skills. It is of note that educational programmes are currently available to AINs with communication being a component of the curriculum.

I have suggested in earlier work (S. Candlin 2008: 251–2) that discourse is always open to a range of interpretations and determined by the people and events which shape its structure and use. It is dynamic and constantly evolves as the relationships which are mediated by our discourse develop and evolve. While discourse is the vehicle for delivering the message, the message both shapes, and is shaped by the situations and circumstances. The situations include individual differences in interlocutors’ needs and deficits of which the nurse must be aware. Such awareness can be raised in undergraduate programmes and reinforced in continuing development programmes. An education programme addressing this issue is the basis of the text *Therapeutic Communication: A Developmental Approach* (S. Candlin 2008). Using a total situation-focused (TSF) approach, scenarios are developed around a family’s health needs over time. The focus is on communication, where discourse analysis provides the basis for learning. This approach can have a liberating effect, with students being empowered to recognise the potential for quality discourse to enrich interactions and nursing care. By being empowered they can facilitate
empowerment in others, thereby enriching professional relationships and nursing care.

References


‘You don’t want to look like that for the rest of your life’: Contested Discourses of Loss in a Normative Societal Context

Lesley Stirling, Lenore Manderson & Jennifer MacFarlane

1. Introduction

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women globally, affecting around one in eleven women and accounting for 21 per cent of all new cases. The majority of women survive after surgery, often followed by radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy. For optimal outcome, however, women must make relatively prompt decisions regarding treatment pathways, including those concerning segmental mastectomy, lumpectomy, or radical mastectomy (and variants), immediate or postponed reconstructive surgery, and type of implant or tissue flap. Their decisions are informed by biomedical and social discourses relating to risk, prognosis, recovery and deficit. Increasingly the choices are set out very evenly on web-based information sites maintained by major cancer foundations and government organisations (for example, the Better Health Channel, offered by the State Government of Victoria in Australia, or the website of the American Cancer Society).

However, women treated for breast cancer, and others, have long been critical about surgical decisions and insensitivity to women’s experiences of outcome (Aronowitz 2009; Kuhl et al. 2007; Linn 1973; Rhein 1993). For some decades, patient support has been provided through psychological counselling in relation to procedure and prognosis, and there is now also increased public understanding of the wide significance of the disease. Lobbying from breast cancer support groups has led to increasing attention being given to the social and emotional impact of loss of breast(s), and to the complicated attitudes of women
to body loss and scarring, including in relation to the appearance of, and speaking about, breasts (Manderson & Stirling 2007).

While the information now provided to women provides the pros and cons of the timing, extent and options for surgery and other treatment, it does not make decision-making by women easier (Pierce 1993; Vodermaier et al. 2009). This is in part because of the contradictions in information available to women, with the evenness of guidance on government-supported websites somewhat undermined by websites promoting post-surgical breast reconstruction to women who have had segmental or full mastectomy and for women with small or asymmetric breasts. After-shots typically depict women with large pneumatic breasts (LocateADoc.com, a US site), and even non-commercial sites offer women advice which feeds into gendered constructions of body image and desire. The American Cancer Society, for instance, sets out the advantage of immediate breast reconstruction because the chest tissues are not damaged by radiation therapy or scarring, so the final result looks better and less surgery is required. The option, delayed reconstruction, may be the only choice for women if they require radiation. But the reasons for the choice are only partly related to the need for adjuvant therapy, and partly, the ACS suggests, to ‘personal factors’ including overall health, stage of breast cancer, size of natural breast, amount of tissue available for flap grafts, whether the woman wants reconstructive surgery on both breasts, hence suggesting cosmetic serendipity of breast cancer (with a ‘tummy tuck’ its added advantage), insurance coverage for the unaffected breast and related costs, type of procedure being considered, size of implant or reconstructed breast, and desire to match the look of the other breast (American Cancer Society).

So decision-making around the management of breast cancer remains economic, social and cultural. Conservative and sexist attitudes continue to hover over decision-making associated with breast surgery, and the management of cancer is complicated by the site in ways unparalleled for other body parts. There are thousands of before-and-after photos of breasts on the web. By contrast, the web-based information on testes implants is very small: there is far less interest in prostheses after testicular surgery for cancer, injury or torsion compared with, for example, restorative surgery for undescended testes or buried penises, and there are virtually no photos on the web.

Cancer is an inherently ‘identity-altering’ experience (Mathieson & Stam 1995), and in addition to the decision-making required in the course of treatment for the disease, women who have undergone body-changing treatment for breast cancer are faced with the task of
reconceptualising their identity within a normative medical and societal context. Drawing on narratives elicited through interviews with women who have had breast cancer, this chapter explores how ‘discourse’ and ‘deficit’ can be understood in relation to the experience of treatment for breast cancer.

2. ‘Loss’, ‘absence’ and ‘deficit’

A discourse of loss and/or absence is common in women’s accounts of their experiences of breast cancer and mastectomy. While the words *loss* and *absence* frequently have negative connotations and collocations (in contrast to expressions such as *free*, as in *cancer-free* or *disease-free*), they are not inherently problematising in the way that the expression *deficit* is. A lack becomes a *deficit* when it is both one which must be deplored and one which there is a drive to remedy. While narratives of mastectomy are inherently narratives of loss, there is no reason *a priori* why they need be framed in terms of deficit.

The concept of deficit is relevant at multiple levels in discourse of and about women who have had the experience of diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer. At the literal and physical level, there is an actual loss of a body part, which must be anticipated and negotiated, and which in addition to issues of identity gives rise to the ontological and referential task of how to conceptualise and refer to the site of the absent body part as women go about the task of incorporating corporeal change into their own (new) self-image (Manderson & Stirling 2007; Manderson 2005; Manderson & Peake 2005).

Women must also negotiate the metaphorical meaning of this physical loss in a societal context in which, as Iris Marion Young (1990: 90) comments, breasts are the ‘primary things’ in the gendered identity of women. As well, in the course of treatment with chemotherapy, women frequently experience the more public if more temporary loss of their hair (Peltason 2008; Freedman 1994). These physical losses index a more abstract loss: that of an unproblematically imagined future.

At another level entirely, women and the healthcare professionals with whom they interact are characterised by differential levels of knowledge and authority in their interactions (ten Have 1991; Ainsworth-Vaughn 1998). The experience of having cancer also brings with it multiple experiences of interactions in the role of ‘patient’. As patients who are female, our narrators are typically in deficit in both medical knowledge and authority with respect to the medical doctors with whom they report interactions. However, there is not a
simple binary contrast here, as women also draw on their experiential knowledge to construct a new basis of authority for themselves.

3. Data and approach

The narratives on which we base our analysis come from a corpus of twenty ethnographic interviews with women who had had mastectomies, most commonly due to a diagnosis of breast cancer but in some cases for prophylactic purposes. These were originally collected for a larger study exploring the nature of embodiment in the context of disease and disability (see Manderson 2005; Manderson & Peake, 2005; Manderson et al. 2005). Women were purposively recruited in two Australian states through ‘snowballing’ and personal referral. All study participants were Australian-born and English speakers, with a mean age of 58 years (range 35–78). The women were diverse in terms of education and employment, but all but one had been married and had children. The majority had had breast cancer in their 40s (mean 46.5).

Interviews were conducted at a venue of the woman’s choice and were designed to elicit narratives of illness through loosely structured questions. They were often extremely lengthy and several were conducted over multiple sessions. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and subsequently a subset of four interviews, representing approximately three hours of interaction, were re-transcribed for detailed linguistic study in the tradition of conversation analysis (CA) (using the transcription conventions in Jefferson 1984). In addition to the twenty women interviewed, questionnaire schedules were sent to a further eighteen women who resided in areas that made face-to-face interviews difficult; these women often wrote extensive narratives of their experience or included tape-recorded responses in addition to completing the questionnaire. The results and examples discussed in this chapter are taken from, and are illustrative of, the full corpus of data, though with a focus on the linguistically transcribed subset of face-to-face interviews. All names are pseudonyms either chosen by the women or allocated by us.

This study, then, situates itself most broadly within the domain of narrative studies of illness, many of which have drawn on accounts by people who have had cancer (see Mathieson & Stam 1995), and of which a significant subset are women who have had breast cancer (e.g. Thomas-MacLean 2004; Langellier & Sullivan 1998). In this context meaning is produced not just individually but dialogically (Mathieson & Stam 1995; Riessman 2002; Gwyn 2000), even in a sociological interview
in which the interviewer/researcher often deliberately attempts to back-
ground their own discursive contributions. Our focus in this chapter is
on the role of specific lexical and grammatical choices in the discursive
construction of the experience of breast cancer. We consider specifically
how women speak of their bodies post-surgery and how they report
their interactions with others, both medical and non-medical, in the
course of their experience. Our approach thus represents a marriage
of ethnographic research with discourse analysis informed by narrative
analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis.

In section 4 we use the example of reference in speaking of a body
with a missing part, to illustrate the ways in which the physical effects of
breast cancer and its treatment are spoken of by the women in our study.
In section 5 we consider the ways in which women speak of and con-
struct knowledge and authority, both of the health professionals with
whom they engage and of themselves, paying particular attention to
the use of devices such as generalised you. Finally, in section 6 we anal-
yse the differing ways in which women report their own speech and
those of their interlocutors in interactions with health professionals and
non-medical contacts.

4. ‘If you look down on my breast . . . but then there’s
nothing’

Manderson & Stirling (2007) investigated the ways in which the women
in our study addressed the complex ontological and referential problem
of conceptualising and speaking of a body part which is no longer there.
Women identify this problem directly in talking of their bodies in terms
of ‘nothingness’, ‘two numb nothings’: one woman said ‘when I look
in the mirror I don’t actually look at my breasts because they’re not
there’.

As we said in section 2, the women in our study described the event of
mastectomy in terms of loss, typically using a passive construction with-
out attribution of agency or intentionality. Thus women talk of their
breast being taken (off) or removed (‘all that breast’s been removed’) or
say that they had lost a/my/the breast. Sometimes their choice of verb
evoked images of violent mutilation at odds with the objectivity nor-
mally expected in a medical context: Jill said ‘if I should have my breast
cut off’ and referred to ‘those bloody paintings with people’s tits cut
off’; similar images are found in literary representations of breast cancer
(see Wear 1993). At times a construction, analysable ambiguously as a
passive or an indirect causative, was used: women spoke of having *had a mastectomy* or *had a/my/the breast off*: Carol spoke of ‘having the whole breast off’.

In describing their experiences, women needed to refer to their bodies at various stages in the spatio-temporal continuum. We found that women used three strategies in referring to this part of their body post-treatment. One was to refer to the body part simply with the first-person singular pronoun *I/me*, in a kind of reverse synecdoche by which the whole was used to identify the contextually salient part. This form of reference reflects and reinforces the status of the breast as a singular marker of the feminine. Women made such comments as: ‘not that I [i.e. my breasts] was big’; ‘didn’t want him to see me’ [i.e. my surgery site]; ‘how he would react to me’; ‘the girls would see me’; ‘look at my body’; ‘look at me and tell me how you feel about me’; ‘looked at myself in the mirror’.

When they needed to make specific reference to it, they generally still referred to the site of their surgery as *my breast* or *the breast*. The distinction between these two forms of reference, one with the possessive pronoun as determiner and one with the definite article, tended to correlate with the context of utterance. First, although the referent was highly activated in the context of discourse and so did not need to be carefully introduced, the form *my breast*, anchoring the referent to the deictic centre of the discourse, tended to be used earlier in the interviews.

More importantly, the definite article was used in taking the perspective of another rather than the self, primarily in medical contexts. In one case, describing her experience of waking up from surgery to find she had had a mastectomy, a woman reported her doctor as follows: ‘he arrived within minutes and said “Sorry, June, it was a mastectomy, I had to take the breast”’. Use of the definite article here is presumably less hurtful than *your breast*, but also perhaps ontologically more appropriate to a diseased body part under consideration of removal and thus alienation from the body. In most cases where the woman was reporting her own perspective, the possessive pronoun was more likely to be used, the main exceptions being contexts in which the woman was speaking highly negatively about medical problems and procedures, and in cases where they describe looking at their bodies in the mirror, often for the first time post-surgery (*just the breast gone*). This had a distancing effect in comparison to use of the possessive pronoun. Thus Jill talks of ‘this problem with the breast mound becoming infected’ and ‘the fact that the breast was absolutely black and swollen’.
The women in our study frequently framed their physical loss as a deficit, explicitly invoking societal norms to present their new bodily appearance as dysmorphic. Thus, Jill, who had had multiple medical problems following her mastectomy, including the failure of an internal prosthesis, spoke at length of the disruption to her life and sense of self as a result: ‘I was walking around feeling like an absolute monster’.

Comments such as this are most frequently made in the context of descriptions of women themselves looking at their bodies transformed after treatment or in contexts where others are looking at their bodies, either in actuality or in imagination:

Jill: I look at it and I think mutilation, damage, defect, yuck.
Carol: It really is an ugly sight...it’s not a good sight...it looks completely abnormal.

And Glenda, in describing her worries about her husband seeing her body for the first time after surgery (‘a man likes a woman all in one’), says:

Actually see, y’know, and think, shit, you know. Is he going to love me the way I am, looking at, y’know.

She reports her speech to her husband at this time:

I’ve only got the one breast and it’s going to look stupid.

Many women speak of the relationship between the breast and their sense of gendered identity. Glenda comments that ‘me with one breast, I’m half a woman now’. This is consistent with other research conducted by Manderson and colleagues with women who had had gynaecological cancer or other gynaecological problems that disrupted their sense of embodied and performative gender, expressed by women in terms of being ‘sort of not a woman’, ‘not a real woman’, ‘half my womanhood out the window’ (Manderson 2010; Markovic et al. 2008). A few women explicitly spoke in more positive terms, either focusing on the pragmatic necessity of treatment in the context of a life-threatening illness and the need to move ahead from this experience, or de-emphasising the effect of the mastectomy itself (in some cases, noting other aspects of treatment, such as lymphoedema resulting from the removal of under-arm lymph nodes, as causing more problems). The view of others is still
important: one woman wrote of her husband’s attitude in these terms: ‘He says I’ve got a great body and only occasionally misses the breast’.

The same societal norms influence medical professionals in advising women about options such as breast reconstruction, and often it is regarded as an expression of empathy and support to make it maximally possible for women to take up such options: one woman reported her oncology surgeon commenting in such a context: ‘you don’t want to look like that for the rest of your life’. Increasing work from the 1960s has built up evidence around the psychosocial adjustment of women who have had breast cancer, and differences in post-surgery sexual problems, emotional problems, depressive illness, adjustment in marriage and return to work with different treatment approaches (Lee et al. 2008). Although much of this work has argued a significant benefit in terms of body image and sexual experience for women whose breasts were ‘conserved’, other studies find little difference between mastectomy with reconstruction and mastectomy only in terms of quality of life, body image, and sexuality (Glaus & Carlson 2009; Jacobson 1998; Montazeri 2008; Potter et al. 2009). Where difference existed, it was not necessarily in support of reconstruction, suggesting – not surprisingly – that the physical body is only part of the story. In summary, as Lee and colleagues illustrate (2008), outcomes reported by women who have had breast cancer are similar, whether they had breast reconstruction after mastectomy or mastectomy without reconstruction. There is consistent evidence also linking social support to better psychosocial adjustment to breast cancer (Irvine et al. 1991). This support is emotional and practical at multiple levels, including through communication and its role in validating a woman’s perspectives and decisions. This is borne out in our data as women describe as highly significant their early post-treatment interactions with family and community members.

5. ‘didn’t know a damn thing about it and nobody nobody was there to tell you...nothing at all’

When a person recounts an event in a narrative interview, he or she takes on responsibility to represent others, including medical authority and medical knowledge. We suggest here that the authority is indexed in the ways by which women position the speaker and also situate medical talk. We have seen a little of this in section 4 as we noted differences in forms of reference used in medically framed segments of the narrative. In this section and the next, we consider two further aspects of this linguistic indexing.
Women’s lack of medical knowledge in relation to decision-making and in coping with their experience of treatment is frequently woven into their narratives. For Glenda, from whom the quote heading this section derives, this is a recurring theme, almost a lament throughout her account.

However, women construct themselves too as having an experiential authority, and they use narrative of personal experience as educative (Warren et al. 2006; Yap 1999). Stirling & Manderson (submitted) show how women use generalised (or impersonal) you to invoke and situate themselves within authoritative membership categories of breast cancer survivor, mother, and woman in telling their stories. In these contexts you is used as a discursive option for reference to or inclusive of self, and as a universalising versus individualising choice (see also Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990; O’Connor 1994). Depending on the membership category (Sacks 1972; Schegloff 2007) invoked, it can function to establish the common ground of the interlocutors, or to establish the experiential authority of the speaker with respect to the interviewer. Women position themselves as members of a group which may or may not include the interlocutor but which in either case recruits generalised knowledge, and position themselves as authoritative. In the example below, Glenda invokes the membership category of ‘mother’ which she knows that the interviewer also belongs to, and uses other markers of soliciting agreement to invoke the interviewer’s shared knowledge and recognition of the truth of what she is saying: rising terminal intonation and pausing, and use of a questioning you know (for all displayed conversation, please see the Note on transcription conventions, before the References section):

G: um,
   and that was frustrating because,
   (0.8)
   you know when you've got babies you-
   (0.5)
   it’s mother and baby you know?
I: [yes]
G: [you] want to hold them close to your body and your chest and,
   k-
   (0.6)
   kiss them and cuddle them and,
   (0.4)
   all those things I couldn’t do with her?
In contrast is the following passage, part of a very negative description of Glenda’s experience of radiotherapy, which illustrates very well her theme of healthcare professionals failing to prepare her adequately in providing information about treatment. Here she interrupts this description to explain to the interviewer a fact which she had not known, and upon which she is now framing herself as an authority with respect to the interviewer:

G: [and-] and-

and she didn’t even tell me that they could see me you know, through-

through-

(cos they got this glass window?)

where they watch you.

I didn’t even know that you know.

and she left me.

she just left me in the room,

The examples bring into sharp focus our interest in this chapter on the sociolinguistics of contestations of power and on resistance to or acknowledgement of authority. This includes the embodied authority of the patient and the acquired and structural authority of the doctor or other allied health professional. Decision-making regarding surgery and follow-up is the result of a largely unequal negotiation between a woman and her consultant physician. It is certainly not a decision of the woman alone, despite the rhetoric of patient engagement and empowerment. Rather, doctors set out the options, and then interpret them to women. At the start of the process, women have limited knowledge of breast cancer in general and their own cancer in particular, and so typically accede to the acquired technical authority of the doctor – authority that derives from the composite of his (less often
her) formal learning, ability to interpret new specific information from ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging and biopsy reports, specific diagnostic and/or surgical skills and experience, and authority within the hospital (e.g. as consultant physician). These threads of authority may be compounded by structural authority which may include gender, class, age and race.

This authority is encapsulated in a narrative fragment, where medical equivocation is evidence of technical complexity rather than indecision or lack of skill. And so Jill explains:

J: see they said to me it was a one percent chance that it was cancer, they said it was a cyst because it moved, it rolled.
I: =yes
(1.3)
J: they said it was very complicated because there were two types of cancer (0.7)
(nodular) and (interductal)? and um, they weren’t sure which way to go.
[...] and I was just about to leave the hospital?
and they came in and they said there’s been a bit of a mistake, with the (0.7) (histology)
and,
(1.3)
it would seem that there’s still cancer on the incision line?

Although Jill is recounting medical uncertainty (‘they weren’t sure which way to go’), this is explained because it was ‘complicated’; certainty can be established only after the doctor(s) have had a chance to look at the histological reports.

Notice, though, that Jill does not distinguish who ‘they’ are in this extract – context indicates the referents to be hospital personnel but this use of antecedentless they is typical in our data to introduce medical voices. ‘They’ has neither gender nor specific location, but has authority. Jill cannot make a decision: in the end, ‘they’ have to do it for her.

In other cases, women individualise specific doctors and other medical professionals (as in he, the doctor or in specific contexts of contrast,
my doctor), and by doing so, and identifying gender, the narrators personalise the encounter and clarify that they are referring to a specific doctor distinct from others – e.g. ‘they rang my doctor’. Other people in clinical settings remain depersonalised, and are typically reported as interacting as a collective. Thus one woman explained, ‘the staff […] they were treating me like I was mad, going what do you mean, your chemo?’ – and women spoke of other professionals as generic – so the social worker, the shrink, the doctor (Manderson & Stirling 2007). This contrasts with the ways that women speak of family, friends, members of the breast cancer support group – where gender (he or she) and relationship (my husband, my friend, the women in the group) are specified.

6. ‘and I’d been crying out for help…’

As Ochs & Capps (1997) point out, acts of remembering and narrating in part constitute ways of seizing authority with respect to the remembered event, so that storytelling becomes inherently an act of taking authority. Even in situations of relative powerlessness, a narrator is the expert in their own story. However recollections are also vulnerable to contestation. In this context reported speech functions as ‘evidence’ (Holt 1996; Clift 2006).

Various studies have claimed that choices surrounding reporting speech index authority – in particular in the choice of the reporting verb and expression referring to the reported speaker (Johnstone 1987; Hamilton 1998; Calsamiglia & Lopez Ferrero 2003; Sakita 2002). In our data women narrators represent their own voices differently in different contexts, so capturing both shifts in authority and subject position. As MacFarlane (2009) reports in more detail, in general, women talk more of doctors when reporting a doctor–patient interaction, and more of their self in self–non-doctor. In addition, in general, women were more likely to use simple past tense for doctors or others in authority – he said, they said – but use tense alternation and the present tense in reporting non-medical contacts. To an extent the choice of reported speech introducer reinforces positionality – a range of expressions, including go and like and progressive aspect, were used in narrating the speech of friends (‘so, they’re telling me…’), ‘and she went, like’, ‘she’s going, like’, ‘so he’s, like, saying’) in contrast with the definitive authoritative voice of the doctor (‘he/they said’). The following segment is a report of a conflict with a friend.
J: who responded with oh haven't they done a fantastic job!
you look fanTAStic!
and I was so infuriated.
(1.0)
I: °mm°
(0.9)
J: what do you mean I look fantastic?
(0.8)
she’s going,
oh well at least they don't sag and all this sort of stuff,
and I was just like fuming.

These are generalisations, however. Women do make their own decisions, and in doing so, challenge and are challenged by their physicians and surgeons. When there is a clear disagreement between the doctor and patient, reporting shifts from the asymmetrical negotiating voice of present tense to matched tense, as reflected in the following said-said example:

J: I asked the specialist when he came in,
he said you might keep your breast for a year or two,
(0.6)
but there will definitely be trouble up the track.
(1.2)
and I said well I'll take that option,
(1.3)
and I'm leaving.
(1.0)
and he said we'll,
you can't have the radiotherapy because,
(2.0)
it will damage,
(0.4)
all cells so we won't be able to follow (0.5) up.
(0.9)
and I said well I'll have to,
(1.7)
take good care of myself,
but I take the option of (0.9) no radical ss-
more radical surgery.
A second example relates to an argument between woman and surgeon, in which the woman wanted reconstructive surgery after the mastectomy, and her doctor advised her to have expanders placed under the tissue at the same time. Part of their reasoning appeared to relate to expediency and economy, as explained:

J: and they said it was really difficult to arrange I said I didn’t care!
   (0.5)
   and they said it took two surgeons to-
   (1.7)
   you had to have the guy doing the mastectomy,
   and then you had to have the reconstruction guy,
   and it was all problematic and,
   blah blah blah,
   and I said I didn’t care and ‘was’,
   (1.2)
   carried on a bit like a child.

Hence in recounting to others, including to the interviewer, interactions with doctors, women shift how they speak when they move from contexts of medical advice, when they are subordinated, to moments of negotiation and resistance to medical authority. This occurs also when women recount conflicts in medical encounters related to incorrect diagnoses, disputed treatment proposals, insensitivity shown by doctors or others, and failure of medical staff and others to recognise the experience of the person being ill.

In the next example, both health staff (like the social worker and the psychiatrist) and the woman are reported in present tense – this is an ongoing contest:

J: and I’d been crying out for help,
   like to the social worker and to the shrink,
   (0.8)
I: ‘mm’,
J: who kept saying,
   (0.8)
   how well I looked.
   and I kept saying,
   (0.5)
   yes but I always put my makeup on and I always present well,
   but I’m telling you I’m not feeling that great.
In the following example, the health staff (they) are reported in continuous aspect (‘they kept coming in and saying’) and the woman uses the simple past to emphasise her own definitive stance:

R: and they kept coming in and saying
(0.4)
do you need any pain-killers?
(0.4)
are you sure you don’t need [any]-

I: [mm]

R: I said no I haven’t got any pain!

In this section we have reflected on how reported talk captures authority and identity as represented by the person speaking, and in relationship to those with whom or of whom they are speaking. As identified, there are differences in how medical and non-medical voices are introduced, and how certain medical voices are constructed. Our aim in sections 5 and 6 has been to show how women narrators construct authoritative voices for themselves.

7. Conclusion

In our data set of narratives of the experience of mastectomy and other treatment for breast cancer, women use language to maintain their differential perspective from that of medical practitioners in speaking of their bodies and in presenting recalled interactions. In some cases women also use it to construct an objective framing of events, which both foregrounds their own experiential authority and allows them to avoid an objectifying stance which would require them to speak of self and body as acted upon. We have illustrated this, taking as examples the use of reference in speaking of a body with a missing part, the use of generalised you as a universalising versus individualising option in the context of describing personal experience, and the differential linguistic construction of reported discourse by self and by medical practitioners. Women frame medical experiences as other: at best, distanced from themselves and at worst, sites of conflict.

Decisions about choice of lexical item and tense reflect the salience of particular objects and individuals, and the communicative goals – the point of the storytelling. As illustrated, in narratives of medical encounters and illness experiences, people move between the personal and impersonal, individual and specific, gendered and general, depending
on how the story teller wishes to position herself and to situate the events and outcomes.

Artists, scientists and community women, through advocacy and support groups, have maintained a high profile in relation to breast cancer. While there has been sustained emphasis on the negotiating power of women, and of joint decision-making, there has also been considerable undermining – psychological subterfuge, if you like – in which women are positioned as bound by the conventions of gender. The Breast Cancer Foundation of Western Australia, for instance, while advocating for women and their agency in decision-making around cancer treatment and rehabilitation, also – drawing on gender-based understandings of cancer and its meanings – organises ‘Pamper Days’ for ‘ladies’ who have had breast cancer, which include ‘a gourmet lunch, hair styling, beauty treatments, head scarf design, makeup artistry, a new outfit and a professional portrait photograph. We believe that pampering is about the whole person – body, mind and soul. Our Pamper Days offer an experience for the whole body to promote feelings of relaxation, rejuvenation and well-being’ (Breast Cancer Foundation of Western Australia). Similarly, one woman who had had breast cancer reported being told as a ‘joke’ at a ‘Look good…Feel better’ session that if the organisers saw women without their makeup they would arrange for an extra chemotherapy session to be scheduled. The cosmetic industry’s ‘Look good…Feel better’ initiative (http://www.lgfb.org.au/) is promoted by health professionals to women with cancer, and states as its purpose ‘to help them manage the appearance related side effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, thereby helping to restore their appearance and self image’. While ostensibly supportive of women and doubtless experienced positively by many women, such cultural responses to breast cancer and its treatment are also a response to, and reinforce the construction of, femininity as an important site of potential deficit for women with breast cancer.

While women typically frame the physical losses they experience during treatment in terms of deficit, we have shown how women discursively act to control the process of constructing deficit, and (re)constructing normalcy, for themselves (or not) within a normative societal context. Their talk about physical loss can be contrasted with the ways in which they deal with the asymmetries of knowledge they also talk about. The linguistic choices of the narrator highlight how discursive interaction provides a medium to allocate or strip the subject of the account of authority, or to shift relations of authority in subtle ways that empower the narrator. This suggests rather greater
empowerment for women than might appear to be the case if we relied on the formal indicators of power, or of outcomes, without attention to interactions. As we have noted, women who have had breast cancer tend to give specificity and affiliation to non-medical voices – ‘my husband’, ‘my breast support group’. But when patients recount interactions, either in clinical settings or with others in relation to the clinic, they take on responsibility to represent others, including medical authority and medical knowledge, and index authority and its absence again by using different forms of speech and choice of phraseology. By doing so in reported speech, within a narrative to a third person, women locate their own contributions to the conversational context against a backdrop of ongoing speech (‘and I was going, no . . .’) and position themselves in relation to others. But these same lexical vehicles allow women also to undermine and challenge authority, as occurs when a woman inverts the choices of style, and speaks of her interaction with a doctor in terms of ‘and he's going .. and I said’. She has the last word.

Note

The following transcription conventions, adapted from Jefferson (1984) and Gardner (2002), are used:

- [ ] point of overlap onset
- ] point at which an overlap terminates
- = no time gap between the utterances (‘latched’ utterances)
- (0.0) elapsed time in silence by tenths of a second
- : short prolongation of the immediately prior sound
- :: long prolongation of the immediately prior sound
- . a falling tone
- , a continuing tone
- ? a strongly rising terminal intonation contour or questioning intonation
- CAPS especially loud talk
- Under speaker emphasis
- °word° comparatively quieter than surrounding utterances
- ( ) descriptions of non-linguistic sounds in the recording
- ( ) unknown utterance
- (word) unsure of utterance
- - a cut-off
huh one syllable of laughter
$ slight or suppressed laughter, usually occurring within a word, e.g. wor$d.
<word> spoken faster than surrounding utterances
>word< spoken slower than surrounding talk
.hhh an audible inward breath with the number of ‘h’s indicating the length of the breath
hhh similarly, an audible outward breath

References

Contested Discourses of Loss


Part IV
Relationships in the Context of Management
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Identity Work in Consultancy Projects: Ambiguity and Distribution of Credit and Blame

Mats Alvesson & Stefan Sveningsson

1. Introduction

The consultancy industry – broadly defined – has boomed significantly over recent decades. A large and increasing proportion of the well-educated parts of the workforce are employed as management, IT and engineering consultants, communication advisors, etc. Large accounting firms employing hundred of thousands of employees also work with advice-giving on a consultancy (or consultancy-like) basis. So do law, advertising, architecture and many other kinds of firms. Consultancy work means coming from the outside, adding advice and/or expertise, helping client firms. In principle, the external professional is supposed to enter with objectivity, neutrality and supplementary or superior knowledge and increases the rationality and efficiency of client organisations. Client-orientation is an espoused dominating value and most consultants have a strong material incentive to satisfy their clients. Prompted by the prestige, high fees and attractiveness of consultancy jobs, talented and hard-working employees are often recruited and many consultancy firms make huge efforts in recruiting, retaining and developing talented people (and ‘letting go’ those viewed as less competent). All this could imply that relations between consultants and their clients are on the whole consensual and positive.

This is, however, not always the case. It is quite common that people involved in consultancy work – clients and consultants – attribute limited competence and bad faith to each other when characterising the consultancy process. Much of this attribution is aimed at consultants, but also clients receive their share of negative assessments and pejorative talk. Moreover, consultancy projects score high on ambiguity
(Alvesson 2004; Clark 1995; Engwall & Kipping 2002), which has strong implications for the identity constructions of consultants – and to some extent of their clients. Our practical interest in deficit arises because the construction of people’s skills and accomplishments as deficient, be this through commission or omission, undermines the expertise on which their professional identity depends.

In this chapter we elaborate on this theme with a focus on management consultants. We do not take the view, however, that one can understand consultancy without taking seriously the relation between consultants and clients. Most of the literature on management consultancy is consultant-focused (e.g. Alvesson et al. 2009; Ernst & Kieser 2003). However, understanding consultancy work relations calls for consideration of the views of both consultants and clients, an approach that is seldom taken (exceptions include Fullerton & West 1996; Kitay & Wright 2004; Kipping & Armbrüster 2002; O’Shea & Madigan 1998). It is commonly suggested that consultants and client managers interact at the boundaries of the organisations, making the formation of solid working relationships difficult (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003). Arguably, the ambiguous character of consultancy work and shifting working relationships between consultants and clients increase uncertainty and anxiety regarding results, responsibility and self-esteem (Sturdy 1997). This easily creates tensions and provides much space for sense-making in which the other – consultant or client – is to be blamed for shortcomings and failures. To create and maintain a certain sense of a valued self thus becomes especially important (Knights & Willmott 1989). In this context the discursive construction of deficit becomes central in order to blame the other and defend oneself from being discredited by others.

We explore here how both consultants and clients (alike) after an organisational change project tried to create and maintain a positive sense of self by engaging in identity work in order to maintain a valued self in contested working relations (Alvesson & Willmott 2002). Significant in the sense-making of those involved was the distribution of credit and blame in directions that supported a positive (capable) identity of the self and a deficit (insufficient) identity of the other. The construction of deficiencies in the other is thus regarded as a way of creating and maintaining a favourable identity of oneself (competent, able and moral) through crediting oneself for positive efforts and/or outcomes of work.

Accordingly, we draw particular attention to the interplay between blaming/crediting and identity constructions as (a) triggered by the
ambiguity of consultancy work (Alvesson 2004; Robertson & Swan 2003), and (b) guiding particular ways of constructing the process and outcome of such work (Weick 1995; Helms Mills 2003).

The objective of the chapter is thus to develop an understanding of blaming/crediting and the construction of deficit as key themes in identity work for management consultants, with particular relevance for understanding client–consultant relationships. We begin with an overview of identity in general as well as in the context of consultancy, and then move on to a case study of a management consultancy project in which we present the voices of consultants as well as client firm managers before proceeding to an interpretation of the nature and function of blame/credit discourses in the area. We end with some more general conclusions on discourses of deficit in relation to identity constructions.

2. Identity work in management consultancy

As with all popular concepts, identity is used in an endless number of different ways (Alvesson 2010), but we use it to refer to subjective meaning, making sense of: ‘Who am I and – by implication – how should I act?’ (Cerulo 1997) A personal identity implies a certain form of (often positive) subjectivity and thereby ‘ties’ a person’s feelings, thinking and values in a particular direction (competent and able). A related concept is dis-identification (Elsbach 1999) or anti-identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). Identity here emerges out of a negative stance; it shows deficiencies such as insufficiencies, often pronounced in contested situations.

People in organisations often engage in identity work, aiming to achieve a feeling of a positively valued self-identity as well as a basis for social relations, necessary for coping with work tasks and social interactions (Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Knights & Willmott 1989; Pratt et al. 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003).

Despite their comparatively high status, consultants must often struggle for the accomplishment, maintenance and positive change of self-identity (Alvesson 2004; Deetz 1998). A special feature in consultancy work is the strong contingency upon the opinion of the client. There are often elements of randomness, arbitrariness, politics and conflicts involved here (Jackall 1988; Ramsay 1996; Sturdy 1997). The unpredictable, relationship-dependent and fluctuating character of consultancy can thus make it difficult to accomplish and sustain a stable, steady growing feeling of competence and respect (Deetz 1998).
We report here on how those involved in a project tried to accomplish it in terms of distribution of credit and blame. A significant aspect of this process of distribution is the construction of deficit, here understood as a process in which the characterisation of the other as insufficient and inadequate in some significant respect facilitates the construction of oneself as competent and adequate in vital respects.

Self-identities are constituted, negotiated, and reproduced in social interaction; without an appreciative client it is difficult to regard oneself as a competent consultant. As we see it, people engage in identity work when the routinised reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued. It is triggered by uncertainty, anxiety, questioning or self-doubt (Collinson 2003; Knights & Willmott 1989). The lack of confirmation by significant others is a major driver of identity work aiming to lead to a restoration of a non-confirmed identity.

We thus examine people’s identity work in terms of how they try to maintain their self-esteem by assigning credit and blame to their own as well as others’ accomplishment. A key element in this process is the deficitisation of the other and corresponding facilitation of oneself as competent and capable.

3. Method

Our empirical material is a case study of a project involving a consultancy firm and their client, a high-tech company. By studying identity in the context of work and client relations in a specific project, this study offers a view of the work context from the significant post-project phase, where individuals create a view of what they have done, accomplished, and, in the light of this, how they perceive themselves. Through studying both consultants and client managers from projects the relational dimension is also illuminated.

The consultancy firm, Big Consulting (BC), is a global corporation in management consulting. The client, High Tech (HT), is a global corporation in the life science area. We interviewed all significant participants of the project: three consultants and three managers. Two of the three consultants – a senior consultant (Farringdon) and a junior consultant (Hudson) – had been involved in previous projects in the industry studied. The third consultant (Wilson) was relatively inexperienced. The interviewees from HT were all managers from support functions. The most senior (Burrows) had initial contacts with BC and Farringdon in particular. Another manager (Rogers) had daily contact with the consultants and was the one most engaged trying to sell in the project.
internally. Hodges, the third manager, was the manager most involved in daily work with the consultants.

We work mainly based on hermeneutic ideas (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009; Denzin & Lincoln 2000), although with some consideration of poststructuralism (Rosenau 1992). The interview accounts are considered in terms of different kinds of contextual logic, e.g. an account is not necessarily expressing ‘facts’ or deeply anchored ‘personal meanings’, but may also be seen as outcomes of dominant discourse, political actions, impression management, identity work etc. (Alvesson 2003; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Silverman 1993).

4. The project

The consultancy project concerned re-engineering of support services at different geographical locations of HT. This involved standardising routines and consolidating support services (finance services: payrolls etc) and property issues, at company locations in the country.

4.1. Accounts from participants

The consultants

As far as the project outcome is concerned, the leading consultant, Farringdon, describes the project as fairly successful, mainly due to the initiative and push from the consultants:

I think we delivered an organisation structure that I think can lay the ground for work effectively within service. In the long run there have been cost cuts amounting to a hundred million a year. I think that the exact connection from what has been done in terms of cost cuts without us doing this or not is hard to tell. The main part of the cuts wouldn’t have occurred if we hadn’t pushed. We have a very positive image today. We installed a management control system, making intra-site coordination in a country possible, leading to exchange of experiences, and learning from each other and realising that we don’t need to do similar things at all sites. I personally think that we ought to have done more, moved further with revolutionising solutions.

He attributes the lack of full success and really radical changes to the shortcomings of the people from the client firm:

The client was too cautious, nothing happened, nobody from management pushed. The reason was their history. HT was a spoiled
organisation, a little fat with its ‘Star Product’. Everybody working there is more or less a millionaire. The office where I worked is really fancy, nice building. They avoided real pressure and tough decisions and preferred to be satisfied. It has been unclear what managers wanted to achieve, it has been volatile and people have switched positions, it’s been unclear.

The positive results are accomplishments of the consultants, while the non-realised potential is attributed to the lack of drive and confusions of the clients, seen as less professional.

The second consultant, **Hudson**, is somewhat more careful both in terms of the outcomes of the project and the reasons for the project potential never really being fulfilled:

> We didn’t reach our goal and got things done that we were supposed to. The work done was good. But since it was stopped the project was too costly in relation to the value it added. The feeling among us consultants was that ‘this is not a very brilliant result’. We thought we had done a good job, but the result in relation to the goals was a disappointment.

According to Hudson the client people appreciated the consultants’ work, but the former were not able to provide team lead:

> The customer thought the project was great; they had gained very much from it. They saw that we had reached very far. We didn’t reach what we wanted, but if the customer had sided with us, then we could have reached much higher, that’s how we felt. The problem was that we didn’t receive any team lead from the client. And it’s hard to be the one pushing.

Hudson is more modest in crediting the consultants but confirms Farringdon’s opinion that they have done a good job, ascribing unrealised potential to the deficits of the client.

The third consultant, **Wilson**, also emphasises the difficulties of getting the client people to deliver, but she is more understanding. She points to the huge changes that took place within HT, and the difficulties of mobilising enough people and time to do everything that was intended. She also says that she had much less work during this project than normally, an effect of the client firm’s personnel not being able to deliver what was needed for the consultants to work. Here there is a
more mild critique, but mainly in respect of the inability of the client organisation to deliver their part of the work needed to reach results.  

_The clients_

Interestingly, clients tell similar stories, although with inverted credit and blame references. Hodges says that the consultants were far too conceptually oriented and too little action-oriented:

BC thinks in terms of concepts. But doing an analysis in order to document the consequences if we implement the changes, _that_ is an assignment for them. I am dissatisfied with what BC has delivered. BC doesn’t take responsibility. They think conceptually about how it could work but haven’t gone out and acted in the business.

BC people are viewed as untrustworthy and unwilling/incapable of taking responsibility for implementation and practice. Hodges:

When _I_ inform BC I try to be as substantial as possible, to find the core. But _BC_ present enormous amounts of information, loads of pictures. It’s hard to analyse what is being said. They're professionals in making PowerPoint presentations.

The consultants were also strongly oriented to marketing and eager to ‘create’ possibilities to charge more. They start working outside the initial system in order to market themselves. I said in a meeting that I felt like a sheepdog. BC people were the sheep and I had to catch them. Farringdon and I had discussions about this.

It was when he ‘took charge’ that things started to improve:

I don’t know what we paid them last year, but it’s very few deliverables. The deliveries started when I entered and we have delivered a lot since, an accounting organisation, we’ll deliver, we’ll merge support systems.

The consultants were unqualified and too junior, had ‘relatively little experience’, ‘seldom have business experience’ and were ‘not senior enough to be able to discuss things in a concrete way in order to get the improvements that we want’, Hodges claims. In this discourse, we meet morally unreliable and not very competent consultants and a client manager being focused and result-oriented.
Another manager, Rogers, echoes the views just cited and says that ‘but if we look at these consulting companies, they’ve got very young people, they’re not always experienced, and I’m not ready to pay 1500 Euro a day for teaching a BC employee’. He also underscores the professional deficits of the consultants, claiming that ‘Consultants are like rabbits, if you don’t have the situation in control they’ll reproduce uncontrollably, it’s in their interest to make as much money as possible’. Talking about his own role, Rogers suggests that:

You must engage competent resources (from the client), competent people to discuss with, who have experience. (Also) that there are resources in the company who can take the theoretical experiences of the consultants and transform it into specific circumstances. If those resources don’t exist there’s a risk that it’ll go wrong because then it builds more on theory than on the specific company situation.

Rogers repeats the shortcomings of the consultants in terms of competence (inexperienced), personal qualities (insufficient drive) and professionalism (reproduce uncontrollably) and emphasises the role of himself as running the project. He implies how he is himself as a manager through claiming that: ‘In running this project it takes a leadership that is clear, fair and that is ready to take punches. If you don’t have power and if you’re not tough you won’t be able to run this.’

Burrows, the client project manager, explains that the BC people ‘can very quickly jot down what’s been said’:

The strengths of this new generation are that they are so incredibly good with computers. If Rogers and I had done that it would have taken twice as long to write it down and summarise. Farringdon did it in no time. It was finished half an hour after we had discussed it.

However, the overall results of the project were not so remarkable, Burrows explaining limited outcomes through pointing out ‘that everything can’t be accomplished has political reasons’. Nevertheless, good and impressive presentation for top management about the project meant a significant element of success:

What have come out of this are the presentations that Farringdon and Blake had for management in London [and] everybody thought that this was an amazingly good and well-accomplished project.
He refers to himself and his own role as follows:

To lead is a matter of being a team leader. Coach. Choosing the people to include in the A-team. (It’s) planning, follow-ups, stimulation and above all, comparing. Most important is the ability to choose the right people. The problem has been to get the ones I want on the ship, a few couldn’t cope. To take responsibility as project leader is demanding in terms of time, goals and scope. I’ve got the experience and age, I can sense which people fit in different situations. I have managed well.

Here Burrows presents himself as an experienced and competent leader who can assess, lead and support people.

4.2. Constructions of credit and blame
The ambiguity around the accomplishments makes it important, as well as providing space, for the participants to maintain a positive self-identity. This is carried out through self-serving accounts involving the distribution of credit and blame.

The consultants agree that the good work and the success accomplished are ascribed to themselves and responsibility for failure is ascribed to the client. They blame the client for the non-realisation of the project potential and for not following up high-quality proposals with implementation.

In contrast, the client managers ascribe success to their own leadership. Hodges initiated change and displayed firmness in an unproductive and chaotic situation. Rogers took the lead, faced difficult situations and stood straight, displaying character and order. Burrows takes credit for being in charge and leading the project, implying that consultants left on their own do not lead to success, the key being his own project management, thus portraying himself as the great leader.

Hence, participants’ reasoning following the question ‘What did I (or we) accomplish?’ produces self-serving accounts according to which they each give the credit only to themselves for whatever positive impact/efforts were accomplished and that either the consultants, if you are a manager, or the clients, if you are a consultant, are to be blamed for the deficits of the project. As this was not a disastrous project, and there was no external pressure to find scapegoats, this is somewhat surprising. That a large part of the project was dropped is not uncommon and is not something that makes defensive moves necessary or implies blaming.
But the latter – and its corresponding position crediting – appears to hold rich meanings in terms of identity constructions.

4.3. Credit and blame as identity work

Blaming generally varies in terms of identity-sensitivity, and frequently the attributed deficit of someone else has little bearing on one’s own identity. However, in our case credits and blaming are part of strongly identity-invoking accounts. They display distinctiveness, direction and coherence about the persons involved, as individuals and, in the case of the consultants, as a work group. Especially interesting in terms of distinctiveness is that the construction of ‘the Others’, i.e. consultants and clients respectively, serve as significant objects of comparison and are characterised in terms of deficits such as incapacity and incapability. Blaming/crediting involves vivid experiences which contribute to ‘effective’ identity work.

The consultants’ identity work, in terms of securing a sense of self, is the expression of drive, consistency, knowledge and ability to participate in radical changes. They also indicate that they are clear, professional, active, result- and long-term oriented, in contrast to the client, who they construct as being unclear, passive, non-knowledgeable and unreliable. The construction of the ‘fat’, ‘spoiled and passive’ Other, i.e. the client people, allows for the consultants to view themselves as ambitious, energetic and efficient. Hence a positive identity and a negative anti-identity are emerging as simultaneous constructions. These constructions serve the identities of the involved consultants to the extent that they express an interpretative logic consisting of normalising elements of what it means to be an ideal consultant (Meriläinen et al. 2004). They consist of several stereotypical elements (discourses within the profession/field) such as being rational, professional, decisive, well-presented and results- and change-oriented. Subjects draw upon available, field-specific discursive resources that guide interpretation and communication. A more functionalist discourse on management consultancy offers an interpretative logic, which, in the context of relevance here, can be seen as a ‘credit-template’, i.e. it gives support in framing and forming crediting. However, the ideal consultant stands out magnificently against the background of the Other, the (typical) manager, here constructed in terms of deficits, such as spoiled, soft, irrational, ‘fat’ and incapable of running a competitive business. These constructions also to some extent draw upon ‘blame-templates’, but seem to be more idiosyncratic and less commonly available in
public discourse on clients. The ideal and capable consultant (us) and ‘non-ideal’ or deficit manager (the Other) here presuppose each other, producing a ‘negative symmetry’.

As key elements in the identity work of the client managers, Hodges and Rogers seem to be taking charge of potentially chaotic situations, which creates positive self-identities. The construction of the Other in deficit terms, such as unreliable, ‘conceptual’ and potentially chaotic, supports the managers’ constructions of a distinctive self-identity. The idea of the greedy and theoretical consultants invites and frames the realistic managers as undertaking tough and firm leadership. Here, in particular, available blame-templates – but to some extent credit-templates – of the ‘manager of substance’ are being drawn upon. Burrows’ construction of self-identity is achieved by referring to the consultants’ abilities mainly in ‘safe’ areas such as computer skills; the consultants make the client project manager emerge as highly experienced and capable. Here difference is not solely negative but a complementary mirror of oneself (a ‘positive asymmetry’). The managers’ constructions express an interpretative logic consisting of normalising elements of what it means to be an ideal manager. Being a manager is about being tough and down-to-earth, i.e. exhibiting determination and consistent and directive leadership and being a senior in charge of junior people. The managers thus stand out as ‘real leaders’ and ‘men of substance’ in a quite stereotypical way, against the background of the Other, the (typical) deficit consultant, constructed here by two of the managers as superficial, young, commercial and slick, and incapable of understanding company specifics. The interpretative logic of the ideal manager (us) and typical consultant (the Other) presuppose each other and discursively regulate the identity work of managers.

4.4. Identity confirmation

Interestingly, in our study, there are hardly any identity claims backed up by the other side. The – according to themselves – effective and focused consultants are viewed by clients as slick traders in sales and symbolism. The consultants are portrayed as superficial and greedy, better at producing smokescreens through mysterious concepts than really improving the client’s business. The client managers – who according to themselves are real leaders – are incapable of providing sufficient team leadership and represent a cautious and spoiled organisation, according to the consultants.
The case illustrates that interview talk is often not so much informative as performative – discourse is used to accomplish effects (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Whittle et al. 2008). Possibly all this negative talk fulfils a therapeutic function – consultancy is complex and tension-ridden and people may get frustrated (Alvesson 2004). The negative stories produced may thus partly be about letting off steam. There is also a political dimension attached to blaming the other but this seems to be less significant than the identity aspect in our case: the interviewees seem more straightforward than politically sensitive. Consultancy projects thus seem to offer an excellent opportunity for engaging in identity work through creating deficiencies and blaming the Other, since oneself and those one is talking to are to some extent protected from hearing the version(s) of the other part after the project. One can thus see the discourses of deficit as a defence – the views of those that don’t confirm one’s sense of self can easily be disregarded.

Given the relational nature of identity, leading to uncertainty and anxiety around self (Collinson 2003), the lack of identity confirmation by the other side fuels identity problems. In our case, people are busy portraying the Other in deficit terms and undermining their identity claims. To maintain a self-image as (at least) the competent (let alone ideal) consultant is difficult if the client people see you as better at PowerPoint presentations than ‘substance’. And a manager being viewed as cautious, slow, ‘fat’ and spoiled will not have his or her ego as a real leader inflated by the consultants. Dealing with lack of confirmation, or even negative feedback jeopardising and threatening positive identity claims, involves three aspects:

- The neutralisation of the validity of the sceptics’ opinions through constructing them in deficit terms – their views are thus marginalised (in our case this was done by assigning blame for deficiencies in the project)
- The constructions of others as negative mirrors of the subject (anti-identities), which reflect positively on the subject
- The use of publicly available scripted representations of the other actor involved, increasing the credibility attributed to local constructions. In the case of consultants and clients there is an abundance of stereotypes and stories, including horror stories, available. We label these ‘blaming-templates’, put into operation in self-serving discourses of deficit.
5. Conclusions

Large parts of contemporary working life concern work with symbols – talk, text and plans – that often score high on ambiguity in terms of the competence, action and contribution of the people involved. This is clearly the case with the work of consultants. The absence of clear confirmation of people's skills and accomplishment is a threat to experiences of security, self-confidence and coherence.

This may trigger strong efforts to (re-)create a sense of a valued, competent and coherent self, e.g. to do intensive identity work. The ambiguity is however also a ‘resource' in that it makes it possible for the people involved to move between criteria, allowing multiple versions of successes and failures, thus facilitating the identity work.

The anti-identity then emerges as a key theme in identity work in consultancy projects. Here the deficit Other is constructed to present a counter-picture to oneself. It has the double advantage of disarming negative feedback of the Other as well as holding up a negative mirror through which the self emerges as distinct, superior and valued. It can be seen as a defence against the potential ‘deficitising' of others, at the same time as the use of a discourse of deficit indirectly sharpens and confirms one's own identity as clearly different and superior.

Attributions of credit and blame here become important and can be found in many studies of consultancy projects (Henriksson 1999; Jackall 1988; Kitay & Wright 2004; Shapiro et al. 1993). In our study, the people involved construct themselves as morally and intellectually or practically superior as well as highly action-oriented, while claiming that there is a deficit of these virtues in others. This finding contradicts a lot of literature emphasising the supplementary roles of consultant and client, e.g. the professional helper and the qualified purchaser of expertise. Our case primarily indicates the opposite: there are strong tensions and inclinations to work with strong ‘we (or I) and them’ divisions in terms of credit and blame. The people involved are active in apportioning blame and deficit, less (in our case) for political than for psychological purposes.

Blaming and deficit discourse adds colour, richness and specificity to identity-supporting narratives; it is presented as building on ‘proofs’ of what actually happened and the mistakes and personal shortcomings and deficits of those to be blamed. It forms a key ingredient in a moral story. Blaming and deficiting sharpen anti-identity – and thus identity – opening up further opportunities for crediting and identity-constructing while repressing doubts about one's own shortcomings.
Discourses of deficit in our case contribute to identity work through: (a) marginalisation of views and accounts of those viewed as responsible for bad things; (b) ascription of an implicit positive identity to those not deserving the blame; and (c) provision of credibility for attributions of credit. There is thus interplay in crediting and blaming in identity projects. Blame sharpens and magnifies credit, the deficit of others strengthens one’s self(-image).

We can distinguish between (a) event-focused blaming/crediting, addressing acts (or the absence of acts) leading or contributing to outcomes, and (b) subject-focused blaming/crediting, where it is the personal qualities of the Other to be blamed and oneself to be credited that are brought forward. Effective identity work calls for both ingredients: accounts involving both the demonstration of acts and their effects as ‘linear blaming/crediting’, and a kind of ‘hermeneutical blaming/crediting’ indicating the qualities or deficit thereof of people producing (or not producing) acts indicative of outcomes.

A ‘full’ identity construction process in which blaming/crediting is central thus involves:

- Positive and negative acts and outcomes (pure success limits need for blaming and deficit)
- Good and inferior subjects
- A complementarity between these acts, outcomes and subjects
- The use of available crediting/blaming templates, i.e. public or local discourse including stories on strengths and deficits
- An interpretive logic producing a credible story.

The key issue then is how the construction of deficient/blame-worthy and/or positive/praise-worthy acts and characters is credibly linked through identity and anti-identity work. In this way, the discursive construction of others as deficient plays a potentially important role in how people do identity work in a society increasingly short of stable and reliable identity anchors.

**Note**

1. Examples of blaming-templates of clients would be the greedy and exploitative client treating consultants in ways they would never treat their own staff, clients wanting rubber stamp consultancy – reinforcing their own views, etc. (Deetz 1998; Shapiro *et al.* 1993).
References


On the Discursive Construction of Knowledge Deficits in the ‘Alter’

Peter Kastberg & Marianne Grove Ditlevsen

1. Introduction

Our underlying understanding when discussing and analysing the discursive construction of knowledge deficits is that language, knowledge and power are inextricably linked (Foucault 1972). In a workplace setting these intrinsic features become even more pronounced. And even though we concur with Sarangi and Roberts when they state that ‘[w]orkplaces are held together by communicative practices (1999: 1), we should not allow ourselves to overlook the importance of Engeström et al.’s addition that ‘[o]rganizations may emerge through conversation, but they do not emerge for the sake of conversation. They emerge and continue to exist in order to produce goods, services, or less-clearly-definable outcomes for customers or users. If you take away patients and illnesses, you do not have hospitals’ (1999: 170). When isolating a specific instantiation of workplace-related discourse, namely that of management communication (see section 2) – be it within late capitalist society or new capitalism (Gee et al. 1996) – we are dealing with a field of study where asymmetrical power relationships (Sarangi & Roberts 1999: 6) not only permeate discursive action but indeed structure it – and very openly so.

Any corporation’s management communication constitutes itself in a wide variety of interdependent managerial and communicative events, channels, modes, media, genres and texts (see e.g. Cheney et al. 2004). We will not, however, be looking at organisational communication in general; in line with the title of this chapter, we will focus on the discursive construction of knowledge deficit in the ‘alter’ (‘other’) within a management setting. Since we are dealing with the phenomenon of discursively constructed knowledge deficits in a management setting, a
few words on the convergence of communication and knowledge management practices are in order. Knowledge management scholars (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Davenport & Prusack 1998) have gradually left behind the idea that knowledge can be managed, since knowledge is not a matter of its representation (in, say, databases), that is, knowledge is ‘not a thing but something living, situated and embedded in work practices’ (Scharmer 2007: 69). With this comes the insight that we do not manage knowledge but communication about knowledge, i.e. the people involved in constructing, communicating and utilising knowledge (Kastberg et al. 2007). In our chapter, we will conduct an in-depth analysis of one of the means of organisational knowledge communication, namely the in-house magazine. Due to the fact that the in-house magazine is (still) considered to be one of the most important means of informing employees of managerial decisions (Kounalakis et al. 1999), the in-house magazine will serve as our point of departure for exploring (i.e. identifying, describing and discussing) what qualities of knowledge deficits may be constructed in the ‘alter’ (and what ‘alters’ may be constructed) as well as the motives for such discursive constructions.

2. Communication as an instrument of management

We do not intend to recapitulate the history of ideas of organisational or management communication theory (see for instance Miller 2003), neither do we intend to paint the broad picture of prevailing organisational management fashions. Our point of departure for dealing with communication is one of ‘corporate communication’. Van Riel defines corporate communication as:

[…] an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with the groups upon which the company is dependent. (van Riel 1995: 26)

Corporate communication is the paradigmatical capstone of organisational communication in the sense that it: (a) subscribes to a systems perspective on communication (e.g. Luhmann 1992); (b) embodies an integrated approach to communication (e.g. Cornelissen 2004); and (c) understands integrated communication to be a matter of upper-level management (e.g. Christensen et al. 2008).
Within the scope of this chapter, we wish to isolate two key aspects in the above quotation and point to some of the far-reaching consequences of this understanding of communication. First of all, being an instrument of management means that the communication function of the company has attained a prominent status; long gone are the days when communication was a mere clerical matter dealt with somewhat summarily or ‘on the side’, as it were. As an instrument of management, corporate communication is situated among the other management instruments in the strategic organisational landscape (e.g. Lorange, 2002). The prime function of corporate communication as a management instrument is to be found in the latter part of the quotation, i.e. ‘to create a favourable basis for relationships with the groups upon which the company is dependent’. In order to establish and develop such stakeholder relationships, all corporate communication efforts are planned efforts forming an integrated part of the company’s strategy, its tactical decisions as well as its day-to-day operations (e.g. Cornelissen 2004). Needless to say, communication as seen and utilised from this perspective has lost all innocence or – to put it in Habermasian terms – corporate communication is indeed strategic action.

Second, being harmonised has several influential implications. First and foremost it means that the company-internal as well as company-external communication efforts must adhere to the same basic ideas, ideas which are documented in the mission, vision and values statements of the company. In principle this serves to ensure that all communication activities of the company are in perfect agreement with the company’s credo (e.g. Gatley 1996). In focusing on company-internal aspects of corporate communication – as we do in this chapter – harmonisation explicitly means aligning the employees with the mission, vision and values of the company (Christensen et al. 2008). Adhering to Watzlawick’s axiom that ‘you cannot not communicate’, corporate communication sees all employees as ‘ambassadors’ of the company (e.g. Petersen 2002), which is in line with the New Work Order’s notion of ‘empowerment’ (Gee et al. 1996). Employees are ambassadors in the sense that how they communicate about the company to their communication partners outside of the company (e.g. family, friends, communities, media etc.) will reflect back on these communication partners’ appreciation of the company. In essence, the idea behind this is that if employees communicate a favourable impression of the company then this is valuable PR for the company; and since it comes via employees (and not, say, the company’s branding department) then that PR is credited – so the rationale goes – with being especially trustworthy.
and hence especially desirable to the company’s branding processes (e.g., Schultz et al. 2006).

Having sketched out the background, we are now able to address the particular kind of deficit to be examined in this chapter, namely the discursive construction of knowledge deficits in the ‘alter’. Introducing the Luhmannian ‘alter’ (1992) – as opposed to more mechanical (and passive) notions of audience typically defined outside of a text by a ‘sender’ (Windahl et al. 2002) – we stress the fact that ‘alter’ emerges exclusively as a discursive construction in a text. Within our framework we define a knowledge deficit as non-alignment with the company credo. The discursive realisation of such deficits may take on any form of ‘talk, text, and interaction’ (Sarangi & Roberts 1999: 1). The craving of organisations and companies for this kind of alignment has given rise to (among others) the practice of strategic corporate journalism as a means with which to achieve such alignment (Kounalakis et al. 1999). In this chapter we take a closer look at one instance of this practice in which this deficit is likely to be discursively realised, i.e. in the foremost media of strategic corporate journalism, the in-house magazine.

3. Means and methods

Before presenting our analyses, we would like to briefly present some thoughts on our methodological background. Generally adhering to a mixed methods approach (Johnson et al. 2007), our fundamental point of departure is neither theory, nor method nor praxis but the (above) research question itself. In order to give an account of our analyses of the data, we have developed and applied a method assemblage (Law 2004: 14) consisting of a topic analysis (Li & Yamanishi 2000; Ditlevsen et al. 2007), an analysis of roles and positions (Berger & Luckmann 1991 [1966]; Davies & Harré 1990), and last but not least an analysis of the use of argumentation (Toulmin 1964 [1958]). This assemblage mirrors the complex nature of our research question and allows us to integrate three different, yet interdependent, perspectives of the discursive realisation of knowledge deficits in the ‘alter’, in as much as it allows us to synthesise and to reflect upon the ‘what’ (the topic), the ‘who’ (roles and positions) and the ‘how’ (textual realization).

4. Analyses

The empirical object of analysis is the article ‘The hot chair – black gold or necessary evil’, which is an approximately 1,400 words, two-page
article placed in the middle of an employee magazine of forty pages. In addition to the written text, the article features a fact box and a half-page photo. The company in question is Dong Energy, one of Northern Europe's leading energy groups. The magazine has a circulation of some 7,000 copies and is published three to four times annually. The textual material investigated is not 'naturally occurring interactions' (Drew 1991: 21). That is, we are neither dealing with an oral, hic et nunc interaction nor with a transcription of such an interaction, but with a written text pretending, as it were, to be an interaction. Generically speaking, the text is an interview, featuring a total of four questions and four answers. Judging from the general set up of the article, it seems that it is meant to provoke HARDtalk associations in the mind of the reader – HARDtalk associations in the sense that (a) the article is set up as a one-on-one interview between a seemingly inquisitive journalist and a person of authority; and in the sense that (b) the topic of the interview is critical towards or sensitive for the said person of authority. These associations are further supported by the fact that the above-mentioned photo displays the person of authority (in this case the CEO of the company). He is sitting upright, very straight, smiling but seemingly somewhat tense in what is supposedly the 'hot chair'. Placed in front of him on the floor lies a small pile of coal, which points to and interacts with the topic of the interview, i.e., coal – black gold or necessary evil.

In accordance with the genre, the text features two specific roles, the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer, however, is not a journalist from a public service broadcasting company, an independent newspaper or the like; the journalist is in fact an employee of the company and – consequently – an employee of the very person, he is interviewing. Nevertheless, structurally as well as procedurally both personae play their part; that is they behave in accordance with the institutionalised conduct of their respective roles (Berger & Luckmann 1991[1966]: 91) and go through the motions of an interviewer and an interviewee engaged in the process of questions and answers. But if we look beyond the surface level of the relatively stable – albeit unsubtly disguised – double roles of interviewer/employee and interviewee/employer and focus our attention on the dynamics of the positioning (Davies & Harré 1990: 62), which takes place in the interaction, we come up with a radically different reading. Despite the HARD-talk set up, despite adhering to the structural features of the genre, and even though the roles of interviewer and interviewee are played out, the interviewer consistently positions himself as an employee. Linguistically this is realised in the interviewer's use of the
inclusive ‘we’ (e.g. ‘should we as employees…’) in the lead and throughout the text. Seen in this light, the veneer of journalistic integrity vanishes, leaving behind an altogether different relationship, namely that of employee and employer. And being an instance of corporate communication, we need to add one more layer to the description of the communicative constellation of the text. The interview features two personae as if it were indeed a hic et nunc conversation. But it is not. Neither is the interaction per se an end in and of itself; it is a matter of communicating by proxy with the body of employees, not present at the actual interview. The interviewer, then, plays the role of acting on behalf of the body of employees, the body of employees in turn becoming the actual audience or ‘alters’ of the interaction. And since the interviewer acts in his capacity as strategic corporate journalist, he is in fact acting on behalf of the very same authority which he is interviewing, in effect making the interview a communicative action embedded in the practice of corporate communication (see section 2). Naturally, both parties to the interview are acutely aware of this; add to that the fact that so are the readers, and the whole set-up becomes a double-layered make-believe interview.

The interview consists of five segments: a title combined with a lead and four question-answer sequences of various lengths. These five segments serve as the structuring device when the analysis is presented in the next few sections. The title and the lead provide the overall topic of the text, i.e. questioning DONG’s utilisation of coal to supply energy. In doing so it not only links itself intertextually to the worldwide climate debate (the debate itself is addressed in the fact box), but specifically to the effects on the climate of burning fossil fuel, such as coal, in order to supply energy.

4.1. Title and lead
Title and lead introduce to the overall topics of the text; additional topics are derived from them. The overall topic is approached from two perspectives, the first perspective being whether the utilisation of coal to supply energy is to be seen in light of it being black gold or a necessary evil. The second perspective is the question whether ‘we’, i.e. the employees of DONG, should be proud or have a bad conscience where the utilisation of coal to supply energy by ‘us’, i.e. DONG, is concerned.

Referring to the discussion of the set-up (above), we are able to see and discuss an altogether different layer of the discursively constructed positioning in the text than the generically (interviewer/interviewee)
or organisationally (employee/employer) pre-determined roles. The lead itself sets the scene for a new reading:

Should we as employees [of DONG Energy] be proud of or feel guilty about the fact that we use so much coal in our fossil fuel-fired power stations? Anders Eldrup [the company CEO] gives the answer in the hot chair.

Taken at face value – and it is very difficult not to – the employees are constructed as being at a loss as to what they should feel – pride or guilt; the CEO, however, is not. On the contrary, he is positioned as the one who will not only provide an ‘an answer’ but indeed ‘the answer’. Add to that that the question posed is not a business-related question of ‘should we produce more, in a more effective way’ or the like. The question stems from an altogether different domain, since it does not deal with work-related matters per se but with a question of personal conviction or even identity. Typically, the authority to consult in such matters as pride or guilt would be a moral or an ethical one, and not the CEO of a company (in his capacity as such). So when constructing the CEO as the person who can categorically answer a question of this kind, the text openly borrows from therapeutic or even religious discourse practices. But the above question not only constructs the CEO as a ‘bonus paterfamilias’, a patriarch or even a shepherd, the fact that the question is posed as it is, simultaneously constructs the ‘alter’ as being in need of guidance, as being a follower, as it were. If we venture to take a closer look at the knowledge deficit constructed in the lead, we find that it is one of non-alignment with a specific part of the company credo (section 2), i.e. an uncertainty as to how one should feel about the company’s fossil fuel-fired power stations. In other words, the knowledge deficit presupposed has an imperialistic undercurrent in the sense that it aims at influencing the personal conviction of the ‘alter’.

4.2. First question-and-answer sequence

The topic of the first question-and-answer sequence is coal as a societal necessity. Interestingly, the initial question is not whether coal is indeed a societal necessity but whether ‘we have done enough in DONG Energy to tell the public that coal is a societal necessity’. Coal as a societal necessity is presupposed and thus holds the position of both claim and backing at the same time (in the Toulmin sense). The interviewer and interviewee seem to concur on this claim-cum-backing, for in his answer
the CEO does not question it either; on the contrary, the claim-cum-backing seems to be reinforced by his statement that fossil fuel-fired power stations will ‘be around for many years to come’. In terms of a constructed knowledge deficit in the ‘alter’, we are again faced with an instance of non-alignment. This time, however, the knowledge deficit takes on a different and less obvious shape than in the lead. In this segment the ‘alter’ is compelled to infer, that if s/he does not accept ‘coal as a societal necessity’, s/he is at odds with the company credo.

Returning to the topic analysis, the section goes on with the CEO agreeing that ‘we probably have not done enough’ (to convince the public of this claim-cum-backing). At the same time he assures the interviewer that ‘we will get better at it’. A planned campaign on TV concerning the business strategy will remedy the deficiency; here it will be made clear that DONG Energy advocates a reduction in CO\textsuperscript{2} emissions, but that modern, industrialised societies cannot do without the reliable supply of energy from fossil fuel. This objective leads to what one might call a two-pronged business strategy that includes renewable sources of energy as well as fossil fuel-fired power stations.

When reducing this argument to its mundane implication (if the public does not know that fossil fuel-fired power stations are a societal necessity, then it is because we have not been good enough at telling it to them) a warrant reveals itself which we may formulate along the lines of: if somebody is not aware of x it is because that somebody was not told x. Alas, as most of us would know, being told x does not compel acceptance of x (or that x is understood for that matter). Applying such a warrant implies that one draws heavily on a transmission perception of communication; generally speaking, however, current communication theory sees communication as co-construction of meaning amongst communication partners (Windahl et al. 2008). Communication from a transactional perspective is not a matter of ‘output’ (e.g. the scope and scale of one’s TV campaign), but to what extent communication partners are able to converge on making meaning.

If we add to this very brief analysis of what appears to be the underlying communication ideology of the company the positioning of the ‘alter’ as it is linguistically realised by means of personal pronouns, we arrive at a yet another knowledge deficit. The use of ‘we’ in the answer given by the CEO is significant because it does not refer to the same ‘we’ as in the lead, i.e. the employees of DONG. It is a ‘corporate we’ that originates in the metaphor of the organisation-as-person (Cheney 1991). The topical analysis, however, reveals a further qualification, for it is not the CEO talking as the company as a whole
but in his capacity as the capstone, so to speak, of the management section of the company. This ‘we’, for instance, is the agent in charge of increasing investments into renewable energy sources, and for being among the best at operating fossil fuel-fired power stations. Whereas the knowledge deficit constructed in the ‘alter’ in this segment may still be subsumed under the concept of non-alignment, it can be said to be of a somewhat cruder nature. In the organisational reality, the average employee is not privy to the upper-level management decision-making processes. So revealing, from time to time, some of the visions stemming from these decisions to the employees not only re-establishes the organisational hierarchy (in effect re-contextualising the implications of Bacon’s statement ‘knowledge is power’ on a continuous basis) – it also keeps the ‘alter’ caught up in a perpetual state of shifting knowledge deficits.

4.3. Second question-and-answer sequence

In the second question-and-answer sequence the topic is the environmental critique raised by third parties due to the fact that DONG Energy is involved in the planned construction of a coal-fired power station in Greifswald, Germany. In his question the interviewer is not concerned with the critique itself but with the way DONG Energy reacts to the critique. It is presupposed that what the customer wants is that an old, polluting coal-fired power station be replaced by a new and more efficient one; and that Dong Energy is the best at delivering just that. The interviewer goes on to pose the question ‘why, then, isn’t that the story that we tell?’ The CEO responds that ‘we’ certainly are doing that but admits that ‘we’ could be better at it. The claim-cum-backing that coal is a societal necessity is repeated and reinforced. At the same time the CEO introduces another topic, namely that environmental concerns have to be an integral part of all business activities. DONG Energy therefore uses new technology and further develops and optimises current production technology, aiming at limiting the environmental impact of its core business. In this way, the derived topic relates indirectly to the above-mentioned two-pronged business strategy.

The topic analysis lays bare two interesting pieces of argumentation in this segment. This first one is produced by the interviewer, where the warrant reads that if the customer wants it (i.e. fossil fuel-fired power stations) then that is what s/he should have. The backing for such a statement obviously being a fundamental mechanism of the market economy, and in a relatively raw form at that. In his answer to the
critique by environmentalists, the CEO proposes to extract and to store the pollutants below ground:

I mean, that’s where it came from as coal. When that technology some day is operational then it is possible to operate fossil fuel-fired power stations which do not pollute, and then we have solved the dilemma.

It seems that the CEO presupposes two warrants here. First that if a pollutant is stored below ground it instantly and radically shifts its status and becomes a non-pollutant. And secondly, that since coal came from underground then we may safely deposit the byproducts of its usage underground, too. The backing for both warrants, we suggest, is one of ‘out of sight – out of mind’. Another – and for our purposes more interesting – dimension which ties the two pieces of argumentation in this segment together is the fact that they both have an instructional quality to them, instructional in the sense that they are explicitly meant to provide the ‘alter’ with arguments when entering into a discussion with company-external stakeholders regarding the environmental controversy of fossil fuel-fired power stations.

The knowledge deficit constructed in the ‘alter’ in this segment has to do with the ‘alter’ not being equipped, as it were, with the facts that would otherwise allow him or her to tell the ‘real’ story. This segment, then, aims at remedying that deficiency. In terms of positioning, this is the segment in which the interviewer – for all intents and purposes – merges with the interviewee, whereas the ‘alter’ is discursively constructed much in the same way as the student of a Socratic dialogue – i.e. not as a part of the actual dialogue itself but as its intended recipient or learner.

4.4. Third question-and-answer sequence

In the third question-and-answer sequence the topic is related directly to the second perspective of the main topic, the question being whether it is a problem (for DONG we take it) that there seem to be differences of opinion among the employees as to whether they as employees should be proud that DONG Energy is one of the best in producing energy from coal or have a bad conscience because coal is used by DONG Energy to supply energy. The answer of the CEO is ‘I guess it is’. And then he
explains the difference of opinion as a function of the size and diversity of the company. Two new topics are then presented and indirectly used as an argument why one should be proud. The first new topic is the demand of the consumer. It is argued that the consumer is setting the scene for the consumption of energy and that s/he demands stable production of energy. Renewable energy alone cannot ensure stable production, a supplement is therefore required. Nuclear energy would have been a possibility, but since Denmark has chosen not to exploit that particular energy source, coal-fired power stations are necessary for many years to come. The CEO introduces another topic, i.e. the fact that several countries have neglected to invest in their energy plants, a fact which is rapidly becoming an issue because the existing coal-fired power stations are very old, polluting and generally unreliable. Prior to the third question-and-answer sequence it has been pointed out both by the interviewer and by the CEO that DONG Energy is considered one of the best within that business. By introducing the two new topics, the CEO implicitly praises the company and explains why one should be proud.

Argumentation-wise the gloves are off in this segment; for the first time the warrant is offered explicitly. The CEO states: ‘We should see it like this; we produce energy because there is a market for it’. The backing mirrors the interviewer’s backing in the previous segment, i.e. an undisguised adherence to the fundamentals of a market economy. Apart from being rather outspoken as to the values the CEO would like to instil in the ‘alter’, this third segment is also the segment in which he exemplifies and personalises the problems which would arise, were it not for fossil fuel-fired power stations:

I don’t think that people nowadays would be willing to accept that they cannot watch TV for the next hour, that their electric razor doesn’t work, or that the PC suddenly shuts down.

The warrant being that, if you do not condone and accept fossil fuel, you risk being without a stable energy resource, affecting you not only in an abstract sense but in a very down-to-earth manner as well. As in the previous section, the ‘alter’ is once again positioned as the student in a Socratic-like dialogue, not directly spoken to, but most certainly the intended learner with an obligation to be able to put forward arguments to the effect that (a) everybody wants energy and (b) that fossil fuel-fired power stations are the only stable sources. These arguments in turn mirror the perceived knowledge deficit in the ‘alter’.
4.5. Fourth question-and-answer sequence

In the fourth and final question-and-answer sequence two topics are addressed. The first one is related to the topic of the second question-and-answer sequence, which dealt with the critique by third parties: how can ‘we’ as employees deal with the criticism that we are facing from family, friends or neighbours? The second addresses the second perspective of the main topic by asking: should we as employees have a bad conscience because DONG Energy uses coal? The CEO answers the second question by stating that he is proud of the way DONG Energy is run and refers indirectly to the two-pronged business strategy as an explanation. He mentions projects and initiatives which support the company’s objective to deliver renewable energy, and repeats the necessity of coal-fired power stations where the company is – as the reader now knows – among the best.

In the lead of the article the reader was promised an answer to the questions, whether the utilisation of coal should be considered black gold or a necessary evil and whether the employees of the company should be proud or have a bad conscience. The answer to the first question is not to be found explicitly in the interview and is thus not that clear. It is as if it is not a question of ‘either/or’ but perhaps rather of ‘both/and’ since it can be claimed to be a necessary evil for the people of modern societies but is indeed also black gold for DONG Energy. The answer to the second question is much clearer: as an employee of DONG Energy you should be proud. It is also implicitly said that a brilliant future is in store for the company because of the two-pronged business strategy that is tailored to the market situation now and in years to come.

In this last segment, the CEO focuses his argument on addressing the issue of a bad versus a clear conscience. Building upon his previous argumentation he tries to turn the tables, as it were, on the whole controversial issue. His argumentation can be read much like a syllogism:

- Everybody wants a stable energy production.
- Coal is the only means with which to ensure a stable energy production.
- Coal is necessary.

In effect he postulates that you cannot not condone and accept fossil fuel-fired power stations; and since that is so, the very question of bad conscience or not is devoid of meaning. The (functionalistic)
backing being that something which is necessary cannot induce a bad conscience. A clear conscience when it comes to operating fossil fuel-fired power stations on the other hand – which he assures the reader that he has – is a function of (a) ‘that it is necessary’ and (b) ‘nobody does it better than us’. In other words, the CEO is now able to resolve the controversy established at the beginning of the interview, namely that of guilt versus pride. The resolution is that the dichotomy is a false dichotomy, since the notion of guilt (reiterated as ‘bad conscience’) can be discarded as irrational. Or that the CEO via his arguments – and this would be in line with positioning the CEO as a ‘bonus paterfamilias’, a patriarch or a shepherd – is able to absolve the ‘alter’ from his or her guilt/bad conscience, quite elegantly leaving the ‘alter’ to infer, then, that pride is the only option left.

In terms of a linguistic realisation of this change, we return to the use of pronouns. Having made ample use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ in the first two sections of the last segment, the CEO ends by using all-inclusive pronouns in the last section. Much like an apotheosis in the form of a triplet, he emphasises that ‘we’ are among the very best in Europe when it comes to operating fossil fuel-fired power stations, that ‘we’ can do so with a clear conscience, and that nobody can do it better than ‘us’. After having been positioned at the receiving end, so to speak, during the entire interview, the last section sees the ‘alter’ and the CEO metamorphose into one and the same ‘we’.

In order to synthesise our analysis we turn to a narratological reading of our text. According to Brémond (1970), the only obligation of any narrative is to relieve the tension which it itself has created. For Aristotle such relief would lead to catharsis; a concept typically referred to as cleansing, as purification, but which can also allude to clarification. In our case, the tension created by the text takes on the form of a controversy and the catharsis takes on the form of resolving the said controversy. The controversy is resolved in as much as the CEO gives the answer. Since the piece of communication investigated aims at bringing a resolution to a controversy, we may take yet another step and look at the communicative exchange from a dramatic point of view. In terms of Freytag’s sequencing of dramatic action (1863), a dramatic structure entails five parts or acts: exposition, rising action, climax (or turning point), falling action, and resolution. Title and lead combined constitute the exposition phase, introducing the controversy. The first question-and-answer-sequence constitutes rising action; here the readers are introduced to the fact that coal is a necessity and that the fact that DONG has not been able to communicate this point, has spurred
on much (company-) unwanted misunderstanding – both among the internal as well as the external stakeholders. The climax is to be found in the second question-and-answer sequence, where the ‘real’ story of fossil fuel-fired power stations is unveiled and where the reader learns of how DONG by means of technological advances eventually will be able solve the pollution problem altogether. Having made it through the climax, the third question-and-answer sequence is characterised by falling action; here the reader is given further evidence as to why modern societies cannot and will not thrive without fossil fuel-fired power stations. In the fourth and final segment, the resolution – that the controversy is based on false premises – is presented.

5. Conclusion

As the explorative study has shown, we have been able to find textual realisations of how the knowledge deficit in the ‘alter’, in the form of variations of non-alignment with the company credo, is constructed within our particular setting. Some of the qualities attributed to these deficits in the ‘alter’ could be labelled as: insecurity with regards to convictions, a feeling of being at odds with the company credo, subordination, and lack of (the proper) arguments. Attributes which in turn reflect the nature of the ‘alter’ constructed.

Even should we disagree with the ideology, which is able to produce this particular instance of corporate communication, the interview is nothing if not elaborate. And since elaborate equals cost-intensive, the company in question must – so we deduce – have powerful motives for taking on such a communication effort. In order to gauge the motivation for this elaborate and highly complex kind of discursive construction of knowledge deficits and their different qualities, we end this chapter by taking into account the raison d’être of a knowledge-intensive company like DONG Energy (e.g. Alvevsson 2001), namely an ever-increasing production of knowledge. But the mere production of ever more specialised knowledge will not create the ‘value added-ness’ needed. Knowledge, regardless of how profound or specialised, will not and cannot in itself create value (outside of itself). For that to happen, the knowledge produced must be communicated and thus be made available to ‘alters’ (in our case, employees) in one way or another. The creation of knowledge is a necessary condition, but it is in itself not a sufficient condition. The one predominant challenge of the knowledge-intensive company is how to transform ever more specialised knowledge into interactions in order for that knowledge to gain
value (outside of itself) (Kastberg 2007). And it is exactly that metamorphosis from ‘knowledge’ via ‘interactions’ to ‘value’ which is also the primary motive for (a) a corporate communication function in general and (b) for value communication – such as the interview analysed in this chapter – in particular.

Notes

1. For a critical discussion of the ‘state of the art’ and the implications of corporate communications, see e.g., Christensen et al. (2008).
2. Christensen et al. (2008) even talk about ‘corporate communications as control’.
3. As indeed do all stakeholders; for the purpose of this chapter, however, we refrain from a discussion of other stakeholder groups such as the media, government, the public at large etc. (Freeman 1984: 55).
5. HAR Dtalk is a BBC flagship television programme, consisting of in-depth half-hour one-on-one interviews.
6. Even though we find that the arguments in the interview as a rule do strain credulity, we will refrain from entering into any kind of climate debate.
7. Within our particular setting predominantly referred to as organisational storytelling (e.g. Czarniawska 1997).

References


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Part V

Capacity in the Context of Communication Disorder
1. Introduction

In this chapter, we examine three different sources of discursive information according to how they characterise the nature of language disorders: (1) literature in the professional field of communication disorders, (2) interactional studies of traditional, impairment-based speech-language therapy, and (3) descriptions of more constructivist, social models of therapy that are emerging.

The professional literature characterises language disorders as bundles of deficits that are contained within the individual. These individuals, when compared to their higher functioning ‘normal’ counterparts, may have intrinsic problems with the form, content and/or use of language. Based upon an assessment of these problematic components, it is then the task of the professional speech-language pathologist (SLP) to correct them through individual or group therapy.

Studies of traditional speech-language therapy interaction reveal that contexts are constructed to make problems visible so that they can be corrected. However, there are times when the emergent context of therapy itself may be responsible for performance errors, as opposed to any intrinsic client deficit (Kovarsky et al. 1999). That is, disability and incompetence are not to be characterised by a simple lack of internal ability. Instead, they are interactional achievements of therapy participants where problems are brought into existence by the very contexts in which they emerge.

In response to traditional, impairment-based models of intervention, a more constructivist, socially oriented approach to therapy is emerging that focuses on how deficit and incompetence are constituted through interaction. In an effort to reduce barriers to participation in
communicative activities, language disorders and deficits are addressed according to the situated social contexts in which they are made visible. We will describe some of these developing therapeutic discourse practices that are more directed toward constructing communicative meaning, promoting face and supporting selfhood.

2. The characterisation of language disorders in the professional literature

...a severe speech defect, because it provokes rejection and other penalties due to its communicative unpleasantness, causes low self esteem [and] ego strength. Thus, in all its various aspects and functions, speech is defective when it calls attention to itself, interferes with communication, or causes its possessor to be maladjusted. (Van Riper 1939: 74)

[Communication is disordered when] the consequences for personality development and for interpersonal relationships are disintegrative in varying forms and degrees. (Johnson 1948: 74)

These two early characterisations define communication disorders according to the stigmatising social consequences that bring them to life. Rather than focusing on a set of deficient psycholinguistic properties that exist inside the mind, disorder is constituted through interactions with others. Although we will return to these characterisations later when discussing social models of intervention, both descriptions stand in stark contrast to more recent, socially neutral definitions that have become the gold standard.

Current definitions of language disorder reflect two different, underlying metaphors that have influenced traditional therapeutic practices in speech-language pathology: a conduit metaphor of communication (Reddy 1979) and a container metaphor of disability (Duchan et al. 1999).

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), language disorders are one category belonging to a larger class of communication disorders. As a whole, communication disorders refer to ‘impairment[s] in the ability to receive, send, process, and comprehend concepts or verbal, nonverbal and graphic symbol systems’ and ‘may be evident in the processes of hearing, language, and/or speech’ (ASHA 1993, to present).

Underlying this characterisation of disorder is a conduit metaphor for what constitutes successful communication (Reddy 1979). According to this metaphor, communication takes place along a language
conduit that travels from the lips of one container (a speaker) to the ears
of another container (a hearer) via words that can encapsulate thoughts.
As long as a clear, pre-packaged message can be delivered to a waiting lis-
tener with normal hearing, the success of communication is automatic.

...one person delivers information to another by inserting thoughts
and feelings into words, and sending the words along the conduit.
People receive the words at the other end and extract the encoded
thoughts and feelings from the words...Therefore, a hearer has
the relatively passive job of unpacking thoughts or emotions from
the words in which they are contained...It is a speaker's job to
make communication successful. Once a person succeeds in getting
thoughts into words, communicative success is automatic. (Kovarsky
et al. 2000: 161)

In other words, successful communication is determined by the inter-
nal capacities of individuals to pass and receive messages along the
conduit; it is not the result of negotiated understandings that get
constructed and finalised (or not) during situated interactions. By exten-
sion then, a communication disorder is an intrinsic difficulty that
disrupts the sending, receiving or processing of information along
the conduit of communication so that message transmission becomes
problematic.

Within this general conception of what characterises a communica-
tion disorder, a language disorder is defined as the ‘impaired compre-
hension and/or use of spoken, written and/or other symbol systems’
that is evidenced in the form, content, and/or function (pragmatics)
of language (ASHA 1993, to present). In this framework, pragmatics is
considered only one potential component of a disorder and not as the
constitutive context for how language disabilities come into existence
in the first place.

Descriptions of language disorders in the professional literature make
it clear that these problems are housed within the individual. Children
with language disorders may reveal ‘limited vocabulary, omission of
many grammatic features, misuses of other grammatic features, shorter
and simpler word arrangements, limited varieties of sentences, and inade-
quate or inappropriate use of learned language skills...and problems
in the comprehension of spoken language’ (Hegde 1991: 21–2). Adults
with aphasia have ‘impairment[s] of language processing’ (Davis 1983:
2–3) that result from a ‘reduction in efficiency of the ability to decode
and encode meaningful linguistic elements’ and an ‘impaired efficiency
in input and output channel selection’ (Darley 1982: 42).
Crystal (1987) uses a ‘bucket’ analogy to describe the nature of language abilities and disabilities. For a normally developing individual, language capacity grows as ‘linguistic water’ is poured into a mental bucket. However, the person with a language impairment has ‘holes’ in the mental bucket so that the water does not fill the container as it should. The idea that a language disorder can be likened to an improperly filled psycholinguistic bucket is consistent with a container metaphor of language disability.

In a container metaphor of disability, competence is something that is ‘located and measured in an individual in much the same way as one would measure liquid in a container’ (Duchan et al. 1999: 18). Competence or ability can be described as ‘high level’ or ‘low level’ depending upon the extent to which a mental coffer has been filled with the appropriate psycholinguistic materials.

Unlike early definitions where social stigma and disvalue stemming from negative interpersonal interactions form the basis of disorder (Johnson 1948; Van Riper 1939), language disabilities are now internal properties of mind. A damaged psycholinguistic container has a negative impact on the conduit of message transmission that, in turn, results in problematic communication. This view of disorder is evidenced in the discourse practices of traditional speech-language therapy.

3. The discourse of traditional, impairment-based language therapy

Often dubbed impairment-based intervention (Duchan 2001), traditional speech-language therapy focuses on fixing psycholinguistic deficits of comprehension and/or expression that exist inside the damaged person. After assessing those domains of language that are not operating at normal levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, or pragmatics), specific problems within these domains are then targeted for intervention (phonemes, plurals, simple or complex sentences, vocabulary or semantic relations, requesting objects and information, and so on) (Duchan 2001: 38). Therapy is then directed toward repairing these discrete, objective pieces of language so that meanings can be successfully pre-packaged and delivered along the conduit of transmission.

Repair work comprises an important component of the interactional substrate of therapy. The interactional substrate, or manner in which clients are held accountable for their performances (Maynard & Marlaire 1999), is characterised by quiz question sequences. In example 1, a child
(Mark) is attempting to eat with a spoon that has been purposely broken by the SLP before the session began. The SLP begins with a quiz question in an effort to get him to produce a grammatically correct response that includes the modal verb ‘can’.

**Example 1**

1. SLP: Mark, what’s wrong with that spoon?
3. SLP: CAN you fix it?
4. Mark: No. Fix it please! (hands her the spoon)
5. SLP: You can ask. I know you CAN.
6. Mark: Can you help me, please?
7. SLP: Yes, Mark, I CAN. (She fixes spoon and they eat)

(Panagos & Bliss 1990: 26)

Even though Mark provides a response that is semantically appropriate (turn 2), it is not the desired answer and the SLP initiates repair work by providing hints that stress the verb ‘can’ in two different sentence structures (turn 3 and turn 5). The repair sequence is ended after he provides a reply (turn 6) the SLP deems appropriate (turn 7).

While the preference is for clients to complete repair sequences initiated by the SLP (Kovarsky 1989), this does not always happen. In one session, a woman with severe aphasia and apraxia of speech (C) is asked to produce grammatically correct sentences that describe pictures:

**Example 2**

1. SLP: ...tell me what’s happening in the picture.
2. C: The c couple is bed in. What isy:: ((points to picture))
3. SLP: Okay. Okay. The couple is IN bed. What are they doing?
4. C: Sleep.
5. SLP: Mhm. The couple is in bed SLEEPING. Can you try the whole sentence for me?
6. C: The couple is bed is sleep. ((looking at card then looks steadily at L))
7. SLP: Mhm (pause) ngkay. The couple is in bed SLEEPING. Okay.

(Simmons-Mackie & Damico 1999: 319)

In response to all of the client’s replies (turns 2, 4, 6), the SLP immediately initiates and completes repair work in a next turn (turns 3, 5, 7).
In retrospect, as the interaction continued to unfold, it became clear that the SLP was concerned that the client would become overwhelmed by the task. Therefore, in what would turn out to be an unsuccessful effort to lessen the client’s frustration and struggle, and salvage rapport, the SLP moved rapidly to initiate and complete repair work in a single turn.

In sum, traditional, impairment-based models of intervention are characterised by a variety of communicative asymmetries. The SLP controls the flow of activities and the topics of discussion, regulates which aspects of language will be subjected to exposed repair sequences (where, instead of embedding corrections into the ongoing talk, they become the overt interactional business at hand), and decides how communicative performance will be evaluated (Kovarsky 1990; Kovarsky & Duchan 1997). In other words, the interpretive framework of the clinician dominates (Damico & Damico 1997). Without errors that can be attributed to a client by an SLP and then subjected to repair work, there is no therapy (Kovarsky & Maxwell 1992). Described as the inherent paradox of therapy, the goal of intervention ‘is to build communicative competence, yet the assumptions required for treatment demand that the client be incompetent’ (Simmons-Mackie & Damico 1999: 313).

From this perspective, traditional, impairment-based therapy becomes a context where competency-lowering practices are enacted as a way of ‘helping’ the client. Over a decade ago, one of the authors (Kovarsky) was involved in a study of group therapy for adults with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and witnessed an intervention activity that he had more difficulty successfully completing than some of them, even though his communicative and cognitive abilities would have been deemed normal (Kovarsky et al. 1999). During a memory game, each person in the group was asked to indicate an item they would bring on a trip to the moon. In subsequent turns, everyone had to repeat all previously mentioned items and then add one of their own. The first item selected had to begin with the letter ‘a’, the second item had to begin with the letter ‘b’, and so on. In other words, each person had to remember all previous items based upon this alphabetic strategy and then add another object to the list.

One of the clients kept trying to tie the accruing list of items to things he would actually want to bring to the moon: ‘I’m going to take along writing paper … something I can make a bench with’. In point of fact, these objects would have been useful for chronicling and remembering a space voyage. However, the SLP interrupted and told him to make his contribution one that followed the alphabetic strategy, even though
it had little to do with how one might experience going to the moon: ‘It doesn’t have to be something you’d really take. It could be something silly. But you need to think of something. A word that begins with the letter C.’

In this way, the clinician managed to de-contextualise memory from important contexts of use in two important ways. First, one of the primary reasons for remembering lists is because they have some sort of functional utility, not just because one can tie items to letters of the alphabet. Second, when lists of items do surface in an actual conversation, they typically contribute to the overall point of the interaction. For example, a woman once described the positive attributes of an office co-worker by saying, ‘and he knows Spanish, and he knows French, and he knows English, and he knows German, and he is a gentleman’ (Tannen 1989: 50). The list generated in the ‘going to the moon’ activity was not constructed for the purpose of contributing to a broader evaluative point of a conversation.

This kind of de-contextualised, alphabetic memory game made it more likely for client incompetencies to surface that could then be fixed via repair work. Given the drive to construe client actions (and not contexts in which they are constituted) as error-filled, there is also a danger of promoting a sense of self-as-damaged-goods among those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of our helping practices. At the beginning of a different session involving adults with TBI, the SLP asks members of the group why they are in therapy, as a way of orienting them to the purpose of intervention.

**Example 3**

1. SLP: And Kevin why do you um think that you need to be in a group that works on thinking and memory?
2. Kevin: My memory got all messed up.
3. SLP: Yeah. What happened to you that got you in here?
5. SLP: Yeah.

(Kovarsky et al. 2007: 59)

Through the use of two, adjacently positioned, quiz question-response sequences, the SLP informed the entire group that the purpose of therapy was to address problems of thinking and memory caused by ‘messed up’ brains. It is ‘internal psychological damage to the self’ that ‘provides a warrant for participating in therapy’ (Kovarsky et al. 2007: 59).
In the next extract, SLP1 and SLP2 are working with four different patients with TBI. SLP1 asks why it is difficult to ascertain what pictures represent when they are drawn by other members of the group.

**Example 4**

1. SLP1: I want ya'll to think about why was it hard sometimes besides the drawings to figure out what someone else was drawing. What was difficult?

2. J: The bad art=


4. SLP1: Besides well what about=

5. S: =The drawings was bad.

6. SLP2: She said besides that guys=

7. S: =Besides that=

8. SLP1: =Besides [the actual art. How can someone look at

9. S: [The colors the color of the [xx

10. L: [The angle you were looking at.

11. SLP1: That’s part of it. But how come some one person can look at something and see one thing and somebody else looks at it and sees something else.

12. J: They like it.

13. S: It’s just the idea they’re thinking (touches forehead).


15. S: Their thoughts. Their thoughts.

16. SLP1: Yeah or their interpretation. And it goes along with not only drawings but words too. And sometimes after a head injury it’s difficult to interpret things or you maybe interpret things one way and be stuck on that way and not be able to see the other person’s view.

17. J: Might even be thinking about something else anyway.

18. SLP1: Pardon me.

19. J: Might have somethin’ else on our mind.

20. SLP1: You might have yeah and that can get in the way. But sometimes it’s just difficult to be flexible and to see more than one viewpoint. And that happens to people even who don’t have head injuries. That you just kind of get stuck on one thought.


22. SLP1: But interpretation of words pictures ideas is uh sometimes difficult too following an injury xx.

From the quality of the artwork (turns 2, 5), to personal preferences of the beholder (turn 12), to thinking about other things (turns 17, 19), to simple fatigue (turn 23), a number of potentially viable explanations are provided for why it can be difficult to correctly interpret what an artist seeks to represent in a drawing – note that none of these explanations reference an internal head injury as a potential cause of the problem. However, SLP1 reveals that these explanations are not satisfactory by initiating repair work in turns 4, 8 and 11. Instead, the SLP’s correctional efforts are geared toward making the group publicly aware that internal cognitive deficits resulting from head injury are the source of their difficulties in interpreting the artwork of others. Valuable meanings that were expressed by those with TBI were dismissed and not explored through the give and take of interaction. Instead, it was the narrow, interpretive perspective of the clinician, with its focus on the intrinsic impairments of clients, that dominated.

In other words, in collusion with patients who rarely overtly challenge the expertise of professionals, the interpretive practices of the SLP can lend themselves to the construction of self-as-damaged-goods. If a modern Western identity is characterised by a plurality of prospective lifestyle options (Giddens 1991), then the interactional substrate of impairment-based intervention has the potential to obstruct the creation of a positive future self by highlighting intrinsic limitations of ability as a way of helping (Kovarsky et al. 2007).

Because impairment-based intervention represents such a potential threat to the face (or public self-image – Brown & Levinson 1987) of a client, it is not surprising that practitioners place a premium on building rapport while seeking to address errors that exist inside the individual (Hand 2003; Walsh 2007). However, there are rare occasions when rapport is damaged significantly. They are of interest because they reveal the kinds of communicative asymmetries that bring them to life.

In the previously presented Example 2, a woman with aphasia was struggling to produce verbal descriptions of pictures in a way that the SLP would find grammatically acceptable. As this session continued, she became so frustrated with this task, and her inability to produce responses that would not be subjected to correctional work, that she began to cry. The SLP sought to console her by saying, with a soft voice, ‘is it frustrating today? It’s okay all right?’ Then, in an effort to re-start the therapeutic agenda and manage the woman’s distress, the clinician asked for input into how therapy should proceed by calling attention to the fact that the client was not ‘up to doing’ the current activity (utterance 1 below) – a comment that only served to reinforce an inability to
produce messages according to certain grammatical patterns pursued by the SLP.

Example 5

1. SLP: You tell me what you feel up to [doing, okay?
2. C: [NO IS IS ((leaning forward, speaking loudly, rapidly)) IS IS IS NEW ((gestures writing)) PLEA:::SE ((holds up picture card)) CARD IS (pause) [I don know isy
3. SLP: [Mhm
4. C: Is PLEA:::SE NE:W (pause) ah CARD ((pleading intonation))
5. SLP: Oh, you want different [pictures?
6. C: [PLEAS:SE! YES ((nods))
7. SLP: O:::H. Oh. Okay. Well remember that last time we talk[ed=
8. C: [hhhhhhhh ((sigh and downward gaze))
9. SLP: =and we went through the pictures and I just picked 10 out and said we’d [work with these a few times?
10. C: [I know I know ((looking away and shaking head “no”)) ((raises hand as in stop gesture)) No, I don know is ((hand to forehead)).
11. SLP: I know (soft voice)
12. C: Isy I don know ((hand up)) where I don know. Bye-bye ((looking down, waves bye, nodding no)) is me ((points to self)) [isy ((looking at SLP))
13. SLP: [Well, I’ll try to find some different pictures but remember when I found some that wer- had more to them and it got you frustrated ‘cause you tried to write so much? (pause) Ya remember that? So we said we’d back up and try these again.

(Simmons-Mackie & Damico 1999: 328–9)

Immediately, C makes it clear that she is eager to do something ‘new’ (turns 2, 4, 6). However, the SLP replies by providing a rationale for why the picture cards used in this session will not be changed (turns 7, 9, 13). In response, C reveals her continued frustration with the pictures and threatens to leave the session (turns 10, 12).
In Example 6, the client continues by arguing that repeating the same picture description task is not a good use of her money, a comment that is also a threat to the professional face of the SLP who is being paid to enhance the communicative successfulness of the client.

Example 6

14. C: ((looking down, looks up and then down))/ Isy, I don know isy. Is bye-bye ((waves with rapid expansive gesture)) Is MONEY ISY ((gestures grasping money to self)) BYE-BYE ((waves))

15. SLP: About money?

16. C: YEAH::: IS ME. PLEA::SE. IS NEW ((leans forward; stares at L))

17. SLP: OKAY, OKAY. IT’S AWRIGHT. I’ll find some new ones. Can we use these today then [since I haven’t pick any new ones out?

18. C: [hhhhh ((sighs, gazing down)) ((puts hand to head over left eye)) ((pause)) ((points to video camera)) is bye-bye ((stop gesture))

(Simmons-Mackie & Damico 1999: 329, 339)

Realising that things have gone awry, the SLP seeks to restore rapport by agreeing to find new pictures, even though the old ones will still have to be used for this one session. In other words, the clinician will abandon neither the task, nor the pictures. As a result, the woman with aphasia walks out of therapy before the session is completed. We wish to make it clear that not all SLPs operating within an impairment-based intervention framework would have acted in a similar fashion. Others might have simply shifted to a different activity in order to meet a predetermined set of therapeutic goals.

At the same time, however, the communicative expectations associated with impairment-based therapy contributed to this extremely uncomfortable interaction when rapport could not be salvaged. Here, the clinician’s task was to create contexts where client errors were likely to surface. Quiz questions provided a highly economical, interactional substrate for holding the client accountable for her own mistakes that could then be corrected through exposed repair sequences. In fact, the picture cards themselves existed in a symbiotic relationship with these quiz question sequences. Each new card was tied to a new quiz question cycle, and with every picture card, there was an opportunity to do
more repair work on aspects of C’s communicative performance that were deemed problematic.

When taken together, discourse analyses such as these raise at least three concerns for definitions of language disorder and impairment-based models of intervention. First, the conduit and container metaphors underlying traditional definitions of communication and disability lead to an oversimplified, de-contextualised understanding that language disorders are simply the result of predetermined intrinsic impairments, as opposed to being accomplished through situated interactions in particularistic contexts (therapy included). Second, the communicative asymmetries associated with impairment-based models of intervention may be far enough removed from ordinary conversation as to actually impede the generalization of gains made in therapy speech events to other, more routine genres of interaction.

Finally, competency-lowering practices found in the interactional substrate of therapy may help to construct a sense of self-as-damaged-goods among clients. Ironically, this kind of stigmatisation is realised as a way of providing professional help for those with communication problems. Unfortunately, such therapeutic practices may only serve to further alienate individuals from participating in a human life-world that is constructed through language and social interaction (Kovarsky et al. 2007).

All of these concerns, coupled with more recent, socially oriented definitions of disability, have led to the emergence of a ‘social model’ of language intervention.

4. The social model of language intervention

Harking back to early conceptions of disorder that highlight notions like stigma and the management of spoiled identity (Johnson 1948; Van Riper 1939), there has been a renewed interest in characterising disorders in terms of their social penalties. Rather than focusing on a set of internal psycholinguistic systems run amok, Tomblin (2008) defines language disorders according to their social consequences. Language disorders exist when they put individuals in situations of significant risk for social and cultural disvalue: ‘language disorder is defined not by underlying causal systems but, rather, by socially evaluated outcomes, and thus we need to focus on where and when individual differences in language abilities are associated with and are likely causes of disvalued outcomes’ (Tomblin 2008: 95).

Although this definition does recognise intrinsic, individual differences in language ability, the focus is shifted to construing disorder only if social and cultural normative expectations for communication
are not met. In many ways, this is consistent with how the World Health Organization (www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/) views disabilities as impediments to cultural participation and involvement in ‘life situations’. As McDermott & Verenne (1995: 324) put it, ‘disabilities are less the property of persons than they are moments in cultural focus’. That is, disabilities, language disorders included, are not predetermined. Rather, they emerge and are constructed through the give and take of interaction in everyday life.

In keeping with these definitions of disorder and disability, social approaches to language therapy are directed toward reducing barriers to participation in life situations and everyday interactions. It is not that the internal psychological reality of a language impairment simply ceases to exist – an individual with aphasia who can only produce three words like ‘yes, no’, and ‘and’ is at a significant disadvantage when, for example, raising a new topic of conversation (Goodwin 1995). However, impairments are now described according to the situated contexts in which they are constituted to determine how barriers to communicative participation are, or are not, realised (Duchan 2001) – that same individual with aphasia is able to affect communicative meaning in certain contexts based on the interactional work done by all participants (Goodwin 1995).

The discourse of therapy is characterised by more communicative parity and symmetry between the participants. Instead of an interactional substrate dominated by three-part, quiz question sequences and repair trajectories aimed at exposing and correcting bits of client performance deemed problematic, efforts are directed toward supporting the construction of communicative meaning and embedding repairs, when necessary, into the ongoing stream of interaction. At the same time, rapport becomes more than a valuable tool for permitting the SLP to dominate and do the real work of correcting internal psycholinguistic deficits. In the social model, conversational sociability and the promotion of face are considered worthy therapeutic goals in and of themselves (Simmons-Mackie & Kovarsky 2009; Walsh 2007).

The following extract involves an interaction between a woman with aphasia who has ‘word-finding problems’ and an SLP. They are discussing routine activities surrounding the preparation of daily meals.

Example 7

1. C: no I usually bake in the middle of the day I might- I’d normally if I’m bakin’ I’d shove in the dinner and the potatoes and the meat
In this sequence, the SLP allows C to take the conversational lead by using the backchannel cues ‘yeah’ and ‘mm’ that serve to transition the turns at talk back to the client. The SLP supports C’s description of meal preparation activities by joking about how ‘economical’ they both are, which in turn occasions laughter from both (turns 6, 7). Like findings from other studies of adults with brain injury, their laughter functions communicatively as a display of camaraderie (or positive face) between the participants (Kovarsky et al. 2009; Simmons-Mackie & Schultz 2003). In addition, the only request for information made by the SLP is not a quiz question; rather, it is a request for unknown information about a recent visit to a physician named Dr. O’Dea (turn 8). While this woman was characterised as having word-finding deficits, a context was not constructed to make this deficit visible via quiz question sequences so that it could then be corrected. Instead, a more symmetrical interaction occurred where attention was focused on promoting face and rapport as communicative meaning was constructed.

Although no correctional work was initiated by the SLP in Extract 8, the next example does contain repair sequences. However, these sequences are qualitatively different from those found in traditional, impairment-based intervention. In a group session for adults with aphasia, J, a client with moderate to severe aphasia, has just described his favourite restaurant using a broad, sweeping gesture with his hand to represent a countertop.

**Example 8**

1. SLP: (**Writing COUNTER**)
2. SLP: (**Holds up pad**) Is it a counter?
   ![showing pad around table])
3. J: [Yep yep
Rather than constructing a context where the progression of a conversation is purposefully halted so that errors become the topic of conversation through exposed correctional sequences, a context that constitutes a potential threat to the face of the client, repairs are embedded into the ongoing stream of talk in a way that contributes to the overall progression of the conversation. The SLP serves more as a translator mediating J’s efforts to sustain his own involvement as an agent capable of participating in the active negotiation of conversational meaning.

When individual problems with language production or comprehension do become the topic of conversation, they are transformed into teachable moments where the power of SLPs to evaluate and address the nature of a problem is shared with those who are actually experiencing the difficulty. In the following example, members of an aphasia therapy group are discussing a trip to Africa. As several books about Africa are produced to help support the conversation, a client (Patty) confides that she had trouble with reading. One of the SLPs then remarks that her own reading comprehension is facilitated by books with larger print size. From there, the conversation develops into a discussion about reading strategies.
Example 9

1. SLP1: They – that’s a little bit big print. ((pointing to Joe’s book))
2. SLP1: Patty, the print you have is smaller.
3. SLP1: ((points to the book Patty is holding))
4. Patty: Yeah, yeah ((leans forward to compare books))
5. Joe: ((points to another book)). Oh, this one=
6. SLP1: yeah!
7. Joe: =is as well. That's that's about right for me.
8. SLP1: This one looks a little bigger ((pointing to a large print book)).
9. SLP2: I've found that hard back books are easier.
10. SLP2: The print is usually a little bigger=
11. Patty: [I can see this alright]
12. SLP2: =in the hardbound books rather than the paperbacks.
14. Patty: But if the, if the sentence gets too long=
15. Joe: yes
16. Patty: =I forget what the first part was.
17. SLP3: I do that too.
18. SLP1: ((nodding in agreement))
19. Sandy: ((nodding in agreement))
21. SLP1: That's when I need one of those little pads ((gestures writing a note))
22. SLP3: I was reading a book last night and I had to read it THREE TIMES.

(Simmons-Mackie et al. 2007: 17)

As opposed to clinicians whose interpretive perspectives dominate in determining the basis of a problem and dictating a solution, group members are all involved in uncovering the nature of a reading difficulty and deciding upon potential solutions. When the SLPs do offer strategies for addressing the problem, they simultaneously confess their own troubles with reading (turns 17, 22). By admitting that even they, the professional experts, can struggle with understanding written texts, a threat to the face of the clients is minimised while a real learning opportunity is created. Instead of promoting a sense of self-as-damaged-goods, those with aphasia become agents capable of solving problems.
5. Closing remarks

We have proposed a rather Whorfian conception of the discursive practices of language intervention. If definitions of disorder are based upon a container metaphor of disability that locates language problems inside the head of a speaker and a conduit metaphor of communication that views the construction of meaning as nothing more than the successful passing of messages housed in words (from one container to another) along a pipeline, then impairment-based models of intervention make sense. It is the clinician’s task to force internal psycholinguistic deficits to the surface so that they can be corrected via repair work, allowing for the successful transmission of clear messages between a speaker and a hearer. That is, it seems perfectly appropriate to de-contextualise language disorders and treat them as isolated problems that exist independent of the situations in which they are constituted.

However, critical analyses of clinical discourse have revealed problems with our traditional assumptions about the nature of communication and language disorders. Beyond the fact that a conduit metaphor fails to account for communicative successes and non-successes found in interaction (Grimshaw 1980), language disabilities do not exist as independent, self-contained psycholinguistic phenomena inside the heads of individuals. Rather, as studies of impairment-based intervention reveal, language disorders are interactional achievements that are brought to life in situated contexts. There are times, for example, when clients’ errors of communication are the result of contexts constructed specifically for the purpose of evaluating their performance as inadequate, even when alternative interpretations reveal that their communicative performance is quite appropriate and reasonable (Example 4). When the dominant focus is on exposing client errors and then subjecting them to correctional work, there is a danger of further promoting a sense of self-as-damaged-goods among those who already are at risk for social disvalue and alienation.

In response to these (and other) concerns, socially based frameworks for intervention have begun to emerge. Drawing upon definitions that view language disorder and disability as interactional achievements that come into existence according to the contexts in which they are constituted, the spotlight is on reducing barriers to communicative participation in everyday social life beyond the therapy room. The point is not to deny the existence of individual struggles with language comprehension and production. Instead, the task is to discover how these difficulties are manifested and evaluated by interactants in situated
contexts, and how they impact on communicative participation in social activities.

The question is not how many discrete bits of linguistic information (phonemes, morphemes, lexical items, or syntactic constructions included) a person produces, understands or remembers, but how problems with these elements do or do not impact on life-world involvement: ‘A person who is not understandable to his friends is probably ostracized from activities that require him to speak’ and therapy is then directed toward the ‘support given him to achieve the goal of social participation...in targeted events that take place in the course of everyday life’ (Duchan 2001: 41).

With a therapeutic focus on supporting and facilitating communicative involvement, as opposed to correcting client errors in contexts designed to encourage problems to emerge, the discourse of socially based intervention looks qualitatively different. There is more communicative symmetry and parity between the participants. The absence of quiz questions and exposed repair sequences, for example, suggests a lessening of the interpretive authority typically exercised by SLPs.

Rapport is no longer just a tool for reducing face threats to clients and manoeuvring them into participating in the ‘real work’ of therapy, which is to evaluate and correct their performance through a series of contrived tasks. Instead, positive communicative engagement in activities and rapport become goals in their own right (Simmons-Mackie & Kovarsky 2009). When communication breakdowns do occur, repair work is embedded into the ongoing stream of the interaction so that conversational progressivity – a feature of ordinary conversation (Schegloff 1979) that, for example, can be a problem for individuals with aphasia (Wilkinson et al. 2007) – is maintained.

In all these ways, socially based intervention frameworks appear more attuned to the construction of a positive sense of self among clients, as opposed to a self-as-damaged-goods.

However, studies that examine the discourse of socially based approaches to intervention are still in their infancy. For example, even though the social model does reveal more communicative symmetry between participants, this does not mean that such interactions are identical to ordinary conversations. Clinicians still plan activities and develop agendas for improving the communication of their clients. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that not all evaluative authority is relinquished by the professional expert. At the very least, more work is needed on the ways in which control may be exercised in different and perhaps more subtle ways.
From our perspective, research into the nature of language disorder and disability is better served by characterisations that locate these phenomena in interaction. Placing them solely inside the heads of individuals limits what we can learn about the nature of the problems people experience and de-contextualises our intervention approaches in potentially harmful ways.

References


1. Deficit and aphasia

The notion of ‘deficit’ becomes of unique interest when the phenomenon being referred to is language/communication. For the individual who experiences disability in other areas, language is one of the resources available to mitigate or explain differences, but, as Goffman (1968) notes, for those individuals with communication difficulties this resource is not available. For communities, language is a means by which other disabilities are constructed, and communication disability too is variously constructed in different communities and different cultures (Bebout & Arthur 1992). In the field of speech pathology/communication disorders, the notion of communication ‘deficit’ or ‘disorder’ is becoming increasingly contentious, as clinicians and researchers begin to challenge some of the traditional ways of discussing communication difficulties encountered by individuals in a variety of contexts – for example, how do ‘deficits’ manifest themselves and who is responsible for the labelling? As Kovarsky and Walsh discuss in this volume, professional discourse constructs communication disorder through textbooks, research and clinical intervention. In this chapter, we will explore key contextual issues related to the notion of communication deficit in terms of the individual’s notion of their own abilities, conversational partners’ perceptions and societal/cultural constructs. These issues will be related to the construction of identity of the self (both inter- and intra-personal perspectives) and the re-negotiation of identity experienced by individuals such as those with aphasia (loss/impairment of language) after stroke.
In the field of communication disorders there are a range of perspectives regarding ‘deficit’, and these perspectives parallel the perspectives that have operated with regard to cultural diversity in communication (Rampton 2001), both in scope and historical place. Through much of the twentieth century, approaches to communication disorders have been deficit-oriented, where both research and clinical practice have centred on the identification of errors or extent of deviation from standard forms or norms. Such research and practice has been consistent with a scientific paradigm in which the identification of error has striven for objective and replicable data-based judgements against assumed universals over and above situational or personal variability. From the 1980s, a degree of relativism and neutral plurality influenced the field, and while ‘error’ persisted as the primary focus of research and treatment, the discourse about error became talk about ‘difference’. By the turn of the century there was, at least at the margins of practice, increasing influence of critical theories (particularly in relation to the development of literacy) and social models of disability (particularly in relation to the use of assistive technologies for communication). While post-modernism as a philosophical stance is little recognised in the field, the movement toward the recognition of communication disorder as socially constructed has become embedded over the last ten or so years within research methodologies (with increasing use of qualitative research to gain the perspective of people with communication disorders) and has been seen as legitimising the ‘person-centred’ approaches to intervention that had long been held to be part of the ‘art’ (rather than ‘science’) of therapy (Ferguson & Armstrong 2009). These different perspectives are all present in the discourse around communication disorders today, and often result in competing interpretations in both research and clinical practice. In this chapter, these different perspectives are also evident, as we will be taking a predominantly critical post-modernist perspective in the analysis of public discourse about communication disorder, and a descriptivist/relativist perspective in the analysis of interaction.

2. Identifying as ‘a person with aphasia’

2.1. Individual identity as socially constructed through talk
Identity has in recent years come to be recognised as fluidly responding and evolving in interaction with others, rather than as a fixed attribute of personality. The shaping and re-shaping of identity through talk and
written texts is an important resource for those who acquire disability, and for those professionals who work with them (Hall et al. 1999). However, for people who have acquired aphasia, their deficits in discourse formulation and interpretation hinder the interactive negotiation of their identity using the linguistic resources available to them (Parr et al. 1997). For individuals without communication disorder, talk provides an opportunity to present the self in a way that can illuminate or offset the immediate medical experience – for example, through personal narrative (Kaufman 1988; Young 2006).

In the practice of speech-language pathology, intervention around identity has generally been seen in the context of the counselling aspects of intervention (Holland 2007), and the closer integration of identity work within the main therapeutic paradigm is a more recent development (Hagstrom 2004). For individuals with aphasia, one method of intervention that has been proposed as facilitating the re-adjustment of personal identity following aphasia due to stroke has been through group therapy within a social participation approach to intervention (Shadden 2007). Within this framework, ‘identity work’ is an integral part of the main activities of intervention, rather than an ‘add-on’ component, as the group context is seen as providing opportunities for affirmation of social value and individual worth to be interactively created by individuals with aphasia within a socially ‘safe’ (stigma-free) context. It is this context for intervention that we have selected to examine for this chapter in relation to the co-construction of private identity.

2.2. Identity of social groups as constructed through public discourse

The impact of communication on identity is not just at the individual level since, as Bourdieu points out, the value attached to different languages, different forms of expression, and different degrees of linguistic competence (different ‘linguistic capital’) are determined by the social environment in which they are used (Bourdieu 2006). The social acceptability of different ways of using language is fundamental to the social identity not just of individuals, but also of groups within society. For example, Bourdieu discusses the social value attached to language use across different social classes, but we can also consider that individual identity is shaped by the social identity as ‘communicatively disabled’ for those groups within the community identified by their communication disorder.
The group of people whose language use has been affected by stroke are most typically from an older age group, and so stereotypes around ageing, illness and language form a cultural backdrop against which their specific aphasic group membership is played out. The discourse of ageing reflects primarily negative cultural stereotypes, as found for example in the large corpus-based study by Mautner (2007) where the term ‘elderly’ was ‘...primarily associated with discourses of care, disability, and vulnerability’ (Mautner 2007: 51). As Coupland (2001) discusses, researchers and others tend to see language variation in older populations from a ‘cohort’ perspective (that is, older people’s language is seen as relatively fixed in relation to their cultural history, but differs from other age-cohorts) or from a medical perspective, that is, language change in older people is seen as deterioration not development. For older people with aphasia then, these cultural stereotypes may intensify the public perception of their language difficulties. On the other hand, research into the illness narratives of people who have had strokes has suggested that the commonly reported ‘biographical disruption’ of stroke is not as evident as expected in older populations, perhaps due to cultural expectations of stroke as an age-related illness (Faircloth et al. 2004). This raises the question as to whether aphasic language difficulties similarly are ‘normalised’ to any extent in the context of cultural assumptions about ageing. However, there is also a considerable minority of younger people with aphasia (Naess et al. 2009), and for this group, age-related public perceptions may influence the way others view them, and the way they view themselves (Wahrborg et al. 1997).

In the literature on aphasia to date, the main issues around public identity and aphasia involve a concern to raise public awareness of the term ‘aphasia’ and its meaning (Code et al. 2001). There is considerable current argument for the determination of particular terms to be used consistently in order to assist in public awareness campaigns, as well as to improve communication between professional groupings (Walsh 2005). For example, Walsh discusses how descriptive labels such as ‘learning disability’ serve useful institutional purposes for speech-language pathologists to clearly identify the need for services for individuals within the school education system (Walsh 2005: 72). Curiously absent in these discussions is any debate regarding potential negative effects of labelling for people with communication disability, and any critical reflection as to any potential for such campaigns to be self-serving for the profession rather than necessarily in the interests of the people concerned. In the case of aphasia in particular, the language difficulties of those affected mean that public messages are
generally filtered through other people (speech-language pathologists, family members, volunteers), and so one of the questions to be explored in the following examples of public discourse on aphasia is the extent to which the voice of people with aphasia can be heard, and the extent to which the representation of aphasia (including its label) is made available for the general public.

3. The discursive construction of aphasia

In this section, we reflect on the framing of aphasia within the wider social context, and the role-relationships expressed and created through such texts (Goffman 1974). By comparing the talk in interactions in groups of people with aphasia, with those involving aphasic and non-aphasic partners (family members, and speech-language pathologists), we also explore aspects of the interactive ‘footwork’ as interactants manage the negotiation of their role in the exchange, and their identity as competent individuals in the context of communication difficulty.

We make use of general descriptive linguistic methodology, and incorporate selected methods from a number of approaches (e.g. corpus linguistics), and focus on the application of the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004) since this approach provides useful tools for exploring the sociocultural context and its realisation in the lexicogrammar. Our primary method for the analysis of these texts is drawn from Martin and White’s work on Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005/2007), as we consider how people with aphasia and others use language to evaluate their difficulties in their co-construction of both their public and private identity.

3.1. Public identity

In order to explore the co-construction of public identity of the population with aphasia, there are of course many sources of discourse that could be usefully examined: for example, public media such as newspapers, representations in film and television, information available through the internet. There has been some limited prior research into this kind of publicly available data. For example, Elman and colleagues (2000) examined major newspapers in the USA for mention of the word aphasia, with findings indicating a lower frequency of the term compared with other acquired neurological conditions affecting communication with a similar prevalence in the community (for example, lower than Parkinson’s Disease, Multiple Sclerosis), and an association of the term aphasia with negative social consequences. These results are
interpreted by the researchers as supporting the need for wider public awareness of aphasia and the need for speech-language pathologists to play a more active role in relation to public advocacy for recognition of aphasia. Websites providing information about aphasia were examined in detail by Ghidella and colleagues (2005), but their analysis concentrated on how effectively such sites might be communicating with the general public as well as with people with aphasia, for example through what has become known the ‘aphasia-friendly’ features of the sites, including the clarity of visual design and reading level of the text (Rose et al. 2003).

Six texts from Western culture that describe the nature and impact of aphasia were selected for analysis – three from the websites of professional associations for speech-language pathology (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association – ASHA, the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists – CASLPA, the Speech Pathology Association of Australia – SPAA). The support groups were the National Aphasia Association (NAA – USA), Aphasia Institute (CAI – Canada), and the Australian Aphasia Association (AAA – Australia). The six texts differed in length (range 277–1001 words), and across the indices of overall complexity (words per sentence range 6–14.2; the percentage of passive sentences range 1–10; Reading Grade Level range 8–12.2). The indices of complexity appeared to reflect the country of origin rather than the nature of the organisations, with the Canadian texts at 10–12.2 Reading Grade Level, the American texts at 10.5–11 Reading Grade Level, and the Australian texts at 8–8.6 Reading Grade Level. As there was no difference in level between the professional association texts and the support group texts, it would appear that the assumed readership was the general public for all texts, rather than professionals. The texts used a variety of stylistic methods to format information and to engage the reader, and these too appeared to reflect country of origin rather than the nature of the organisations. For example, the use of questions such as ‘What is aphasia?’ as headings was a feature of the American texts (ASHA 14% of sentences; NAA 18% of sentences), but used rarely in the Canadian and Australian texts.

Examination of word frequency, using WordSmith Version 5.0 (Scott 1996), indicated two main high frequency clusters, with the first, predictably, around ‘person with aphasia’, ‘language’ and ‘brain’, and the second around ‘damage’, ‘difficulty’ and ‘disorder’. The second cluster involved ‘disorder’. While ‘difficulty’, ‘disease’ and ‘injury’ were used to much the same extent across the professional association and support group texts, proportionally the support group texts made fewer uses of
'damage', ‘disability’, ‘disorder’, ‘problem’ and ‘trouble’. Possibly ‘difficulty’ is a more neutral term (softer focus of evaluation) than ‘problem’ or ‘trouble’, even though all three are non-technical terms. Similarly, possibly ‘disease’ and ‘injury’ are more neutral than ‘damage’, ‘disability’ and ‘disorder’, even though all three are medical terms.

The six texts were analysed for expressions of evaluative attitude, that is, the appraisal of feelings (Affect), things (Appreciation), and character (Judgement). While there were no marked differences between the two sets of texts at this level of analysis, it was noted that 60 per cent of 107 evaluations in the professional texts involved Appreciation (usually in relation to features of disorder), while 50 per cent of fifty evaluations in the support group texts were to do with evaluation of the impact of disorder upon character judgements (for example, in relation to negative judgements as to the intelligence of persons with aphasia).

The appraisal in these texts was overwhelmingly negative across all types of evaluation and in both sets of texts, although somewhat less negative in the support group. Most of the appraisal was direct rather than implied, but when appraisal was implied then it was more likely to be a Judgement (42.2%) rather than Appreciation (24.4%) or Affect (7.7%). Implied appraisal was about as likely to be positive (57%) as negative (43%).

Engagement overall in these texts was, in a sense, neutralised through the adoption of a de-personalised style across the texts, except for two marked instances which warrant attention. The first more personalised moment occurred in the Canadian support group text, which said, ‘Sadly, aphasia can mask a person’s intelligence and ability to communicate feelings, thoughts and emotions.’ This use of the word ‘sadly’ would not be marked in a personal narrative of stroke and its effects, yet such a moment only occurs once across these texts. The second instance occurred in the American support group text, which by way of differentiating aphasia from the problems associated with dementia, said ‘...because people with aphasia have difficulty communicating, others often mistakenly assume they are mentally ill or have mental retardation’. This is the only moment across the texts in which the perspective of the ‘other’ is taken, invoking the only glimpse of the social reactions of people other than the reader (who is assumed to be ‘in the know’).

The striking omission from these texts was the ‘voice’ of people with aphasia. Not only were these texts not written for them (in terms of linguistic complexity), but these texts did not tell their story. Some of the support group websites did provide such information in later
pages or linked material, but the immediately presented information for the general public did not include more personalised accounts or viewpoints. There was an attempt, particularly in the professional association texts, to provide neutrally evaluated information as to what might be considered ‘normal’ for a person with aphasia. As others have discussed (Sarangi & Roberts 1999), normalisation of deficits serves to foreground the generalities in medical knowledge and to background the individual weight of personal experience. We have seen this foregrounding of the medical perspective through each stage of the analysis: the quantitative description indicated that material was designed for a well-educated and non-aphasic readership; the analysis of high frequency word clusters indicated that technical terms were differentially used between professional association and support group texts, and the professional association texts focused on evaluative description of aspects of disorder, in contrast to the support group texts’ focus on social judgements and their impact. Also, only one of these texts (American support group text) included content relevant to younger people of working age with aphasia – the implicit assumption across the other texts was that people with aphasia are older (or now not part of the workforce). In this case, this omission is possibly even more powerful in revealing the public identity of aphasia.

3.2. Private identity

The example we have chosen to analyse to explore the co-construction of individual identity is the interaction that takes place in a group therapy session for people with aphasia. While the analysis we are using is based on an SFL framework, the key levels for description and analysis of the interaction resonate with analyses drawn from other approaches in discourse analysis. For example, if we compare the present analytic framework to the work of Tannen and Wallat (2006), then description of the context of culture and context of situation reflects similar aspects described within ‘knowledge schemas’; description of discourse-semantic aspects of language use reflect similar aspects described within ‘interactive frames’; and description of the lexicogrammatical resources used provide a detailed understanding of how the relative ‘footing’ of interactants is dynamically aligned (Tannen & Wallat 2006). The example discussed by Tannen and Wallatt (2006) involves a medical examination of a child with cerebral palsy by the doctor in the presence of the child’s mother, and the analysis notes that a feature of the complex interaction is the simultaneous frames which the doctor’s language is
serving: maintaining a social encounter (to sustain rapport with both child and mother) at the same time as conducting the consultation, as well as an educative frame (video-recording for later teaching purposes).

The SFL framework enables us to look further into the way the presence of aphasia impacts upon the construction of identity by the individual, through analysis of the semantic resources found in the use of evaluative language and speech functions such as opening or sustaining a topic, supporting or confronting an argument. In studies by Ulatowska and colleagues (Ulatowska et al. 2001), speakers with aphasia have been found to be able to use evaluative language in the form of lexicogrammatical items involved in appraisal, as well as features defined by Labov (1972) as evaluative, e.g. repetition, direct speech and the use of metaphor. However, other studies document reduced lexical variety in appraisal terms and overall less evaluative language use by people with aphasia than by non-brain-damaged counterparts in some cases (Armstrong 2005). In some severe cases, people with aphasia can produce no explicit appraisal terms. In terms of speech functions, people with aphasia have largely been found to be in a respondent position in many conversations, particularly in therapy situations, and also to have limited access to a variety of functions (Drummond & Simmons 1995; Simmons-Mackie & Damico 2007; Simmons-Mackie et al. 2007; Wilcox & Davis 1977). The example of group therapy we analyse below involves multiple and simultaneous frames. The nature of therapeutic interaction is shaped by the theoretical paradigm which informs the approach to intervention (Martin et al. 2008). In contrast to the more traditional interactive frame for group therapy discussed in this volume by Kovarsky and Walsh, in which a cognitive-behaviourist paradigm informs the therapeutic model, the present example is drawn from the more recent social participation approach to therapy, in which therapeutic benefits are held to be gained through the facilitation of maximal participation in interaction (Elman 2005). Group therapy interaction in a social participation approach involves the group leader (usually a speech pathologist) in simultaneously maintaining the frame of a social encounter (for example, facilitating the flow of conversation, and not correcting errors) and a therapeutic interaction (for example, maximising opportunities for all interactants to contribute to the conversation, maximising understanding and production of communicative contributions).

The data presented in this example involved a group session for people with aphasia that was not a therapy session aimed at improving the aphasic members’ communication skills per se, but focused
on promoting social interaction in general (Armstrong & Mortensen 2006). The group was recorded at UK Connect in London (http://www.ukconnect.org/), a centre whose aims include empowering people living with aphasia to re-engage with life after stroke and improving the full range of long-term therapy and support services available to people living with aphasia that enable them to make that re-engagement. The overall aim of the particular group under focus in this study – the Music Group – is to promote social interaction. The specific aims are to include all group members in group discussions, to enable members to participate actively within these discussions and thus to develop confidence in their interactional skills. Resources to assist communication have been developed to support the conversation, and communication supporters help those who need some assistance in getting their message in or out. (These resources are known as ‘ramps’, a term that was coined by Kagan [1998: 818] to parallel the provision of physical ramps that assist the independence of wheelchair users.) Group members are proactive in this process by choosing and bringing in music of their choice, often with memories or stories attached. Occasionally music is chosen to arouse, shock, or provoke – rarely does a track please all, but it is certainly a vehicle for discussion and debate.

There were five people in the group who had been aphasic for between three and nine years, with ages ranging from 48 to 72. Three of the group – Tom, Anne, and Chris (pseudonyms only) – had a mild to moderate degree of aphasia, but were relatively fluent speakers. Jill had a severe Broca’s aphasia, mainly spoke in two- to three-word utterances, and David had global aphasia, with very limited repetitive utterances. David, however, had vivid facial expression, good intonation skills, and used gesture and writing as augmentative communication strategies. The facilitator, Sarah, was a volunteer trained at Connect to work with people with aphasia.

There were few opening moves in the conversation (18/308) and interestingly, most (13/18) were made by the people with aphasia – of all severities – rather than the facilitator. Opening moves were defined as a turn in the talk involving getting someone’s attention or initiating a new topic, or taking a new direction in the conversation. One of the more mildly affected people with aphasia tended to use the most opening moves, appearing to take an organising role in the group at times, as reflected in his attempting to get others involved in the conversation. However, the most severely aphasic speaker, David, was also able to initiate to a limited extent, given some interpretation by the other speakers. Thus, while the severity of aphasia did appear to affect the
members’ ability to facilitate, it did not necessarily restrict a person’s ability to participate.

Most of the sustaining moves (moves carrying the conversation forward) of the facilitator (92%) and the aphasic speakers (87%) were reactive, i.e. reacting to other people’s statements or questions, rather than being continuing moves, i.e. elaborating on their own thoughts. In the facilitator’s case, this was primarily because she tended to ask questions of the group members through probing and clarifying, and made comments to continue the topic, while in the aphasic speakers’ case, it appeared to reflect their restricted ability to elaborate and expand on their own talk in particular, or to expand on anyone else’s beyond one turn – see Example 1. It is important to note that Sarah had been trained not to intervene in conversations too much, and to give each aphasic speaker plenty of time to contribute. Hence she provided the aphasia speakers with a lot of time to continue as needed.

**Example 1. Conversation in Music Group**

Sarah: You seemed to be enjoying that (looking at Chris)
Tom: Yeah yeah very good
Chris: Very good
     Don’t know … this year (pointing to the CD)
Tom: Yeah
     Two thousand and five
Jill: Yeah
Tom: Very good
Chris: It’s good
Tom: Yeah
Jill: Yeah
Chris: Yeah
Sarah: What did you like about it?
Chris: Everything
Sarah: Everything (laughed)
     You liked vocals
Chris: Yeah everything
     It was good
Sarah: Quite uplifting
Chris: Yeah

In terms of evaluative language used by group members, all sub-types of evaluation examined were used by the aphasic members of the
group. As mentioned earlier, an individual’s ability to use evaluative language to convey attitudes, opinions and feelings is extremely important in establishing their identities and social bonding. All but David, the most severely affected speaker, could explicitly produce appraisal terms.

Graduation (intensifying the emotion/opinion expressed through use of lexical items such as *very, incredibly, awfully*, and devices such as repetition) was often used to provide amplification of the statement the previous speaker had made. The two most severely aphasic speakers relied heavily on such resources for expression of their evaluation and entered into the conversation substantially through use of these resources. While their identity as an active conversational participant was obviously restricted and different from before the stroke, these abilities enabled them still to participate socially, and it is of interest that both these individuals were active members of the Connect community.

It was significant that evaluation was rarely initiated by the people with aphasia in this particular context – it was usually in response to the group facilitator's expression of her opinions. Armstrong and Mortensen (2008) described this particular type of evaluation as co-constructed evaluation. When combining usage of explicit evaluative terms with those expressions achieved through co-construction and graduation, all speakers contributed significantly to the overall amount of evaluation and there did not appear to be a relationship between severity of aphasia and amount of evaluation used (something which has not previously been reported in the research literature). In fact Jill, one of the more severely affected speakers, produced the most evaluation, and David, the man with global aphasia, also produced a reasonable amount. However, when the evaluation was examined in terms of whether it was ‘independently’ produced or ‘co-constructed’, it was clear that both Jill and David relied heavily (and in David’s case, totally) on other speakers’ comments as scaffolding for their evaluation.

Example 2 demonstrates Jill’s use of graduated responses (the term ‘exactly’ and repetition of agreement ‘yeah yeah’ with emphasis placed on these words) to contribute her evaluation:

**Example 2: Aphasic speaker’s use of graduation**

Tom: She was such a talented singer  
Jill: Oh yes  
Tom: It’s such a pity she died  
Jill: Exactly  
Sarah: She was such a tragic figure really  
Jill: Yeah yeah
The dependence of the more severely aphasic speakers on conversational partners for co-construction of evaluation was not surprising, but demonstrates the potential for conversational partners to provide opportunities for opinion-giving in individuals with even global aphasia. In such cases, of course, comprehension of the non-aphasic partner’s comments must be maximised through necessary ramps (e.g. written cues, pictures), but this study highlights the potential of the aphasic individual to take up such opportunities. However, it is often the social opportunities that are lacking.

4. Implications

If we better understand the way(s) in which identity is constructed through language, and the impact aphasia has on this, then the ramifications for the person with aphasia and their social networks become clearer. The nature of the ‘deficit’ becomes socially situated, with both the person with aphasia and their communication partners/social networks a focus of importance, rather than only the person with aphasia. The ‘strength’ rather than ‘deficit’ approach to evaluative language use in aphasia highlights the fact that people with aphasia are able to use this kind of language to express opinions and feelings, and suggests the importance of promoting this use of language as much as possible in both therapy and social situations. Particularly in the light of Borod et al.’s (2000) findings that emotional topics elicit ‘better’ discourse, such opportunities may well provide the person with aphasia the chance to use more of his/her resources rather than restrict him/her to the factually based language tasks that have been the primary basis of traditional therapies. Such tasks may not provide the person with aphasia the opportunity to demonstrate the relatively retained function of evaluation, and in turn to demonstrate and develop their ‘competence’ (Kagan et al. 2001; Kovarsky et al. 1999). Conversational ramps (Kagan & LeBlanc 2002), rather than focusing on primarily referential meanings involving nouns and verbs representing objects and spheres of actions, could be increased in range and variety to include more interpersonal words and concepts such as adjectives, intensifiers, and specific mental verbs such as like, love, hate. While some are already included in different systems, sub-categories of evaluation may be incorporated more systematically into a set of ramps, using the proposed framework. In a similar way, individual therapy could include evaluation-related lexical items rather than remain with the traditional focus on factual information primarily involving nouns and verbs. Evaluative language is an important part of communication. Extending our clinical approaches beyond the
‘information’ focus may begin to connect our notions of impairment-based therapy with social participation and facilitation concepts. It may also assist us to focus on a strength that appears to be, to a large extent, retained at a communicative competence level in people with aphasia, and to further explore these skills so that therapy may facilitate people to engage with friends and family in increasingly meaningful ways.

For the person with aphasia, their overall social and communicative context has definitely changed after their stroke; hence their identity is constantly being re-negotiated. In more recent years, it has been suggested from a social participation approach (Elman 2005) that clinical services need to focus on assisting the person with aphasia to re-integrate into their community post stroke. Identity issues are discussed frequently in this approach as the person with aphasia is encouraged explore their ‘new’ or ‘changed’ identity within a broader social communication/participation context. One of the consequences of developing an understanding of the co-construction of both private and public identity is the recognition of the importance of the wider sociocultural context. Within both research and clinical practice in the field of communication disorders there is a focus on individuals with aphasia as separate from the society in which they live and talk. Even in scholarly discussion of alternatives to the medical model for ways to understand the access and social inclusion issues for aphasia, it is the individual’s interaction with their speaking partner that is the focus for discussion. Even when communication disability is recognised as socially co-constructed, the context for negotiation of this disability is seen as primarily local, with wider social dimensions such as interactional power seen as reflecting the dimensions of the immediate clinical context rather than the social institutions in which these interactions take place. Social marginalisation is recognised as a consequence of aphasia, yet described in terms of individual social isolation, rather than recognised as applying to the wider group of people with communication disability (Simmons-Mackie & Damico 2007). In contrast, recent practical suggestions for change present a blueprint for social action based on recognition (embedded in practice, not in the context of a theoretical perspective) of the wider social context for aphasia (Kagan & LeBlanc 2002; Parr et al. 2006). Wide-reaching institutional change requires clear communication about the nature of communication disability, and so it is important to recognise the society-wide implications of the way we talk about communication disability.
Note

1. Reading assessments based on Flesch-Kincaid Grade level automatically generated through Microsoft Office Word (USA grade levels).

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References


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Part VI

Recognition in the Context of Educational Diversity
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Introduction

In educational research, interviewing is a routine research procedure which assumes that the production of knowledge around topics of interest is the result of an interchange of views between individuals. In practice, typically, researchers focus on what their interviewees say rather than on the social significance of their interaction with them. Social scientists often do not even conduct and transcribe the recordings themselves.

In this chapter, I address some epistemic aspects of the phenomenon whereby the symbolic power associated with the use of the official languages in education in Cameroon remains associated with characterisations of the dialects as inferior modes of expression. By focusing on the way this affects interactions with primary school teachers I try to characterise the significance of the phenomenon for the production of knowledge about education in Cameroon and the wider significance for educational research. I argue that the interactional difficulties observable in these interviews reflect the long-term consequences of the imposition of European languages in education and the assertion that only these languages were able to express knowledge. The concomitant assumption that local languages – and their speakers – were essentially deficient constituted a case of injustice of an epistemic nature. The long-term effect in the educational space – as evidenced in these interviews – can be characterised as mutual ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu 1991) between genuine participants struggling with the deadlock and their
institutionalised roles. Overall, I argue that the analytical turn whereby both participants are conceptualised as socially grounded epistemic subjects, rather than as sociologically determined agents reproducing inequalities, opens up possible ways forward for educational research and second language education in particular.

In Europe, although policies have encouraged positive views of multilingualism and the advantages of diversity, endocentric norms (i.e. ‘established from within’) dominate national educational systems. This points at groups outside the norm as being marginal. In France, where language use has been regulated and codified by the ‘Académie’ since 1635, the power of the language as a symbol of national unity is particularly strong. ‘French is the language of the Republic’ is stipulated in the constitution by virtue of which it is illegal to teach in a language other than French. Recent research shows the extent to which social prejudices towards children from the minorities who speak another language at home still abound in schools and in society at large. In France, as recently as 2004, the commission presided over by M.Benisti published an official Report to the French National Assembly entitled ‘On the Prevention of Delinquency’ (my translation), which made an explicit link between social deviance and bilingualism (p. 9). In the UK, Bernstein (1970) proposed the notion of sociolinguistic code ‘to address the social antecedents of the educability of different groups of children’. Pupils who do not speak the school language at home have also been marginalised as ‘problematic learners’ by various psychological constructs such as the ‘mismatch hypothesis’, or ‘basic interpersonal communicative skills’ versus ‘cognitive academic language proficiency’ (Cummins 1979, 2000). The situation resulted in calls for ‘mainstreaming’ in the UK as a solution counteracting the social exclusion of children from the minorities (Bourne 1989). More recently, Rampton (2006) showed the crucial role of school discursive practices in the constitution and reproduction of particular groups’ undesirable learner identities in school contexts.

The official intention behind the use of endocentric linguistic norms in education is the equality of access to education. In practice, it amounts to an assertion that linguistic diversity needs to be eradicated and that people who have different linguistic practices suffer some sort of deficit. In France, the notion of equality through linguistic uniformity dates back to the Jacobin period of the Convention during the Revolution. It was at the heart of the development of the compulsory, free and non-denominational educational system of the Third Republic at the time when France developed its colonial empire in Africa and
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Europe’s decision to create colonies led to the establishment of educational systems based on exocentric norms which set up the conditions for the authority of the user of the school language to be ‘recognised’ (Bourdieu 1991: 107).

In Africa, multilingual countries like Cameroon offer the image of the continued promotion of exocentric linguistic norms in education. Basic schooling is conducted via the medium of official languages ‘exported’ by European countries, thus offering a kind of mirror image of the European situation. However, half a century after Independence, it is clear that the sociolinguistic situation is extremely complex – with major differences between rural and urban areas – and is reflected in schools. Yet, very little empirical work so far has been conducted on actual language use in primary schools. Research has generally concentrated on planning issues or associated language educational policy issues, as in Benson’s (2004) study in Guinea-Bissau. However, a growing number of publications based on recordings and observations have raised awareness both of the complexity of language use in classrooms (Arthur 2001) and its sociolinguistic significance. In Cameroon, the debate has concentrated on the status of Pidgin English (Alobwede d’Epie 1998) and an appropriate writing system for it (Sala 2009), thus illustrating how educational discourse plays a key role in the reproduction of social prejudices in schools through the assignment of hierarchical values to languages (Esch 2008) and, implicitly, to their speakers.

The issue opened by these de jure situations in education is that schools perpetuate the many practices through which knowledge continues to be defined and conceptualised through western epistemologies. Makoni & Meinhof (2004) discuss the effects of this dominance on Applied Linguistic research in Africa and encapsulate the issue by quoting the following:

The real power of the west is not located in its economic muscle and technological might. Rather it resides in its power to define. The west defines what is, for example, freedom, progress and civil behaviour; law tradition and community; reason, mathematics and science, what is real and what it means to be human. The non-western civilizations have simply to accept these definitions or to be defined out of existence. (Sardar 1999:44)

My endeavour here is very limited. Starting from the analysis of a series of interviews collected in two Cameroonian schools in both
parts of the country, I try to show how conversational interaction between teachers and a European researcher reveals difficulties of communication arising from the assumed power differential between users of the official languages and users of the ‘dialect’. Doing so also offers a window on the convergence/divergence dimension between the francophone and the anglophone teachers’ teams analysed (the two schools are dubbed ‘Camfranc’ and ‘Camenge’ to protect participants’ confidentiality).

In the first Part, the background to the project which motivated the series of interviews is introduced very briefly and the historical basis for several aspects of educational language policies which are relevant to our argument is outlined. Documentary evidence is presented to show that from the end of the First World War, the imposition of their language was officially declared to be a right for the colonisers and moreover, that Cameroonian people’s languages were deemed by the Europeans not to be fit for the expression of modern ideas.

In the second Part, interview data is presented to show that this definition of Cameroonian languages as incapable of carrying and transmitting school knowledge apparently still prevails amongst teachers in both parts of the country. In interviews taking place in the school context, the teachers exhibit a regular propensity or disposition (Bourdieu 2000: 234) to routinely denigrate their own ‘dialect’ and crucially, any question relating to the teachers’ own dialect triggers complex interactive sequences regularly across the whole data set analysed as ordered forms of social organisation.

In the third Part, the data are interpreted further in terms of the specific kind of injustice done to people who are wronged in their capacity as knowers and who are deemed not to be credible because of their language, in terms of epistemological injustice (Fricker 2007). The fundamental issues this raises for practising educational researchers who have an interest in the development of learner autonomy are considered.

Part 1 The background

1.1. Reasons for undertaking a comparative project in Cameroon primary schools

The project was concerned with the significance of primary teachers’ views about the role of languages in education in the process of the reproduction of language norms and pedagogies in the francophone and the anglophone sub-systems of the national organisation. It aimed
to document how far teachers’ thinking contributed to the current educational situation in Cameroon, where the continued promotion of exocentric norms inherited from the colonial era, and the promotion of endocentric norms, lead to conflicting models of multilingualism. At the time of Independence, the policy of French/English official bilingualism (Fonlon 1963) was hailed as a symbol of national integration between the francophone part and the anglophone part of the country (then East and West Cameroon). But while this policy officially recognised the formal equality between the two colonial languages, it also avoided agreement on a multilingual policy in a country where there are still over 230 national languages. By now, two views of multilingualism are apparent, a transitional view, associated with awareness of the national languages, and the integrative view, which places multilingualism at the heart of national integration with functional complementarity between languages (Gfeller 2000). The transitional view clearly prevails, particularly in urban areas, where many people cannot communicate in their dialect outside their home and a growing number of younger parents use French and/or English with their children. Bilingualism is perceived as a means of improving social mobility, but this process takes place to the detriment of the use of the dialects and of their transmission, which in turn increases the isolation of rural communities. As shown in my work in a Senegal lycée (Esch 2005), French and English both divide and unite communities. The sociolinguistic picture is further complicated by the increasing confidence of the educated elite in the use of Cameroonian varieties of French and English (Echu 2003) on the one hand, and by the dominance of a number of lingua francas – usually regional – and more particularly of Pidgin English, which has a dominant role in the anglophone North-West and Southwest Provinces (Schneider 2007; Chumbo & Simo Bobda 1996; Todd 1982a: 25).

Choosing to do a comparative pedagogy project was meaningful in a country with two sub-systems assumed to apply the same national programme coming from the same Ministry, but it was also guided by the fact that a growing body of comparative research has shown the extent to which the French and English views about primary education diverge, and more particularly in the domain of the role of languages (Raveaud 2002). Such cultural aspects may still be unacknowledged sources of misunderstandings between the two areas. For this reason, I was using Alexander’s (2005) definition of pedagogy as ‘the act of teaching together with the ideas, values and collectives histories which inform, shape and explain that act’ as a useful means of broadening the framework within which I was engaging in the research, to answer the
questions: to what extent are the educational views and pedagogical cultures of the British and the French concerning language still reflected in the discourse of primary teachers when talking about their professional role, their practice, and their function in society, as well as the bilingual policy and use of the national languages?

1.2. The power to define

The 2004 edition of the Champions en Histoire-Géographie, the manual used in Camfranc for the CM1 and CM2 classes (years 5 and 6 in Camenge) helps illustrate Europe’s power to define in its most literal sense. It is published in France, with a special edition for Cameroon carefully documented and illustrated. In Lesson 11, entitled ‘The Europeans on the coast of Cameroon’ (CM1: 97) we find that the country’s very name comes from what the Portuguese explorers called the River Wouri in 1472, ‘Rio dos Camaroes’, which then became ‘Camarone’ in Spanish, ‘Kamerun’ in German, ‘Cameroon’ in English and ‘Cameroun’ in French.

The list does give the impression that the country’s successive names themselves reflected the varying degrees of influence of the European nations. Each ‘label’ in fact reflects different kinds of relation: the Portuguese were exploring the coast, the Spanish were establishing trading posts. The defining moment came in 1884–1885 at the conference leading to the signing of the Berlin Treaty which established a kind of code of conduct between European countries for the sharing-out and colonisation of Africa. The non-representation of the Africans at the conference led to ‘embarrassed and confused explanations’ (Manceron 2003: 144). Kamerun at that point acquired official borders for the first time and a political entity, as defined by the Europeans, i.e. as a protectorate. Its people consequently had to fight with Germany in the First World War. At the Treaty of Versailles, the country found itself the object of competing European nations yet again. Cameroon was split between the British and the French under a Société des Nations/League of Nations Mandate from 1919 until 1945. It then became a United Nations Trust Territory until Independence in 1960, and in 1961 – after two regions of the English-speaking part decided in favour of attachment to Nigeria – the two Cameroons became a Federal Republic, then, in 1972, following a much contested referendum, a United Republic.

The other side of the coin is also apparent in the CM1 textbook. Lessons 1 to 10 deal with the long history before contact with the Europeans, with evidence from archaeology; but the power to define
through language becomes obvious in Chapter 16 on ‘Resistance to colonisation’ (p. 108) and the dossier on ‘The great figures of the history of Cameroon from 1956 to 1998’ (p. 124). These both refer typically to men educated in Europe who were executed as traitors or murdered for political reasons. While the textbook is well-documented and ‘evidence-based’, the representations given are ambiguous and provide the kind of sanitised version of colonial history common in French textbooks for French children. For example, Martin Paul Samba’s public execution is described on p. 108, but his photo above represents him in his uniform of a German officer, which makes him look important but validates the accusation that he was a traitor. Similarly, the six lines devoted to Ruben Um Nyobe on p. 124 make him appear as lacking flexibility, ‘refusant tout compromis’ (with a note explaining that the ‘difficult word’ means ‘agreement requiring that each party gives way a little’), engaged in illegal action ‘clandestinité’ (with a note explaining the meaning of the difficult word as ‘acting secretly’) after 1955 when the ‘Union des Populations du Cameroun’ was prohibited. His death – apparently linked to the fact that he was ‘poursuivi sans relâche par les Français’ or ‘chased relentlessly by the French’ – remains agentless, i.e. ‘fut tué’, ‘was killed’. Here, one sees evidence of how the manual’s pedagogic discourse, typical of the French tradition, orientates the attention of the children to the accuracy of the vocabulary used and the metalanguage, while it builds up some legitimacy for the fate of the Cameroonian heroes for Independence through characterising their struggle as somehow unreasonable and above all, fought on equal terms.

The power to define applied to African languages was made explicit as early as the end of the First World War, when France and Britain were given a mandate by the SDN. The first quotation below illustrates the way the French used the notion of ‘devolved sovereignty’ to impose their language as unifying common language:

La population du Cameroun n’est pas homogène et les nombreuses tribus qui la composent se servent de dialectes fort différents. Il est donc de toute nécessité de créer entre elles un langage commun qui ne peut être évidemment que celui du peuple à qui est dévolue la souveraineté du pays. [emphasis mine]

(Report to the Ministry of the Colonies, Annex to the ‘Journal Officiel’ of the 7th September 1921, p. 431, following the decree of 01-10-1920 introducing 25hrs of French language per week in schools; quoted by Owono 1986: 77 and ff).
‘The population of Cameroon is not homogeneous and the numerous tribes of which it is composed use very different dialects. It is thus necessary to create between them a common language which obviously can only be the language of the people to whom the sovereignty of the country has been devolved’. [my translation]

This second quotation defines further the nature of the dialects, and supports the statement with experimental evidence.

Il y a en effet un véritable abîme entre les dialectes indigènes et la langue française. Ils expriment des sentiments, des tendances, des formes de pensée profondément différentes à tel point qu’il ne peut y avoir de passage de l’un à l’autre. Les dialectes indigènes ne se prêtent pas à l’expression des idées dont nous voulons assurer l’essor bienfaisant. Leur esprit particulier, comme la mentalité de l’individu primitif, s’oppose tout naturellement aux idées de progrès. Les plus fervents partisans de l’enseignement par les dialectes locaux ont compris qu’il n’était pas possible de répandre par le véhicule d’une langue primitive les acquisitions d’une civilisation moderne. (Source: Rapport SDN 1923 : 19–20 [quoted in Atangana 1996])

There is a real abyss between the indigenous dialects and the French language. They express feelings, tendencies, ways of thinking which are deeply different to such an extent that it is impossible to pass from one to the other. The indigenous dialects are not able to express the beneficial ideas which we want to see developed. Their particular genius, like the mentality of the primitive individual, is opposed by its very nature to ideas of progress. The most fervent partisans of teaching via the medium of the local dialects have realised that it is impossible to spread the learnings of modern civilisation by means of a primitive language. [Ph. Harding-Esch’s translation]

Part 2 Interviewing primary school teachers: Camfranc and Camenge

This section gives evidence that defining languages as deficient and incapable of carrying and transmitting school knowledge was an act which still affects primary school teachers’ interactions in interviews taking place on the school premises with a European researcher.
2.1. Approach to the analysis

The fact that status, social roles and age were going to be prominent had been made clear to me by people in the street as they routinely hailed me, ‘la blanche’ and ‘maman’ or ‘la mère’, while at the same time, clearly not identifying me as French or English. Another factor was that the administrative process to gain access to the schools was necessarily formal. Because it took place through meetings with the inspectorate and school heads, my role of observer-interviewer (as outlined in the project) tended to be distorted in the eyes of the teachers. At the beginning, in particular, they perceived me as observer-evaluator or adviser, and I had to meet these expectations when possible.

Interviews were carried out with the teachers in their professional capacity. This meant that the data offered instances of ordered forms of social organisation where the maintenance of participants’ face (teachers’ and my own) was central. This led me to focus on episodes where the management of face was somehow ‘noticeable’, to identify regularities in the data set, then what seemed to trigger the occurrence of regular patterns, and finally to contrast the two data sets to capture convergences and divergences between the francophone and the anglophone teachers.

In section 2.2, this chapter reports on the first analysis which made use of Goffman’s (1981) work and Garfinkel’s ‘shared methods of practical reasoning’ (1967) to study problematic episodes in both data sets. In section 2.3 we explore further how teachers’ avoidance of talk about their home languages may have come about. It is the most striking area of convergence between the two teams of teachers.

In the second and third analysis – to be reported elsewhere for lack of space – we concentrated on notions of ‘face-work’ and ‘footing’ to observe the positionings and identity claims made by the participants in discourse when they ‘changed footing’. We also used the notions of ‘Ethos’ (Riley 2007) and ‘Ethos in interaction’ (Amossy 1999; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005) to study episodes where teachers projected ‘virtuous selves’. Both analyses highlighted divergences which relate to French and British pedagogical values.

2.2. Naming one’s dialect: a problem

A feature of all interviews is that questions relating to the teacher’s own dialect trigger complex interactional repair sequences. The reasons why these were particularly long were many. One was the fact
that the interviewer had comprehension difficulties in recognising and identifying proper nouns, which led to a succession of other-initiated self-corrections (see Example 1 below, lines 10–14) or even other-corrections through writing (line 14–15), which created embarrassment. However, the main difficulty was that questions concerning ‘languages’ led to misunderstandings on both sides. The word ‘languages’ in Cameroon refers to French and English, i.e. the official languages used in school. When the interviewer E expects a straightforward question-answer sequence (lines 1–5) she fails, because the question does not mean what E intended. Instead of a one-word answer (i.e. ‘Bassa’) she gets (line 6) ‘non (..) d’abord je commence d’ où je viens’ (‘no (..) first I start with where I come from’), leading to a lengthy narrative (lines 6–27) related to what it means to her. It seems that the terms ‘language’, ‘national languages’ and ‘Cameroonian languages’ refer to abstract entities which may have currency in University Language Departments and academic papers, but these terms do not relate to what primary school teachers call ‘patois’ or ‘dialect’. ‘One’s home language’ is not a topic of conversation or a construct one talks about, but a means of expression one uses with the people who speak it. Giving it a name requires from individuals that they explain who they are, i.e. that they locate themselves in space and time as B does in Example 1, lines 6–7. As Hampâté Bâ (1991: 19) writes, ‘En Afrique traditionnelle, l’individu est inséparable de sa lignée’ (‘In traditional Africa, individuals cannot be separated from their lineage’). They need to develop a narrative involving their lineage, their origins and where they precisely come from, in order to perform a meaningful answer. Another reason why the question is inappropriate here is that the ‘dialect’ is not supposed to be used in the school context: its very mention by a foreign visitor comes to the teachers as a surprise because they have been used to exclude the dialects from the school context from early childhood (see section 2.3).

The very long pause at line 25 makes it clear that E is wondering why B is telling her all this, and she makes a last bid to obtain the information she wants. E’s expression of surprise at hearing ‘Bassa’ reflects that she has interpreted the whole sequence as conditionally relevant to the original question (Levinson 1983: 306; Schegloff 1972: 363ff.).

Example 1  Camfranc, Mme B. (1) [5’16”–6’ 27”] 10-10-08

1 E: (venez vous d’) une famille où vos parents parlait des langues camerounaises ou bien eventuellement même ‘deux langues camerounaises différentes (.) et à quel moment dans ce cas là vous avez
commencé à fonctionner en Français

B: non dans mon enfance (.) d’abord je commence
d’où je viens :: je suis de la province du Centre
E: ah vous venez du Centre (.) d’accord
B: c’était la province du Centre e :: plus précisément

du département du Nyong et Kelle
E: [ekile ] ?
B: Nyong et Kelle
E: Nyong et [tshedè] ?
B: ⇒ (B writes it on E’s note book)

E: oui dans le Centre (.) où est ce que c’est ?
B: dans le Centre c’est un peu :: au :: vers - comme si on allait vers Douala
E: ah d’accord (.) un peu a l’ouest alors
B: huuu vers Douala et plus précisément à Boumyébem et les voitures
s’arrêtent là (.) on paie (.) on appelle ça le péage

E: oui
B: on paie pour passer et il y a encore seulement le péage
à Edea (.) bon (.) on traverse la province du Centre là et plus précisément là
où je suis même mariée c’est à ce niveau du péage à Boumyébem

⇒ (.) (very long pause)
⇒ E: et votre langue (.) s’appelle comment alors ?
B le Bassa
⇒ E: a :::h vous êtes (.) vous parlez le Bassa !

Word for word translation

E: do you come from a family where
your parents used Cameroonian languages or even
possibly ‘two different Cameroonian languages
in which case at what moment
did you start speaking French ?
⇒ B: no in my childhood (.) first I start where I come from
I am from the Centre province.
E: ah you come from the Centre (.) OK
B: it was the Centre province and more precisely

the Nyong and Kelle Departement
E: Ekile?
B: Nyong and Kelle
E: Nyong and [tshedè]?
B: ⇒ (writes it on E’s note book)

E: OK in the Centre (.) where is it ?
B: in the Centre it’s towards – as if you went to Douala
E: a::h OK (.) to the West then
B: huuu towards Doula and more precisely Boumyébem and
the cars stop there (.) one pays (.) we call that the toll gate

E: yea
B: one pays to go through and there is only another toll gate
at Edea (.) OK (.) one goes through the Centre Province there
and more precisely where I got married at the toll gate of Boumyébem

⇒ (.) (very long pause)
⇒ E: and your language then (.) what is it called?
B: le Bassa
⇒ E: a::h you are(.) you speak Bassa !
Another regular feature of the interviews was the tagging of apologetic references to parents being uneducated or ignorant, before mentioning their use of the dialects in the home. Thus, Mrs T declares [bold=my emphasis]:

**Example 2**   Camfranc, Mme T. (1) [0.48] 02-10-08

T: dans notre temps (.) la plupart c'était le::
   *ma maman ne savait pas ni lire ni écrire alors::*
E: ah oui oui oui
T: *alors on causait plus le:: le patois*

*Word for word translation*

T: at the time(.) mostly it was the::
   *my mum could not read or write so::*
E: ah yea yea yea
T: *so we talked more in::: the dialect*

and similarly, in Camenge:

**Example 3**   Camenge, Jo (1) [2.25] 04-11-08

E: so both your parents spoke the same variety
J: yess the same *and they did not ->to be frank they did not even know pidgin* < so I got pidgin from the quarters and then started English in school

These remarks contrast with the opposite tendency to associate the use of English and French with education, knowledge and social status conferring authority on their speakers:

**Example 4**   Camfranc, Mme O. [2.00] 01-10-08

O: au quartier si y'avait des petits amis
   *on parlait le français* et le pidgin (.)
   on était à Douala (.) *mon père était fonctionnaire à Douala.*

*Word for word translation*

O: in our neighbourhood if there were friends
   *we spoke French* and pidgin (.)
   we were in Douala (.) *my father was a civil servant in Douala.*
and similarly in Camenge:

**Example 5** Camenge, Anne (1) [5.40] 04-11-08

A: (...) since my father was educated  
E: huhu  
A: as I was learning in school when I was in class 1 (.) when I reach the house  
my father would continue to teach me (.) English

Thus we find that both teams of teachers display in their discourse the reflex of dissociating the use of their own language from the knowledge and education domains, while associating the use of French and English with valuable knowledge and authority. This appears to be the outcome of their shared early school experience of practices used to eradicate the dialects through symbolic and corporal violence.

**Example 6** Camfranc, Mme El (1) [1’30”] 02-10-08

El: .. au départ, notre directeur d’école avait absolument interdit la langue là  
E: oui  
El: au niveau de l’école (.) y’avait une gros morceau d’os là qu’on appelait symbole  
E: huhu  
El: quand on surprenait quelqu’un en train de parler (.) la langue là, le patois (.) on vous accrochait ça

*Word for word translation*

El: at the beginning (.) our headteacher had strictly forbidden that language  
E: yes  
El: at school (.) there was this big piece of bone we called symbol.  
E: huhu  
El: when somebody was caught speaking (.) that language (.) the patois (.) they would make you wear it.
In this example from Camenge – where I witnessed some teachers use corporal punishment routinely – it is made clear that these practices are kept alive and are considered appropriate by some teachers, although the government prohibited it in schools in 1998.

In Example 7, A refers to her childhood and in Example 8 she refers to her current practice:

**Example 7** Camenge, Anne (1) [6'10"] 04-11-08

A: we were no punished (sic) ..but we were not allowed...we could not stand answer a question in the dialect or- in pidgin (.) the teacher was at least trying that we should speak the language..
E: and if you could not what would happen?
A: *nono:: no beatings (.) only correct*

**Example 8** Camenge, Anne (1) [24’] 04-11-08

A: ..it's difficult by the second term (.) we make a card (.) if you ‘SPEAK PIDGIN’ they put it on your neck (.) and you are punished
E: why?
A: we do that! you are punished so:: when you do it like that (.) you see them controlling (.) and then they are – they are coping

To summarise, the evidence is that the interviewees' use of language is not only constrained by the way they perceive the interviewer but reveals the extent to which their professional habitus as teachers is geared to the maintenance of the symbolic power of the two official languages and the exclusion of the national languages from the school context. Teachers see their role as being the proud guardians of standards and of the implementation of the policy to maintain French and English in school as the sole media of instruction. Two of them even mistook ‘national languages' for ‘French/English’ in interviews.

In so doing, as professionals, the teachers dismiss their own difficulties and their own experiences of becoming literate in a foreign language, such as restricted input or lack of deep comprehension, as exemplified by this translated example from Camfranc:

**Example 9** Camfranc, Mme B. (1) [8.30] 03-10-08, [my translation]

B: ...of the main problem I've noticed (. ) it's that to understand something properly I need to understand it before I understand in
French (. ) I need to understand first in my patois (. ) in order to be able to explain it (. ) I need to be able to really understand it (. ) to acquire it

The following example is from Camenge, where teachers all stressed the issue of teaching children who spoke Pidgin at home:

**Example 10** Camenge, John (1) [2’47”] 05-11-09

J: it was very complicated writing (. ) write and study in class with Pidgin environment entirely in ‘pidgin ‘pidgin ‘pidgin ‘pidgin

E: yeayea

J: so when I went to primary school then I started the Standard English

Finally, as parents, although they claim they speak the patois at home and it represents their own personal identity, the teachers acknowledge that their own children do not speak the patois any more, and that with urbanisation, contact between languages in towns favours the choice of French or Pidgin English, thus acknowledging their own ambiguous agency in the predictable loss of many national languages. Example 11 from Camenge is revealing. The teacher is a speaker of Kom. She left her community young and has lived in towns since. Kom is one of the languages whose maintenance is actively supported by the community (Truddell 2004).

**Example 11** Camenge, Pat (1) [14’10”] 03-11-08

P: when I am using the words in the dialect they didn’t put weight (. ) they didn’t make [my father] see or feel the burden I was feeling (. ) so find it easier talking – using the English language (. ) not in my dialect (. ) so that now the dialect becomes a problem (. ) when I have to address a situation (. ) if it means I have just the dialect (. ) I find myself wanting

It is tempting to adopt Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* to explain the teachers’ actions as ‘integrating past experiences’ shaped by the linguistic and social capital gains of their status in society. In this way one could explain the process of reproduction of professional practices and views imposed over fifty years ago. However, this would only account for the unmediated and habitual *reflexive mode* of functioning of their habitus.
Indeed, here the analysis accounts for the performativity of certain topics in the interviews – such as the naming of one's dialect – as reflexive of the teachers' ‘taken for granted’ assumptions about the interviewer's expectations.

But the analysis of the interactions between the interviewer and the teachers requires that one engages in a mediated, thoughtful, interpretative reflective mode because of the kind of confrontation produced by the interaction between two ‘taken for granted’ worlds. In other words, it is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon whereby teachers, as prime agents of language education policies, have internalised the notion that their own language doesn’t belong to the school domain while concurrently making identity claims about ‘their’ dialect. One needs to account for the performativity of the very mention of certain topics – such as the name of the dialect – in the interviews, which raises the issue of what Bourdieu called ‘performative discourse’, whereby the symbolic power of what is said is achieved ‘through the legitimate instruments of expression, and therefore the participation in the authority of the institution’ makes ‘all the difference’, i.e. institutes the deficit so to speak (Bourdieu 1991: 109). However, the further question is the extent to which these interactionally noticeable sequences also impose ‘reflection’, ‘self-observation’, ‘taking into account one's situation’ [which] assume, in such moments ‘the functions of self-reorganisation’ (Mannheim 1940: 57; quoted in Harman 1988: 109). For example, one needs to address the issue of the ‘knowledge deficit’ on the European side. Example 1 shows that – apart from the missionaries concerned with translating the Bible and anthropologists who decided to make it an ‘object’ of study – Cameroonians' epistemologies have not been ‘recognised’, but they are still very effective. It is apparent in Example 1 when B tells the interviewer in no uncertain terms not only that the questioning is not correct, but also precisely what the right ‘order’ is supposed to be (line 6). In the last section, I address briefly other issues of the ‘taken for granted assumptions’ about the teachers’ expectations when answering particular questions, as well as what it means in terms of the ethical features of our epistemic practices and the way we construct knowledge as professional researchers in education.

Part 3 The issue of epistemic injustice and the development of autonomy

The argument here is that these interviews raise the question of the ethical features of our epistemic practices. Starting from the position that
the human condition is socially situated, Fricker (2007: 176) adopts a socially situated conception of epistemic subjects and addresses the issue of *epistemic injustice* or the specific kind of injustice where, through prejudice, people are wronged in their capacity as knowers. In the case of Cameroon, the official claims in the 1920s that dialects were unable to express ideas of modernity amount to what Fricker would describe as an *identity prejudice* against people who suffer a collective loss of credibility as knowers of their own languages. The exclusion of the dialects and the imposition of European languages in schools through symbolic and physical practices of coercion endured by the teachers – and reproduced by some – also created an institutional form of collective hermeneutical impoverishment which takes time to improve if not acknowledged. This can be exemplified by most teachers’ pessimistic view of the current efforts made by the government to develop the introduction of ‘national languages and culture’ in the curriculum as part of the country’s ‘linguistic heritage’. There is also evidence that some of the teachers maintained and transmitted parallel bodies of knowledge (concerning medicinal plants, for example) in which they had been initiated in the context of their community and in their dialect. However, as suggested by Truddel (2004: 23), the notion that ‘the refusal to use local languages in educational and development contexts results in the dismissal of the values of local knowledge’ may be valid but is too strong, and could lead to essentialist views of culture, if not misleading constructions of ethnicity (Bayart 1996). It would be usefully revisited in terms of the significance of the ways in which local languages are able to evolve in urban contexts, and there is much evidence of the ‘cannibalisation of the cultural inventory of the West’ documented by Piot in his work on the Kabré people in Togo (1999: 174).

The phenomenon of epistemic injustice allows us to look at the data differently and to open up a way forward, because participants are conceptualised as epistemic subjects, rather than subjected – or dominated – epistemologically. Epistemic injustice is certainly not confined to a time and a place. It is a general issue in educational practices and institutions and it can be said to happen routinely whenever individuals are labelled or pre-judged as being unable to participate in educational situations as learners because of our own inability to acknowledge or deal with their being different from us. One can think in terms of degrees. Whereas assumed deficits are sometimes associated with a person’s attribute (for example visually impaired pupils), or apparent inability to develop particular skills (dyslexic pupils and reading difficulties), the kind of injustice done to all communities whose language
was excluded from the educational domain appears to be linked to cases where the deficit is assumed to be located in what makes the heart of a people's identity. When, as in Cameroon, the claim was explicitly based on ideological statements regarding the non-translatability of modern ideas into the dialects – and for obvious political reasons – their speakers were denied their potential as subjects. The assumption was that this potential could only be fulfilled by the knowledge acquired through the legitimate language (Bourdieu 1991: 43), thus affecting the capacity of both Cameroonians and Europeans to co-construct a discourse on equal and mutual terms. It is the gap between the imposed and the self-imposed deficit which still appears in the interviews presented.

The exclusion of local languages from schools in Cameroon helps characterise the banality or ‘the normality of injustice’ (Fricker 2007: 7). Rather than get involved in the particulars of a debate about the place of Cameroonian languages in Cameroon peoples’ lives – and their fundamental right to be the agents of the construction of their own identity in the twenty-first century – researchers need to develop a better practical understanding of how to counteract epistemic injustice in society, and to examine institutional and professional discourse accordingly. Epistemic injustice raises issues concerning agency in many constructs such as ‘language planning’, the methodology of educational research, and more particularly pedagogical research aiming to support the development of the capacity for autonomy and empowerment through second languages in post-colonial contexts.

Notes

1. This is a simplification: historically, many missions not only put a lot of effort into producing lexicons, grammars, storybooks etc. but also insisted on using the dialects to teach reading to the children (Tabi-Manga 2000). Currently, there is also a major drive to introduce the home languages at primary level in the framework of the new ‘national culture’ component of the curriculum (Tadadjeu et al. 1988).

2. Individual countries were by no means unanimous about the decision to colonise other countries. The French Assembly, and the Republican party in particular, were split on the issue, on the basis that it could not be reconciled with the proclamation of human rights. (see parliamentary debates of the French Assembly, in the edition introduced by G. Manceron [2006]: 1885: le tournant colonial de la République. Paris: La Découverte).

3. The use of language for political ends via education was not specific to the French approach (see for example E. Riedi’s 2005 article on the use of English in the South African War concentration camps between 1899 and 1902). However, the French were particularly explicit and systematic in the model they were deploying in the French territory in Africa.
4. Please note the transcription conventions used in the examples:

(·) micropause, very short pause, comparable to average syllable duration or below 0.2 seconds duration.
CAPS high amplitude
:: lengthening of syllable
‘ stress on following word for contrast or special effect
> < change of speed of delivery for the length of that segment
➔ draws attention to specific location of the conversational phenomenon the transcriber wants the reader to attend to
(notes) text within brackets gives additional information on some action taking place which the researcher considers meaningful.

5. In a country with so many different dialects, since the terms ‘dialect’ or ‘patois’ are normally used, the act of naming one’s language publicly may be misunderstood as trying to project it as dominant, and thus slightly suspect. (Cameroon student, private communication).

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References


13
Absence as Deficit in Assessing Intercultural Capability

Angela Scarino

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, all students in higher education, both those from overseas and local, need to learn and to understand how to use their discipline knowledge in practising their disciplines/professions in increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. The issue is particularly pressing for overseas students because their learning involves constantly moving between at least two languages and cultures (the students’ first language(s) and, typically, English) and, as such, is a continuously interlingual and intercultural process.

At the same time, a growing literature on the internationalisation of education has highlighted the need to ‘integrate international dimensions’ in higher education as a response to globalisation and the movement of people and their knowledge and know-how across the world (Knight 2003, 2004). Specifically in the Australian context, Gallagher (2002: 4) has noted:

we have a long way to go on some of the cultural dimensions of education internationalisation. And these cultural dimensions can be seen to underpin our economic competitiveness and social openness as well as enabling opportunities for personal growth.

Jane Knight, the most frequently cited scholar in this field, has identified expressly the need to address how internationalisation is to ‘deal with the intersection of the international and intercultural’ (2004: 49). What these international and cultural/intercultural ‘dimensions’ are, and how this ‘intersection’ is to occur remain, however, unclear.
While there is general agreement on the need to include this intercultural dimension in the internationalisation of teaching and learning, there is no development in the literature of a connection between internationalisation and issues of language, culture and discourse. Where language and culture are referred to in the context of internationalisation, it is primarily in relation to the linguistic and cultural problems faced by overseas students studying in English-speaking contexts and the need to address these. In addition, it is English only that is referenced, rather than the emerging bi- or multilingualism of these students (Crichton et al. 2004: 39). There is consideration neither of language, culture and discourse within or across particular disciplines, nor of mediating learning in the disciplines and the use or practice of disciplinary knowledge in diverse contexts internationally.

While the concept of the ‘intercultural’ is variably understood across the disciplines (see, for example, Bennett 1993; Kramsch 2002, 2003; Lange & Paige 2003; Liddicoat et al. 2003; Scollon & Wong Scollon 2000; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin 2009), with respect to the process of learning, there is broad agreement across the literature that all learning – no matter the field, the discipline-specific theories and applications, and the content of teaching and learning – involves language, culture, communication and learning how to communicate and interact. (Crichton et al. 2004: 43)

Moreover, language, culture and the discourses of participants have a definitional role in the development of disciplines because each discipline has its own community of participants and its own domain of concepts, language, ways of thinking and modes of inquiry, history, and evaluative and affective stance (see King & Brownell 1966). Grondin (1994: 120), underscoring this point, describes the ‘essential linguisticality’ of construing knowledge in culture-specific ways, no matter the academic discipline.

While the research on intercultural awareness indicates that the learning of any discipline knowledge is constructed and mediated by and through language in any of its variable forms of cultural representation, this understanding is absent in the discourse associated with internationalisation. Indeed, the very reference to ‘dimensions’ in the internationalisation literature suggests elements or entities that might be added to the curriculum, understood essentially as ‘content’, rather than a deeper, qualitative transformation of the curriculum and process.
of learning, of disciplines and the participants in education, and of education itself (Crichton & Scarino 2007).

The absence of a discourse that acknowledges the role of language, culture and discourse in the disciplines, and of the mediating role of language (or languages) and culture (or cultures) in learning, is manifested in the curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment practices. The approaches to internationalisation that are most prevalent in the curriculum in higher education courses are ‘additive’ (Crichton & Scarino 2007), generally taking the form of the inclusion of an example or case study from another cultural context, or an experience such as study abroad. These additions or inclusions are neither transformative of the discipline itself, nor of the ways in which students are educated into the discipline. Further, traditional curriculum design and teaching, learning and assessment practices do not recognise that the professional and educational practices of the discipline are ‘peopled’ (Candlin 1999) by professionals and students who bring their own particular frames of reference or interpretive stances to their learning and practice of the discipline.

I argue in this chapter that there are multiple sources of this absence, but that it is particularly consequential in the area of assessment, because assessment, and discourses associated with it, is a discipline which informs the construction of the curricula of all others and is decisive in shaping judgements on students’ performance in learning. The absence is evident in four areas in assessment. First, there is a paucity of research that specifically addresses assessment in the context of the internationalisation of education. Second, policies in this context require that assessment of overseas students and local students, or assessment in offshore programmes and local programmes, be equivalent in a context where equivalence is understood as same-ness (see Scarino et al. 2005). This policy position reinforces the need for assessment to be conducted in English and in exactly the same manner regardless of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students. Third, the discourse and technology of assessment itself, as it is traditionally understood and practised, with its focus on the individual and his or her understanding of pre-defined content knowledge, does not acknowledge or address the variable ways in which people learn and practise within a particular discipline because of their own situatedness in their particular language(s) and culture(s) and because of the reality of practising disciplines/professions across languages and cultures in a globalised world.

The chapter draws on one of three case studies within an overall study that examined lecturers’ assessment of students’ intercultural capability
in courses in different disciplines. In the study, ‘intercultural capability’ was understood as entailing that students learn to construct, act upon, use and communicate their disciplinary knowledge both within and across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, and in so doing come to understand their own (and others’) situatedness in their particular language(s) and culture(s). Drawing on data from interviews with the lecturer on one of the courses, I argue that in the current framing of international education, of the disciplines and, in particular, in the area of assessment, the absence of a discourse that recognises the development of an intercultural capability understood in this way, creates a deficit which has the consequence of limiting the educational experience of both overseas and local students studying in higher education, and in doing so acts to deficitise the disciplines themselves, leaving lecturers caught in a trap between these deficits.

2. The study

2.1. Aim and approach

The study was conducted in an Australian university and examined how interaction between students, both overseas and local, and between students and lecturers, including the research team (the present writer and two colleagues in linguistics/applied linguistics) can contribute to the development of an ‘intercultural capability’ among students and staff. A parallel and reflexive focus was on what such a capability could mean for students and the conduct and content of the lectures, tutorials and other educational practices associated with the particular discipline. The study was designed to develop and explore this capability through interactions that actually or potentially occur at sites of students’ study: for example, in lectures, tutorials, workshops and assessment processes.

The study drew on participatory action research with three lecturers and their courses in a collaboration which involved the lecturers and their students and the research team. The emphasis on collaboration with lecturers and students enabled the study to be oriented towards working with participants (Cameron et al. 1992: 15) and drawing on and addressing their diverse perspectives in their enactment of teaching, learning and assessment with a view to developing reciprocal understanding and an ethical model of working (Sarangi & Roberts 1999: 2).

Each of the three courses selected represented a case study and involved a different discipline (communication studies, business and psychology); each was taught to both overseas and local students. The course discussed in this chapter is at postgraduate level in psychology.
and focuses on developing research skills for counsellors. It has been taught by the lecturer locally in South Australia as well as in Hong Kong and Singapore. The process of collaboration involved cycles of meetings, observations of lectures and workshops, the collation and the collaborative analysis of students’ work and the lecturer’s process of assessing students’ intercultural capability. In this process, the participatory action research process in the study became itself a focus of the course as a case study for students to consider as an example of research. This reflexive process focused on what an intercultural capability might mean in the discipline of clinical psychology, specifically in counselling, and how language(s) and culture(s) come into play in the mediation of learning in the discipline on the part of students entering the discipline, and in the practise of the discipline in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts.

2.2. The lecturer

Peter is a highly experienced clinical psychologist who is respected both as a teacher and as a researcher. He maintains that his experience of teaching his course in Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as in South Australia, changed the way he understood clinical psychology. The present study enabled him to explore and articulate this change. As described below, Peter succeeded in finding ways of inviting his students to reflect on the interplay of language, culture, and discourse in counselling and in research in counselling. However, throughout the study he constantly struggled to articulate and re-articulate his understanding of his discipline in the context of this interplay, explaining this difficulty as a deficit within his own repertoire.

Together with the research team, Peter engaged in a critical examination of (1) his course as a whole and all its parts, (2) his planned and enacted curriculum and his assessment practices, from conception to elicitation and finally to judgement of students’ learning. Student assessment in this course normally involved three components: a journal in which students responded to three or four open-ended questions on each of the ten topics of the course, responses to end-of-course questions, and a critique of a research article. As part of Peter’s participation in the study, and based on discussions with the research team, he decided to alter the assessment in the weekly journal component by including one additional question at the end of each set of questions for each topic, namely: Consider how cultural factors influence your understanding of the questions (above). From analyses of students’ responses to the questions on the weekly topics, including the specific
question on the role of language and culture in the discipline, Peter developed two sets of activities to be included in his course in future. The first set was to enable students to develop their own self-awareness as counsellors and researchers of their own (and others’) linguistic and cultural situatedness (through the development of an autobiography, exchange with peers about autobiographies, cross-cultural analyses based on reciprocal interviews related to similarities and differences in their biographies, and the development of an intercultural diary). The second set of activities was to enable an analysis of the linguistic and cultural assumptions underlying research.¹

This apparently systematic process of incorporating changes, and Peter’s development of self-awareness by the end of the study, however, do not reflect his struggle to figure out how to incorporate an understanding of the constitutive role of language, culture and discourse in his discipline as a condition for developing intercultural awareness, its application or use, and its teaching and learning. This struggle warrants closer examination. It is a disciplinary and interdisciplinary struggle to connect clinical psychology/counselling and linguistics, and, in particular, a struggle to judge students’ understandings of this connection as a manifestation of their intercultural awareness. Peter’s struggle makes visible the way in which the absence, in traditional framings of the discipline, of a discourse that recognises the development of this intercultural capability has the consequence of limiting the educational experience of both overseas and local students and, at the same time, perpetuates the deficitising of the discipline itself.

3. The struggle

Peter’s struggle is captured in the penultimate interview with him:

1 Lecturer: So I have some ideas but I also do feel stuck, I’m not too sure and I think I could do this or I could do that. Now, am I stuck because I’m still not clear what it is that I’m seeking? Am I stuck because

5 I don’t actually know how to get what I’m seeking? I suspect that for me, I can see that it is something important but it still remains not well defined.

Researcher 1: Fluid?

10 Lecturer: Yep and I’m not too sure why that is, I’m not too sure if it’s because of unfamiliarity with - it’s not the rhetoric but the…
Researcher 1: The whole literature behind it.

Lecturer: ...the literature behind it and I don’t have a

sense of boundaries and what is productive and
non-productive and so on and so forth. But on the
other hand it is a course about research so it’s not
a course about cultural studies so I’m also mindful
that it needs to be present but it’s not the theme of
the course. Now in terms of this question of
culture, I mean, normally and though I strongly
see the skill coming in it’s not only people
developing some self-awareness which I think is
important because through all our courses on the
counselling programme there is always an element
of self growth and if you like self-awareness.
So that needs to be present. There is over and
above the self-awareness, the expectation that by
doing any course in the counselling programme
you acquire a skill which has some therapeutic
advantage to it. So often self-awareness and
therapeutic advantage are congruent, but not
always. I think that the ability to view what we do
as sort of ...I think it’s also true to say that we do
have a diverse cultural mix in the class and I am
interested in this idea of how to get them to
participate more and to use their differences in
some way that will work to their advantage. Now
coming back to the threads of the counselling
programme – self-awareness and some therapeutic
advantage one could argue that the knowledge
about research has, you know, some advantage in
terms of evaluating and deciding what sort of
course of action to take. But in a sense, you know,
any research activity is a method of inquiring and
therapy is also a method of inquiring. So in a
sense, you know, you could say they are very
similar exercises. So one could sort of argue ...I’m
sort of thinking is it worth while going down
the track and exploring, you know, if you’re
doing post-modernist therapy versus cognitive
behavioural therapy which is more sort of more
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Empirical therapy, you know, what does it mean? What are the assumptions underlying it? Now with the empirical side of it, the assumptions people find are generally easy to challenge and they’re quite comfortable and they’re quite joyous in seeing them corrupted. But when it comes to the other they find it very difficult and neither do they feel triumphal. They find little fault.

Researcher 1: Why?
Lecturer: Now that’s an interesting question and one could set the group the question, ‘What don’t you like about this approach to research?’ ‘Why is it that there are a lot of pros and cons of it?’ and that’s an exercise that one could set.

This interaction reveals the way in which Peter is experimenting with disciplinary and interdisciplinary meanings. His effort is to make sense of his own discipline by drawing on the discursive resources that it makes available to him. He is seeking definition (lines 1–5). At this stage in the study, he had come to understand that ‘it’s not the rhetoric’ (lines 11–12), which was how he originally saw the struggle to bring together his discipline and an understanding of the role of language and culture in his discipline. His struggle is not only with definition but also with salience (lines 13–16). He highlights that the focus of his course is on developing skills and understanding in counselling and in research, and self-awareness in both processes. He sees the value of understanding ‘culture’ (and I add ‘language’), but it is not after all the focus of his course. When he says: ‘I think that the ability to view what we do as sort of ….’ (lines 33–34) he is clearly reflecting on the place of culture but he does not complete the thought that might have led him to articulate the realisation that culture and language come into play in all interactions in counselling and research; they provide the frame of reference through which people interpret and construct meaning. Instead, he pauses and begins to reflect on the diversity of students in his own class and how he might use this in his pedagogy (lines 34–38). This, of course, is another dimension of the influence of language and culture. Just as these factors provide a frame of reference for the interpretation and construction of meaning in the processes of the counselling profession and in research, so do they also for teaching and learning. Peter oscillates between these areas in which an understanding of language and culture is relevant. He then considers opposing paradigms
in his discipline (‘post-modernist therapy versus cognitive behavioural therapy’) (lines 50–53). Again, his thinking processes necessarily reflect the discourse and ways of thinking in his discipline, as traditionally understood. Although he recognises alternative paradigms, it is the traditional stance, oriented toward cognitive constructions, that prevails. The traditional construction, however, does not encompass a discourse that permits the development of an intercultural capability as understood in this study. He recognises for himself and for his students that he will invite an identification of underlying assumptions. He observes that students (and he himself?) find it easier to challenge the assumptions within a cognitive paradigm than within a post-modern one (lines 54–60). Interestingly, even when reflecting on why students (and he) find it less easy to challenge ‘post-modernist therapy’ and research, Peter can only envisage an analytic frame of ‘pros and cons’ (lines 64–65) rather than considering a more integrative frame of reference. Shaped by the discourse and ways of thinking of his own disciplinary background, this frame is also reflected in Peter’s consideration of assessment. Through discussion about assessment he finds ways of developing processes for eliciting evidence of intercultural understanding. However, the process of making judgements of students’ understanding becomes and remains a challenge.

In the final interview, Peter self-reflects on intercultural awareness as follows:

Well I can talk about sensibilities but not specifics because I don’t actually know enough to know what to carve out of there. But the story would be a demonstration how, you know, language is used and how it mediates meaning and how it’s applied in research from a linguistic … someone who is doing analysis from a linguistic standpoint – how they would actually deconstruct and construct things, and so this is, you know, inside the head of such a person and this is the way things can happen and this is the way you can see the world. So you could compare and contrast that particular world-view to another world-view about how one can interpret things without necessarily being so (focused on) language …

In this reflection there is an appreciation that intercultural capability relates to how language is used in ways that are open to comparison and contrast. At the same time, there is a sense in which this capability remains something interior, something intangible. That language
mediates world-views is clear to Peter, but he draws a disciplinary distinction between people who are ‘language-focused’ and those who are not, namely, the members of the research team and himself. In so doing, he identifies his own limits, which result from the traditional and dominant framing of the discipline in which he works, a framing in which there is an absence of a discourse that permits the development of an intercultural capability.

4. Discussion: absence as deficit

Through the ongoing dialogue central to this study Peter came to understand the constitutive role of language and culture in his discipline, in the practice of counselling and in teaching and research. He was able to incorporate this understanding in both the substance and processes of teaching and learning and in the design of assessment tasks to elicit this awareness on the part of his students. However, there remained a fragility in assessment, particularly around the process of judging intercultural awareness in the context of his discipline. As foreshadowed in the introduction, this fragility can be understood in relation to the discourse of traditional assessment on the one hand and the recognition of multiple absences on the other.

There is a tension in the field of assessment between traditional psychometric and more recent sociocultural perspectives (Shepard 2000, 2001; Gipps 1994, 1999; Delandshere 2002; McNamara & Roever 2006). Within and across these divergent positions, responses from scholars/researchers are markedly different with regard to questions of knowing and learning that are central to the process of assessment. With regard specifically to the judging process in educational assessment, within traditional, psychometric conceptualisations it is seen as involving an objective and certain system of evidence, criteria, standards and rules of aggregation that are systematically applied to individuals’ performances. Within this conceptualisation, the educator-assessor’s role is to implement systematically pre-specified criteria and standards. Students are the subjects of, rather than participants in, assessment. Within alternative, sociocultural conceptualisations, judging is seen as inherently social and personal, involving a process of seeking to understand the nature of student performance, where this understanding is recognised as an act of interpretation and construction on the part of both the assessor and the assessed (Moss 1994, 1996, 2003) and where, in turn, interpretation is seen
as the general and natural process we invoke as human beings for interacting in, and continually coming to understand, our world (Hoy 1997).

Drawing on the discourse of traditional assessment associated with his discipline, Peter is not fully aware of the additional possibilities that alternative assessment might afford beyond the assessment of discipline knowledge as content. Moreover, assessing intercultural awareness involves entering into an interdisciplinary dialogue between the discipline (psychology in the context of this case study) and intercultural communication (the discipline of linguistics/applied linguistics in the context of this case study), as well as with the field of educational assessment, and the debates within each of these.

The challenge for Peter of addressing the absence in his own discipline is therefore compounded by the need to understand and meaningfully act upon the interdisciplinary relationships among the discipline, intercultural communication and the field of educational assessment, each of which has its own distinctive discourse and history. In the traditional framing of each of these, there is an absence of a discourse that permits the development assessment of an intercultural capability. As such, the absence is multiple, and so too is the deficit.

Moving beyond Peter’s experience to consider the nature of the absences and consequent deficits, I note that traditional conceptualisations of the curriculum have focused predominantly on discipline content. In response to a critique of this conceptualisation, institutions have introduced the notion of generic ‘qualities’ and skills, also known as ‘key competencies’ or ‘employability skills’, among other formulations. These generic qualities and skills are seen to ‘transcend’ the discipline, to extend conceptions of learning beyond discipline boundaries.

Seeking to consider interdisciplinary as well as disciplinary learning through the curriculum raises issues about how these different kinds of learning are understood and brought together in teaching, learning and assessment. The lack of clarity about the nature of generic qualities and their relationship with disciplines implies, in assessment terms, an equal lack of clarity about the construct of interest, and how the construct is best elicited and judged.

Intercultural awareness, as one of these generic qualities, pertains fundamentally to meaning-making: the ways in which people interpret and construct meaning and develop understanding in social interaction. It recognises that people bring diverse meanings to interactions, and
that developing new understanding necessarily involves engaging with diverse meanings. It is this notion of multiple, socially mediated meanings that renders this quality particularly complex for assessment, whose dominant paradigm lacks a discourse which acknowledges that the meanings that an individual may believe to be invariant are, in fact, subject to variable understanding, and that in fact meaning is always subject to interpretation and created in conjunction with others. The absence of such a discourse has deficitising implications for students whose performances are judged and for lecturers who make these judgements since, in the absence of this acknowledgement, traditional psychometric assessment demands single meanings, and thereby constructs as deficient performances or interpretations that evidence variability of meaning.

In contrast, assessing intercultural awareness needs to allow for the elicitation of the interpretation and construction of multiple meanings by individuals in conjunction with others. Assessment within the sociocultural conceptualisations identified above tends to be more amenable to assessing intercultural awareness, because it allows for the assessment of process as well as content; it conceives the assessment process as dynamic rather than static; it requires that attention be paid to the social and cultural context of learning and its assessment, and the relationship between participants in the process. It calls for the kinds of procedures that are characteristic of performance assessment, for example, open-ended tasks, portfolios, journals, extended essays, and the like. These kinds of procedures allow for extended and multiple interpretations and responses, as well as the demonstration of development over a period of time, but there is still contestation about how the responses elicited are to be interpreted. Multiple interpretations and responses imply variability, and it is this variability that poses a threat to traditional understandings of assessment, where standardisation is seen as necessary for achieving fairness.

Peter's work in the study suggested that the deficitising consequences of this absence in traditional assessment are most significant in the part of the assessment cycle that pertains to making judgements. This is because variability necessarily calls into question the reliability and validity of such judgements. Within traditional assessment, it is generally assumed that judging performance relies on the application of pre-determined criteria and standards as ‘rules’; assessors interpret and apply the criteria and standards, reach conclusions about students’ performance, allocate scores or grades, and report this information to
interested others. In this tradition, judgement is seen to be unproblematic. The criteria and standards are assumed to describe expectations, and their nature, their pre-specification and their application are unquestioned. They are seen as the tools for specifying features of performance; their pre-specification is intended to render them transparent so that educators, students and others are ‘let into the assessment picture’ and, within this discursive sphere, it is assumed that, provided the criteria and standards are available and clear, they can be applied consistently, and that consequently judgements will be reliable, valid and fair.

Peter’s identification of the absence of a language through which to express his judgements of intercultural awareness no doubt reflects a part of the explanation of what is at play in the complexity of making judgements about intercultural capabilities. A further explanation relates to a deeper absence. What appears to be absent is the larger frame of reference or ‘fore-understanding’ (Gadamer 2004) that educator-assessors necessarily bring to making judgements. This frame of reference includes how participants understand the interdisciplinary relationship between their disciplines and the construct of intercultural awareness, and how they scope the relevance of this relationship for their disciplines as a whole. Peter was able to identify instances of this relationship (for example, in the way that culture shapes the ethics of research), but the question then becomes: how does this instance relate to a map of possible instances that could represent the scope of the discipline as a whole? In judging, it is necessary to consider what is evident in performance against what may not be evident but is nonetheless possible. The process of judgement, then, entails referencing in relation to a map of possible relevant instances, and it is this interconnected map that is not available as an holistic frame of reference for making and justifying judgements. This frame of reference is not available because interdisciplinary connections between intercultural awareness and particular disciplines have not entered the discourses that constitute them.

The deficitising of students, lecturers, and the discipline is in this sense sourced in the judging process itself, and is intensified in judging intercultural awareness because of the current absence of: firstly, a common language that would facilitate the interdisciplinary dialogue that is necessary for making and justifying judgements; and secondly, the availability of an interconnected map of possible instances of the interrelationship of intercultural awareness and the discipline that would provide an holistic frame of reference for judging performance.
5. Summary and consequences

The traditional framing of international education, of its disciplines and of the assessment of student learning, does not give sufficient salience to the constitutive role of language and culture in learning. Furthermore, in the current framing, these constructs are understood to operate within a singular linguistic and cultural frame of reference.

The international education field has not yet developed a discourse that acknowledges intercultural capability as ‘moving between’ languages, cultures and diverse contexts of application and use of disciplinary knowledge. In the traditional framing of disciplines essentially as content knowledge, there is an absence of an understanding of the discipline as constituted by language and culture and an absence of a hermeneutic interest (Gadamer 2004) in understanding how people make sense of the discipline in learning, and in applying their learning in professional practice.

The deficitising effects of this absence are most evident in, but not restricted to, international education, because this imposes new exigencies on the institution of assessment that challenge its traditional framing. In the interests of objectivity and fairness, traditional assessment seeks to de-contextualise and de-personalise the process, and backgrounds the role of language and culture in learning and in the assessment of learning. It has not yet developed a discourse that fully acknowledges its social and interpretive nature. The traditional framing of all three areas (i.e. international education, the disciplines and assessment) produces a compounding effect at the point of assessment, resulting from the absence of recognition of how languages and cultures constitute understanding within and across disciplines. Connected to this absence is a lack of focus on people and how they negotiate meanings within and across languages and cultures (Candlin 1999). The framing of the discipline, international education, teaching, learning and assessment influence how the lecturer sees the discipline and educates (teaches and assesses) others into the discipline and its diverse applications. It also influences how students come to understand the discipline, its learning and its diverse applications, and most importantly, how their place as knowledgeable and successful within it is judged.

These conclusions resonate with the work of Gadamer (2004) in developing philosophical hermeneutics as the study of the role of interpretation in people’s experience of themselves in the world. Gadamer reminds us that our understandings are historical. They are shaped
by fore-understandings (or ‘prejudices’), that is, ways of understand-
ing the world that we inherit from the past, that underlie how we
judge and make sense of the world, and which are articulated through
our language and culture. This means that in international education,
in working in diverse disciplines, in teaching and learning, and espe-
cially in assessment, it becomes essential to understand people and their
linguistic and cultural situatedness and how that shapes their under-
standing and judgements – their own and those of others. The point
applies equally to lecturers and their students in diverse disciplines.
Peter’s struggle is with the absence of such a frame of reference within
his discipline.

At a general level, the consequence of this absence is that this under-
standing, essential in an increasingly interconnected world, remains
undervalued. More specifically, for lecturers in the assessment process
the need to conform to the traditional discourse of objectivity and
equivalence, and the consequent de-personalisation of the process, risks
compromising the students’ ability to perform. For overseas students,
there is the further consequence that their identity as knowledgeable
and successful is based on an assessment process from which there is
absent a discourse which would acknowledge their particular learning
and understanding. For international education, and indeed education
in general, the challenge remains to address this absence.

Note

1. Limitations of space do not permit a full elaboration of the changes the
lecturer made to his course; a full report is available from the author.

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Deficit in Assessing Intercultural Capability


Part VII
Agency in the Context of Marketing
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Discourses of Deficit and Deficits of Discourse: Computers, Disability and Mediated Action

Rodney Jones

1. Introduction

Much has been made in both academic and popular discourse of the transformative effects of computers on the lives of people with disabilities. Computers have been credited with increasing people’s independence (Grimaldi & Goette 1999), their opportunities for participation (Roulstone 1998a, b), their access to medical information (Hauber et al. 2002), and their opportunities for the formation of supportive communities (Braithwaite et al. 1999), with granting them the freedom to choose whether or not to disclose impairment (Cromby & Standon 1999; Seymour & Lupton 2004), and even with making it possible for them to ‘escape’ their ‘disabled’ bodies altogether (Stone 1991; Turkle 1995). Some, however, have taken a more sceptical stance, pointing out that social relationships can be as problematic for the disabled on-line as they are off-line (Seymour & Lupton 2004); that factors such as age, income, geographical region and literacy often restrict access to computers by the disabled (Eng et al. 1998; Kaye 2000); and that, in some cases, technology can actually create disability by excluding those with physical impairments by virtue of its design (Goggin & Newell 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to compare various ‘discourses’ of disability and computer use articulated in this debate with ways disabled people themselves describe their experience with computers in their daily lives. Although current discourses on computers and disability provide valuable perspectives, they are also in many ways ‘deficient’ in describing the actual experiences of people with disabilities. One reason for this is that they are nearly all based on a construction of disability
as a matter of ‘deficit’. At the end of the chapter I will explore the relationship between disability and technology, using principles based on mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones 2005; Scollon 2001; Scollon & Wong Scollon 2004) as first proposed by Al Zidjaly (2005).

When I use the word ‘discourses’ I am primarily referring to what Gee (1996) has called big ‘D’ Discourses, or what Foucault (1984) and Fairclough (1992) have referred to as orders of discourse – ideological discursive structures that form around particular topics in particular social and material circumstances and create what Kamberelis & Scott (1992: 361) call ‘socially and culturally informed systems of possibilities of knowing, being and acting’.

In speaking of ‘discourses’, however, I acknowledge that they are, by their very nature, unstable, always historically located and constantly in flux as they engage in ‘conversations’ (Gee 1996) with other ‘discourses’. All ‘discourses’ are in a sense, ‘inter-discourses’ (Candlin & Maley 1997), as they arise through the historical interaction among multiple texts, multiple social practices, and multiple communities. This contingent, hybrid and interdiscursive nature of ‘discourses’, in fact, will be a major theme in my analysis as I trace the effect of various discourses upon the formation of new discourses, and trace the interdiscursive borrowing and mixing of discourses in my participants’ responses to questions about their experiences with computers. In this respect, my focus will not just be on describing these ‘discourses’, but also on exploring how they are ‘negotiated in and through texts’ (Kamberelis & Scott 1992: 361).

The data for my discussion come from a six-month-long ethnographic study of the discourses surrounding disability and technology which was carried out in Hong Kong in 2007. The project took a participatory approach (Wallerstein & Duran 2003) to data collection, in which members of disabled communities were invited to join the project as ‘participant-researchers’ to gather data about their own computer use and that of their peers. Five participant researchers, three with physical impairments resulting in mobility issues, one hearing-impaired person, and one visually impaired individual, were employed to conduct interviews with their friends and acquaintances about how they use and experience computer technology. Altogether 56 such interviews were conducted. The study also involved the collection of a large corpus of secondary data in the form of public discourse about computers and disability from newspapers, government documents, academic books and journals, and from internet web pages.
2. Discourses of disability/discourses of technology

There has long been an interest in disability studies in the ‘disabled body’ as a site of discursive production and consumption. One of the best-known treatments of the issue is Fulcher’s (1989) seminal work of the ‘discourses of disability’, in which she argues that the politics of disability is not so much about institutional decisions as it is about contests over everyday ways of speaking about disability and disabled people. Fulcher identifies four main ‘discourses of disability’: the medical discourse, the charity discourse, the lay discourse and the rights discourse.

The medical discourse constructs disability as a physical deficit located exclusively in the body of the impaired individual and sees it as the job of ‘experts’ to ‘fix’ or otherwise regulate that physical deficit. The charity discourse has a similar emphasis on dependency and loss, but sees disability more as a social or ethical problem than a physical one, and constructs people with impairments as in need of the kindness and assistance of others. The lay discourse is heavily influenced by the first two, constructing people with disabilities as inferior, freakish, dependent, weak, asexual, and/or childlike. What is emphasised in all three of these discourses is the ‘otherness’ of disability, which is constantly measured against normative standards of what is considered ‘able-bodied’ (Fulcher 1989: 29).

The fourth discourse Fulcher discusses, which she calls the rights discourse, sharply contrasts with the previous three in that it relocates the deficit from the individual to the society, which is portrayed as taking insufficient account of the rights of people with impairments and thus unjustifiably excluding them. This discourse portrays people with disability as individuals with civil rights of access and equity, as opposed to helpless patients or welfare recipients. It is this discourse that underlies the language of much equal opportunity legislation.

Along with these four discourses, Fulcher also mentions a fifth, one which as she was writing in the late eighties she regarded as an ‘emerging discourse’, but which has today fully emerged, taking on an especially central role in the domain of new communication technologies. This is a consumer or corporate discourse, which portrays disability as something to be ‘managed’ and commodified in acts of ‘corporate responsibility’, and the disabled as (more or less imperfect) capitalist subjects.
Fulcher’s aim is not just to describe these different discursive models of disability, but to show that they have significant material consequences on the lives of people with impairments. All but the rights discourse, she claims, dis-empower disabled people, resulting in ‘poverty and dependence, dominance of professionals, (and) the devaluing of the disabled in the context of a capitalist labor market’ (Fulcher 1989: 32).

Just as disability has been a contested site of discursive production and consumption, so has technology. As Hine (2000) points out, technology is both a tool for communication and an artifact that we create through the symbolic meanings we invest in it. Stefik (1997), for example, claims that people’s use of the internet depends a great deal on the metaphors they use to describe it, whether they see it, for instance, as a ‘communication conduit’, ‘a digital library’, ‘an electronic marketplace’, a collection of ‘virtual worlds’ or an ‘information superhighway’. Discourses of technology in a more general sense can be broadly divided into utopian discourses, those which emphasise the positive effects of computers, and dystopian discourses, which emphasise the negative impact of computers.

Among the utopian discourses are the virtual communities discourse, popularised by Howard Rheingold (1993) and his disciples, which focuses on the power of technology to bring people together into ‘virtual communities’; the digital democracy discourse, which constructs cyberspace as a space of freedom, democracy, and equality (Dahlgren 2000); and the cyborg discourse, famously articulated by feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1991) and later promoted by scholars like Turkle (1995) and Stone (1991), in which technology is seen as erasing the limitations of the physical body.

Dystopian discourses, on the other hand, portray computers as threats to social relationships, equality, mental and physical health, and privacy. They include the social isolation discourse, which argues that computers isolate people from ‘real’ life and ‘real’ communities (Kroker & Weinstein 1994; Winn 2002); the addiction discourse, which treats computers and the internet (especially internet pornography and computer games) as sources of compulsion and uncontrollable behaviour (Cooper 2000; Grüsser et al. 2007; Young 1998); and the surveillance and predator discourses, which highlight the potential of the internet for increased surveillance and control over individuals by governments and corporations (Bennett 2008), or for increased opportunities for criminals or opportunists to prey on vulnerable users, especially children (Henderson 2005).
3. Discourses of disability and technology

In my collection of public discourse about computers and people with disabilities, I identified three primary discourses, what I call the social levelling discourse, the accessibility discourse, and the empowerment discourse. In many ways these three discourses are more accurately described as ‘inter-discourses’ as they all contain various mixtures of the discourses of disability and the discourses of technology described above. The social levelling discourse, for example, contains elements of both the digital democracy discourse and the rights discourse, and the empowerment discourse mixes aspects of the rights discourse and the virtual communities discourse. Furthermore, these discourses rarely appear in isolation from one another, but rather, are often deployed together and mixed in strategic ways – in fact, many of the texts I encountered contained all three discourses, as in the following (p. xi) excerpt from the United States’ National Council for Disability’s 1996 report on Access to the Information Superhighway and Emerging Information Technologies by People with Disabilities:

For people with disabilities NII (the National Information Infrastructure) provides all the advantages provided to everyone else, plus some special ones. The special advantages include the following:

- Drastically increasing the ability of individuals with some types of disabilities to access and use information
- Decreasing the personal isolation that individuals experience because of restrictions in their ability to move about, communicate, or get together with others sharing their interests or situation
- Allowing individuals to interact with others in a way that makes their disability invisible or irrelevant
- Allowing convenient access to educational and medical services

In this example, the accessibility discourse – expressed in phrases like ‘increasing ability to access and use information’, ‘allowing convenient access to services’, and ‘decreasing isolation and mobility restrictions’ – is mixed with the social levelling discourse, which focuses on how computers make disability ‘invisible or irrelevant’, and the empowerment discourse, which emphasises how computers help people with disabilities ‘get together’ with people in similar situations. What links these different discourses together in this extract is their arrangement as a
series of parallel constructions beginning with verbs (increasing, decreasing, allowing). Underlying this parallelism is a common relationship these three different discourses create between the two participants in the text: (a) the National Information Infrastructure and (b) people with disabilities, in which (a) is seen as acting upon or aiding (b) rather than the other way round. In other words, in all of these discourses as they are realised here, agency is granted to the technology rather than to those who use it. Technology does things to or for people with disabilities rather than people with disabilities doing things to or with technology. In this regard, all three discourses promote what Roulstone (1998b) calls a ‘deficit’ approach to disability, focusing on how technology can help make disabled people more ‘normal’ rather than on the unique ways people can adapt technologies to re-configure social situations and social identities.

3.1. Social levelling discourse

The social levelling discourse has as its foundation the bifurcation of the ‘virtual’ and the ‘physical’. Virtual communication, the argument goes, provides people with disabilities more control over information, allowing them choose whether or not to make their disability visible, a choice they may not have in the physical world (Cromby & Standon 1999; Seymour & Lupton 2004). For Bowker & Tuffin (2002), for example, the textual medium of computer-mediated communication removes the ‘ocularcentrism’ governing the way people interpret and evaluate others, erasing disability and reducing all participants to the same level of representation.

At the foundation of this discourse is what Goffman (1963) refers to as ‘passing’ – a strategy used by some stigmatised individuals to avoid discrimination by concealing their stigma and presenting themselves as ‘normal’. It embodies what I have called the ‘paradox of invisibility’ (Jones 2005) – the fact that while the anonymity of the internet creates a situation in which marginalised individuals feel freer and more equal, this same anonymity serves in many ways to perpetuate marginalisation and undermine the potential for true equality.

An illustration of this discourse and the underlying ‘deficit model’ it promotes can be seen in the excerpt below, from the on-line magazine Eureka Street about a disabled user of the virtual reality environment Second Life:

Known as Niles Sopor in the 3D virtual world called ‘Second Life’, Niles has found an opportunity to forget his disability and experience
walking life through his avatar. ‘Perhaps the most profound difference I have experienced is that people have treated me differently’ he said. ‘In real life, due to my wheelchair and lack of physical coordination, people often regard me as intellectually as well as physically disabled.’ (Cassidy 2007)

In this excerpt, all of the major presuppositions of the social levelling discourse are evident: that on-line environments allow people to escape from or ‘forget’ their physical bodies, and that this results in increased ‘equality’. What is problematic about this excerpt is, first, that it uncritically equates the experience of manipulating an avatar on screen with the physical experience of mobility; and second, that it deals with the problem of discrimination not by confronting it but by ‘removing’ the disability, thus potentially perpetuating discrimination by reproducing ‘disablist’ pressures on the impaired to aspire to society’s assumptions of normality.

In the speech of my participants, this discourse is contested on a number of grounds. Several, for example, described contexts in computer-mediated communication in which ‘bodiless’ communication was not an option. One participant, for example, noted that when playing mahjong on-line the speed with which she played necessitated explanation, and that the stigma of having a disability was for her less problematic than the stigma of being a poor mahjong player. Another, for whom playing World of Warcraft provided the opportunity to inhabit non-disabled avatars, still experienced limitations as to which avatars he could choose – because of limitations he had in manipulating buttons on the keyboard. Finally, one pointed out that the assumptions of text-based interaction on which the notion of ‘bodiless’ communication rest are becoming less relevant with the increasing popularity of video-conferencing. ‘It used to be that I could talk over the net with strangers or net friends until midnight every day’, she said. ‘But my interest deteriorated after web-cams became popular. Now it is more difficult to develop relationships on-line, because if you reject someone’s video-chat request, they have no more interest to talk with you. It seems that even as the technology goes forward’, she lamented, ‘for disabled people it goes backward’.

For others, even when ‘passing’ was accomplished, it brought with it other problems and complications, in particular what Goffman (1963) calls ‘in-deeper-ism’ (see also Al Zijdaly 2005, forthcoming). Several of my participants related how hiding their impairments created the need to lie or prevaricate about other aspects of their lives, like employment
or leisure activities, and how it was sometimes difficult to keep track of the different ‘identities’ they had created. As one participant put it, ‘If they ask about my leisure activities, I tell them I like cycling or hiking because if I leave out outdoor activities, they may become suspicious, but then I have to keep all the details straight, and sometimes it’s difficult to remember all the lies I’ve told’.

Finally, many of my participants found the basic assumption of the social levelling discourse – that people with disabilities would want to hide them – to be fundamentally offensive, and in fact, they went out of their way to tell their virtual interlocutors about their impairments even when such disclosures were unnecessary. One said:

I want to let people know that disabled people face reality bravely… I just want all people including disabled people to know, it doesn’t matter whether we are disabled or not.

3.2. Accessibility discourse

Whereas the social levelling discourse focuses on virtual identities, the accessibility discourse focuses on how computers can improve the material lives of people with disabilities. There are really two parts to this discourse, one emphasising making computers and the internet accessible to people with physical impairments through technological fixes, and the other celebrating how accessible computing makes previously inaccessible activities of ‘normal’ life, from employment to dating, accessible to people with disabilities. The key metaphor here is ‘computer as prosthesis’ – computers are the new wheelchairs.

The first part of this discourse has been strongly influenced by the utopian discourse of ‘universality’ associated with the internet, perhaps best illustrated in the work of Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, who wrote: ‘The power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect’ (WC3 1994). Today this aspect of the accessibility discourse can perhaps best be seen on the corporate websites of hardware and software manufacturers, who tout their commitment to accessibility as evidence of their corporate social responsibility. In such contexts, the idea of accessibility, what it symbolises in terms of a corporation’s public image or its legal liability, is often more important that the reality of accessibility, which, as I will show below, often lags far behind the rhetoric.

In this discourse, technologies are usually represented as a ‘correction’ to or ‘normalisation’ of impairment, an approach which has the effect
of separating disabled users from other users. Often these ‘enabling technologies’ are inscribed with a view of ‘ablebodiedness’ which constructs certain groups as inherently deficient. Furthermore, what is often masked in this discourse is that many accessibility solutions involve substantial financial investment, require users to develop special skills, and are often difficult to service or repair. What is also usually missing from this discourse is the fact that many initiatives to increase accessibility have failed miserably. Despite the fact, for example, that web content accessibility guidelines have been in existence for a decade, the United Nations Global Audit of Web Accessibility conducted in 2006 concluded that there is a global failure to provide even the most basic level of web accessibility for people with disabilities (Nomensa 2006). Finally, this discourse sees accessibility purely in technological terms, ignoring social aspects that affect access, such as income, geographical location, gender and education (Kaye 2000).

The second part of this discourse is the notion that technology (when it is rendered accessible) makes many aspects of the physical and social world, such as shopping, employment and dating, ‘more accessible’ to people with disabilities. As with the social levelling discourse, texts deploying this discourse tend to focus on how technology ‘helps’ the otherwise ‘helpless’. One example can be seen in on-line dating sites for the disabled, which often construct their readers as deficient and in need of help, with statements like: ‘finding the right person is never easy, but if you have a disability, things become more complicated’ (What you should know…2008), ‘You probably haven’t achieved a lot of success with romance offline’ (Disabled love…2007), and ‘if you suffer from a disability finding your true soulmate is going to be even harder’ (Are disabled dating sites…2009). The solution to this problem is technology. ‘The most important development for disabled people has been the Internet!’ says the website ‘Disabled Cupid’ (n.d.), and Amputee Dating.com (n.d.) promises to ‘set disabled people free’.

More worrying, however, is the fact that many of these sites, which claim to make the world of romance accessible to people with disabilities, are actually inaccessible to many disabled people, especially those with visual impairments. One study showed that of the ten top dating sites, including some specially designed for disabled people, nine lack the fundamental features to enable people with disabilities to access and navigate them effectively (AbilityNet Web Accessibility Team 2007).

The accessibility discourse was also often contested by my participants, who talked of how difficult it was sometimes to obtain or service the kinds of tools they needed to access computers, worried about
becoming too dependent on technology that might break down, and voiced concern that technology had created expectations in others that they could or should be more independent. Some pointed out barriers to accessing computers that were not directly related to their physical impairments, barriers such as language proficiency. ‘All of the information on the Internet about my disability is in English’, said one participant, ‘It’s useless to me’. Others found that using computers exacerbated their impairment or created new physical problems. Said one: ‘Using a computer is sometimes so painful. I can hardly move after using it. It helps me overcome one disability but it’s caused another’.

3.3. **Empowerment discourse**

Finally there is what I call the *empowerment discourse*, which emphasises how technology can help people with disabilities organise and connect with other people in similar situations for the purposes of advocacy and mutual support. Computers are seen as tools people with disabilities can use to organise, fight for their rights, and form ‘communities’ to share stories, information and mutual support.

Underlying this discourse is the social constructionist approach which has dominated disability studies since the early nineties (Barnes 1991; Oliver 1990), an approach which sees the source of disability not in the individual, but in a society that fails to accommodate people with different needs (Barnartt & Altman 2001).

Some of my participants enthusiastically took up this discourse, one for example seeing himself as a kind of cyber-advocate, searching out barriers to access around the city and organising email campaigns among his friends and acquaintances in the disabled community. ‘I use the Internet to investigate which passages have barriers’, he said, ‘and then write emails to the agencies and the departments concerned and alert all my friends on-line to do the same, so computers make it possible for us to speak in a louder voice’. Others, however, just as enthusiastically resisted this discourse, avoiding interacting with other people with disabilities on-line and visiting disability-related websites. ‘I don’t pay much attention to those websites and news about the disabled’, said one, ‘I find out information that I need, but I don’t get involved in their activities’. Another said: ‘Just because someone also uses an wheelchair doesn’t mean I want to talk with them on-line.’

Although this discourse contrasts sharply with the other two in the agency that it affords to people with disabilities – the disabled *use* technology, rather than being ‘assisted’ or ‘allowed’ or ‘enabled’ by it – it is still, however, a ‘discourse of deficit’. The only difference is that
the ‘deficit’ is assigned to society rather than the individual. Dis-ability rather than ability continues to be the focus. Seymour & Lupton (2004: 301) point out that one danger of this discourse is that ‘the communication focus remains problem-centred, and … the world of disability is reinforced and strengthened’.

I am not arguing that these discourses, so prevalent in academic and lay literature, are not ‘true’ – clearly computers have had enormously beneficial effects on the lives of people with disabilities. The problem is that these ways of speaking are deficient in accounting for so much of what my participants told me about the complexity of their relationships with technology both on-line and off-line. One of the most interesting findings of my study, for example, was that the phenomenon of ‘social levelling’ was often more relevant to participants’ off-line interactions, in which their disability was visible, than their on-line interactions. They were often, for example, the most competent computer users in their families, taking the role of performing on-line financial transactions, finding important information or solving technical problems for their family members, that is, dealing with the ‘disabilities’ (when it came to computer literacy) of those around them and taking on the identity of the most ‘able’ person in the family.

Many others spoke of their computer use not in terms of overcoming their disability but of developing potential in areas like art and business, which had nothing to do with their disability; and others spoke of the pleasure they took in operating technology, which again, did not seem to have much direct relevance to their disability. In fact, there was much resistance to the fundamental premise of my research (that there must be some kind of special relationship between computers and disability), with participants often reminding me that ‘computers are important for everybody, not just the disabled’.

4. Computers, disability and mediated action

As Al Zidjaly (2005, 2006, 2009, forthcoming) has pointed out, one model of discourse which can help us better understand how and why the discourses I described above are ‘deficient’, and can suggest an alternative model for speaking about disability, is mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones 2005; Scollon & Wong Scollon 2004), an approach which focuses on real-time social actions and the role discourse plays in them. All actions, according to this approach, are mediated through ‘cultural tools’, which may be technical (like computers) or symbolic (like languages) and which come with built-in ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’,
which affect what actions, can be performed with them and what cannot. As these tools are appropriated by social actors, they are also adapted to fit particular needs and situations. Thus, agency is never a matter of the individual actor. It is always ‘distributed’ (Scollon 2005) among the actor, the tools through which the action is mediated and the other people involved in the action.

From this perspective, each of the discourses discussed above can be seen as locating ‘deficit’ in a different part of this model. The social levelling discourse locates deficit in the social actor and suggests that by erasing or concealing that deficit (‘passing’), desired social actions become more possible. The accessibility discourse, on the other hand, locates the deficit in the cultural tools through which actions are mediated, arguing that all we have to do is find the right ‘technological fix’ and the problem will be solved. Finally, the empowerment discourse locates the deficit in other people who exclude people with impairments. (See Figure 1.)

What makes the discourses of Figure 1 ‘deficient’ is that they assign responsibility for actions lopsidedly to one or another element in the model, failing to appreciate the interconnectedness of actors, actions, tools and the communities from which they arise. This ‘discursive lopsidedness’ has very real consequences for policies and practices around disability. Reliance on clinical definitions of disability which emphasise individual impairment, for example, results in policies that favour individual adaptation over social responsibility and offers solutions based narrowly on physiological criteria. A focus exclusively on cultural tools risks descending into a kind of ‘technological determinism’, which fails adequately to consider the circumstances under which these tools are used, or the barriers to their use not immediately related to the technology. Directing our attention exclusively to the faults of society risks ignoring the material realities of impairment, the corporal experience of

![Figure 1](image-url)  Where discourses of disability and technology locate ‘deficit’
it that is not caused by society and yet must be addressed (Shakespeare & Watson 2002).

In contrast, an approach to disability informed by mediated discourse analysis (see for example Al Zidjaly 2005, 2006, 2009, forthcoming) does not seek to locate ‘deficit’ in any single element in the model, but rather focuses on the action the actor wishes to accomplish and whether or not all of the elements are in place for its successful accomplishment. From this ‘action-oriented’ perspective it is more appropriate not to talk of ‘disability’ – which acts to essentialise ‘deficit’ and attach it as a fundamental characteristic to the actor, to the tool, or to society – but rather to speak of inability (see Al Zidjaly’s 2005 discussion of ‘ability’). Inability is something we are all subject to, since all actions are mediated and all mediated actions depend on all of the parts of the model working together. One may be ‘unable’ to perform a particular action even if one is not ‘disabled’ in the traditional sense of the word, and, in the presence of the proper tools and cooperative others, one may be ‘able’ to perform an action despite ‘suffering from disability’. This concept of inability then, allows us to acknowledge that we are all dependent both on cultural tools and on other people to get things done, and helps us to see ability along a complex, fluid and context-dependent continuum rather than as a dichotomy (i.e. ‘able’ versus ‘disabled’) (Al Zidjaly 2005).

What then determines whether or not a particular action can be accomplished? According to Scollon & Wong Scollon (2004), all social actions take place at a nexus of cultural tools, interaction orders – the social organisation of relationships within which people interact, and historical bodies – the physical conditions and psychological conditioning that individuals bring to social interaction. These three elements are not independent; they interact with and affect one another in important ways: communication technologies, for example, alter relationships of power and distance in interaction orders, individuals’ experiences with computer technology and the meanings they assign to it affect the ways they use it, and the organisation of social relationships affect both how technology is taken up by individuals and the kinds of access they have to it. When these three elements interact in a particular way, they create what Scollon (2001) calls a ‘site of engagement’, which he defines as ‘the real-time window’ that is opened up through an intersection of social practices and meditational means that makes particular social actions possible at particular moments (Figure 2).

There are certain criteria associated with each element that help determine whether or not a site of engagement is possible. First, the
appropriate tools must be available. Often for a tool to meet the criterion of availability requires the availability of other tools that must be used in combination with it. A wheelchair, for example often requires other tools like ramps and lifts to create ability. But the use of tools is also dependent on the histories that tools carry with them and the social meanings that they have. Certain tools, for example, may create assumptions about ability in certain social situations which may not necessarily be justified. Wheelchairs, for example, often carry the meaning of an ‘inability’ to walk, though many people who use wheelchairs can actually walk. Similarly, the use of a webcam (or, as seen above, the failure to use a webcam) might carry particular social meanings in different communities.

For historical bodies, ability depends upon mastery, which includes both the physical dexterity and the knowledge necessary to successfully manipulate the available tools. Mastery is often a matter of degree and something that builds up over time as people interact with tools. Again, just as ability often depends on the availability of multiple tools, it also often involves multiple types of mastery. The successful use of a particular website to access medical information, for example, may require not just knowledge of how to use a computer and navigate the internet, but also knowledge of the language (English, for example) in which the information on the site is presented. A person with no physical impairment but a limited command of the language would clearly be more ‘disabled’ than a physically impaired person who is highly proficient in the language.
Finally, ability depends on *interaction orders* in which particular historical bodies using particular tools to do particular things are recognised as legitimate. All social actions take place in relationships of *power* which help to determine what kinds of actions can be accomplished by particular individuals as well as what kinds of access they have to particular tools and the circumstances under which to develop mastery of those tools.

This model, whether we are discourse analysts or software developers, leads us to a new set of questions with which to approach issues of technology and disability. It suggests that the first question we should ask ourselves when approaching the issue is ‘what is the action that people are trying to accomplish?’ It is on the basis of this question that we can examine what kinds of tools are available to accomplish the action, what other tools these tools are dependent on, what kinds of mastery are required to make use of these tools, and finally, what kinds of social relationships need to be in place to make sure that the right kinds of tools are available at the right time for particular historical bodies to perform the actions they want or need to accomplish.

To suggest this model is not necessarily to engage in a kind of discursive engineering or to introduce a new regime of ‘political correctness’ (Corbett 1996), but rather a way to highlight how the language we use around issues of ability and disability has consequences for the way all of us, whether or not we consider ourselves ‘impaired’, understand and perform actions in the world. ‘Discourses’ and the meanings and relationships they create are themselves cultural tools for the accomplishment of particular kinds of actions and the construction of different kinds of social identities for people with impairments, for people temporarily free of impairments, and for the social institutions which control our access to technology.

Addressing both technical issues in hardware and software design as well as social issues such as inequity and discrimination can best be accomplished not by searching for ‘deficit’ in people, tools or societies but in understanding how deficit is created in the *relationship* among these three elements. This observation has important implications for public policy and the provision of services for people with ‘disabilities’. As Yeatman (1996) argues, the ‘need for support arises from a complex and individual interaction between…and any reduced capacity and the person’s environment and personal circumstances’ (p. 40). ‘As long as impairment is used as a descriptor in discussing need for disability services, it will be difficult to develop a genuinely functional approach to the design and provision of such services’ (p. 39).
Note

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References


Young Peoples’ Binge Drinking Constituted as a Deficit of Individual Self-control in UK Government Alcohol Policy

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1. Introduction: UK Government alcohol policy and the Safe, Sensible, Social policy document

In this chapter, we reflect on the discourses of deficit theme in the context of our study of young people and alcohol in the UK, and in light of the way the UK’s alcohol problem is constituted in public policy discourse. We chose one policy document in particular because it came directly from the UK Government cabinet office and focused prominently on young people. This was called Safe, Sensible, Social: The Next Steps in the National Alcohol Strategy (Department of Health 2007). The document was produced in a climate of moral panic over ‘binge drinking’ (Measham 1996), which it defines (p. 3) as ‘drinking that leads to drunkenness’ and its damaging economic, social and health implications. It sets out the rationale for policy at national and local level. The stated overall aim of policy as expressed in the document (p. 1) is to promote ‘a sensible drinking culture’. We explore further the implications of the differing possible definitions of ‘binge’ and ‘sensible’ drinking below.

The document invokes a collective sense of responsibility and states that ‘We will challenge the belief that drunkenness and antisocial behaviour are an accepted part of an English “drinking culture”’ (p. 47). Changing this culture is ‘a job for us all, not just the Government. Everyone must take personal responsibility’ (p. 1). The conflation of collective and individual responsibility in UK alcohol policy, exemplified in the
sentence above, reflects the contradiction we explore in this chapter. In this chapter we suggest that policy discourse in Safe, Sensible Social carries a moralistic subtext which produces excessive drinking as a deficit of individual self-control and personal character, while ignoring the possibilities for other rational motives for drinking, such as pleasure (O’Malley & Valverde 2004). In the way that the document constructs the UK’s alcohol problem, the individual responsibility of the consumer is highlighted as the key to both the problem and the solution, while the influence of UK Government legislation around alcohol licensing and promotion, and the marketing practices of the alcohol industry, are effectively played down.

There are practical reasons why this thrust of policy can be questioned. The target of changing the UK’s drinking culture is highly ambitious. Changing culturally constituted norms and practices could take years, if it is possible at all (Measham 2006). At the same time, appealing to personal restraint is also unlikely to resonate with the required audiences. As Lindsay (2009: 371) has noted, ‘individual self-control is a weak moderating force on alcohol consumption in the face of market exploitation, incongruous state control and heavy drinking cultural expectations’. Intuitively, this would seem especially true of young drinkers, who are singled out for attention in popular media accounts of the negative aspects of drinking. This group, as we shall see, also receives disproportionate negative attention in UK Government policy discourse. The acknowledgement of drinking as a cultural phenomenon in Safe, Social, Sensible does represent a positive shift, but the way the individual and the cultural are constituted seems to need more careful thought.

As we have suggested elsewhere, (Hackley et al. 2008), in Safe, Sensible, Social the idea of self-control, exemplified in the discourse of ‘sensible’ drinking, is set in opposition to crime and social disorder, with young people often singled out as the perpetrators. The Safe, Sensible, Social document asserts (p. 19) that ‘the UK now has among the highest incidences of youth drunkenness’, but such claims lack the support of precise evidence. Quoting data from surveys conducted by alcohol industry lobbyists, the Portman Group, it refers to public concern over ‘underage drinking and drinking by young adults’ which is ‘perceived as a real problem by the public. Over half of those who reported witnessing drunken or rowdy behaviour said it was due to young people drinking in the streets and other public places...’ (p. 20). The focus on young people is continued with the claim that the Government’s ‘Know Your Limits’ broadcast advertising campaign promoting sensible drinking to
young people is ‘the first national campaign to target 18–24-year-old binge drinkers’ (p. 33). Again, there is a lack of substantive evidence elaborating on either the claim or the reason why it is necessary.

We suggest that constituting the UK’s alcohol problem in terms of a deficit of individual self-control and personal responsibility exposes contradictions between the role of cultural forces, including licensing legislation, marketing, and social attitudes, and the morality and character of the individual. To what extent, exactly, can governments place the blame for excessive drinking on young people, when those young people are faced with relentless social pressure and marketing around drinking? Many young people view drinking and the social interaction which surrounds it as a key part of their social lives (Szmigin et al. 2008). This social dimension is played upon by alcohol marketing and advertising campaigns targeted at young people (Griffin et al. 2009a). Self-evidently, young people are the least empowered group of stakeholders in the complex of alcohol marketing, consumption and legislation. They do not have a voice amidst the lobbying of alcohol trade associations for liberalisation of marketing codes of practice and licensing laws, and the condemnation of heavy drinking coming from medical bodies, police and local authorities. Young drinkers are the single most heavily targeted group for the vast resources devoted to alcohol advertising, new product development and pub promotions (Smith & Foxcroft 2007) which identify drinking as a necessary accompaniment to fun, friendship and social life (Nayak 2006). The discourse of a deficit of personal control around excessive drinking distracts attention from the complex of structural economic and legislative forces which have promoted drinking in this way. We discuss these in more detail below.

Elsewhere we have argued that Safe, Sensible, Social constitutes the UK’s alcohol problem in ways which mirror neo-liberal themes. Griffin et al. (2009b) suggest that young people, in particular, have to negotiate identity in ‘the context of the individualism and consumer discourses characteristic of neo-liberalism. Contemporary discourses of individual freedom, self-expression and authenticity demand that we live our lives as if this was part of a biographical project of self-realisation in a society in which we all appear to have ‘free’ choice to consume whatever we want and to become whoever we want to be’. The alcohol marketing which targets young people plays heavily on the notion of drinking as a practice bounded by identity, fun and freedom. It seems contradictory to expect that young people, who face daily advertising and marketing encouraging them to drink, will stop that behaviour just because
of a much smaller number of anti-drinking advertisements sponsored by government and the alcohol industry.

Young people, then, face a dilemma. Drinking is a cultural practice and a key site of identity formation (Wilson 2005). Drinking is one available resource through which young people are able to negotiate and deepen membership of social groups in ways which fulfil the neo-liberal agenda, by expressing an individual choice to join a desired group and partake in the collective fun which denotes social success. On the other hand, the key discourses of government alcohol policy constitute drinking in terms of a deficit of individual self-control and character, even though these drinking practices have become thoroughly normalised. Paradoxically, this might reinforce the sub-cultural frisson around getting drunk as a gesture of defiance towards the forces of the establishment, whilst also serving to obscure the role of government and the alcohol industry in creating the very ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham & Brain 2005) which government wishes to change. As Measham (2006: 263) suggests, a focus on ‘sensible’ individual levels of consumption collides ‘with an emergent culture of intoxication…an economic climate of deregulation of the alcohol market and a political context of licensing reform…This results in a credibility gap between recommended and actual practices for drinkers, alcohol manufacturers and alcohol retailers’. The credibility gap is ignored in policy discourse, which constitutes drinking in terms of a deficit of individual, and by implication, collective, self-control.

We do not suggest that government policy is insincere or that the alcohol industry has hidden agendas in its dealings with policy makers. We acknowledge that policy discourse is not exclusively biased against young people, as we note at the end of this chapter with reference to a subsequent policy document. We do suggest that alcohol policy as expressed in Safe, Sensible, Social appears to suffer from some deep conceptual confusion which risks clouding policy making. One unfortunate consequence of this confusion is that young people can be demonised for their deficit of self-control, when in fact the tensions and contradictions in their position need to be acknowledged as part of a more effective strategy for changing young peoples’ relationship with alcohol and the marketing and retailing practices of the drinks industry.

Below, we briefly review the literature on the UK’s alcohol problem before outlining the study we undertook. We then offer examples of how UK alcohol policy, as it is articulated in the Safe, Social, Sensible policy document, plays on the discourse of deficit in relation to young people and harmful drinking practices. We conclude by suggesting that this
way of constituting the UK’s alcohol problem lacks credibility, especially among young people, and risks leading to confused policy initiatives.

2. Recent research on young people and alcohol in the UK

Excessive alcohol consumption is a serious issue in the UK, and the long-term health and welfare implications for young people are especially worrying. Alcohol-related hospital admissions and cases of early-onset alcoholic liver cirrhosis have increased significantly in recent years among younger age groups of both sexes (Leon & McCambridge 2006). In England in 2006–7, almost 8,000 young people (4,266 girls; 3,617 boys) aged under 18 were admitted to hospital for conditions directly related to alcohol (Chief Medical Officers 2009). During the same period 1,340 children under 14 years were taken to NHS hospitals in England suffering from alcohol-related problems (Hansard 2008). Excessive drinking contributes, in perception and reality, to heightened tension, violence and crime on the streets, especially in the night-time economy, as well as to serious health problems. The problem is of such a scale and importance that it is essential for policy initiatives to be formed from clear, coherent and evidence-based arguments (Room 2005).

Alcohol consumption is a cultural practice (Wilson 2005) that is deeply embedded in many countries, but researchers have identified a shift toward a normalisation of drinking to intoxication (Measham & Brain 2005). Discourses of moral censure over young people’s alcohol consumption in the UK have focused on the apparent increase in so-called ‘binge drinking’ among young people since the mid-1990s (Measham 1996). A variety of different definitions of binge drinking have been used in academic and policy discourse (Measham 2004a), and the term is used in a loose way, encompassing extreme drunkenness, drinking to excess over a long period of time (Matthews et al. 2006), or any drinking which exceeds the Government’s ‘safe’ limits – which equate roughly to about a half, and a third, of a bottle of medium-strength wine per day for men and women respectively. The term ‘binge’ pervades media discourse on youth drinking and has developed a politically loaded character. As noted above, it is commonly used in policy discourse. But it is not a term in common use amongst one of the main target groups of policy, i.e. young people (Szmigin et al. 2008). In contrast, young people’s drinking practices tend be characterised by highly nuanced and strategic approaches which are heavily contingent on time, place and company (Brain et al. 2000; Measham 2004b; Parker...
2003). As we have suggested, for many young people, getting determinedly drunk may be a response to perceived pressures of life in the neo-liberal order (Engineer et al. 2003; Measham 2006).

Young people’s drinking, and policy responses to it, must be understood in the light of the important changes in the environment of young peoples’ alcohol and leisure spaces which have taken place in the UK over the past twenty years. These include new policies on alcohol licensing and regulation – extending opening hours and allowing more establishments to retail alcohol, and new marketing practices which have driven an emergent economic sector founded on branded alcohol consumption. This sector is maintained by a powerful collection of trade associations linked with licensed premises, city-centre business associations, and the alcohol manufacturers (Brain 2000). The night-time economy has emerged as an economically important sector for employment and wealth generation in many UK cities. These areas often consist of many heavily branded bars, pubs and clubs grouped in near proximity, frequented by a predominantly young customer base and characterised by frequent drunkenness (Chatterton & Hollands 2001; Hobbs et al. 2000).

Many new branded alcohol drinks have been created since the early 1990s with a clear emphasis on youth orientation in the advertising, branding and promotion, indicating the intended target market. These include FABs (flavoured alcoholic beverages), RMDs (spirits-based ready-to-drink mixers such as Bacardi Breezer, the market leader), ‘buzz’ drinks based on legally available substances such as caffeine (e.g. Red Bull), and cheap ‘shots’ of spirits and liqueurs, usually downed in one for an instant ‘hit’ (Measham & Brain 2005). Simultaneously, the strength of many brands of normal beers and spirits has been increased while the use of much larger glasses for wine and spirits has apparently encouraged higher consumption. Some of these new drinks are marketed with an implied psycho-active effect (Brain et al. 2000) to appeal to a post-dance drug culture, and they have contributed to a putative ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham & Brain 2005; Measham 2006). These elements have not been confined to male drinkers, and indeed have contributed to gendered drinking practices, reflected in rising incidence of female drink-related ill-health, and representing an increasing risk to the well-being of young women (Jackson & Tinkler 2007).

Having considered some recent research which identified changes in the drinking environment for young people in the UK, we will outline the main findings from our empirical study of young people and alcohol
consumption before discussing further the discourse of deficit implicit in the UK’s alcohol policy discourse.

3. The Young People and Alcohol Study

The Young People and Alcohol project examined the significance of alcohol consumption in young peoples’ social lives with a focus on identity and everyday drinking practices. It entailed sixteen semi-structured focus group discussions with 102 young adults aged 18–25, conducted during 2006. In addition, four in-depth observational case studies of young peoples’ drinking activities were carried out in the three geographical locations in which sampling took place: a major city centre in the English Midlands with a diverse population (‘Rowchester’), a seaside town (‘Seatown’) and a small market town (‘Bolston’) in the English West Country. Finally, eight individual interviews were also undertaken. All interviews and discussions were fully transcribed. Sampling generated a range of participants of varied ethnicity and roughly equal division of males and females.

As we note above, detailed findings from the study are presented elsewhere (e.g. Griffin et al. 2009b; Szmigin et al. 2008). The central role of alcohol in young peoples’ social lives was underlined by a substantial majority of participants, since their tales of fun, friendship and bonding were oriented powerfully around alcohol. Drinking to intoxication was often represented as a key component of a good night out. Not only was drinking represented as a reason for going out, meeting and being with friends, but getting drunk was also seen as a core behaviour for cementing friendship bonds, generating drunken tales to tell, and forging a sense of identity within the group as a person who is fun, sociable and ‘up for a laugh’ (Griffin et al. 2009a). Many of the participants saw going out with the primary purpose of getting very drunk as an entirely normal and accepted part of social life. However, getting drunk was not merely reckless behaviour but was framed by a sense of calculated risk within the friendship group, a practice termed ‘controlled loss of control’ by Measham (2006: 263, citing Measham & Brain 2005).

It is important to note that hedonistic drinking does not necessarily mean there is no calculation involved (Hartnett et al. 2000). One connotation of the term ‘binge’ drinking is that all self-control is lost. This, arguably, gives the term its pejorative, and moralistic, resonance. As our study and others have shown, there is an important element of calculation, which includes consideration of personal safety and health in
relation to the inner body, balanced with the management of appearance and social positioning through the outer body in the social space of the night-time economy (Featherstone 1991). Even loss of control through drinking is a social practice which occurs within a framework which affords an element of control over social positioning (Hayward 2004). Talk of drunkenness in our interview transcripts was framed by an awareness of the risks entailed, including the risk of long-term damage to health, the risk of an accident or the risk of physical assault, ever-present in the UK’s night-time economy (Szmigin et al. 2008). Such risks were rationalised in terms of a sense of trust and reliance on other group members to watch out for each other. Indeed, risk was used as a discursive resource to enhance the resonance of the group and deepen the sense of friendship against a backdrop of latent but pervasive danger involved for young people in ‘going out’.

Drinking sessions were characterised by consumption far in excess of the UK Government’s ‘safe’ drinking limits, but the term ‘binge’ was felt to be inappropriate since it did not capture the ways in which drinking sessions were framed by the social context to provide limits on the personal risks to which group members were exposed. Hence the discourse of self-control in government policy documents runs counter to the culture of drinking to intoxication reflected by the young people in our study. Drinking, and importantly, getting drunk, was seen to facilitate social life and deepen group bonds. As we have noted elsewhere (Griffin et al. 2009a), the role of alcohol as a social facilitator and essential accessory to fun and friendship is heavily emphasised in alcohol advertising and marketing. Getting drunk was not essential to group membership provided the abstinence in no way reflected a negative judgement on those who did. But the choice not to get excessively drunk had to be warranted and it was not the norm. To expect young people to thus marginalise themselves from their key social group is not only unrealistic but risks diverting attention from structural elements in the UK’s drinking culture, especially the role of government and business.

4. The discourse of deficit in Safe, Social, Sensible

The move towards a discourse of deficit of individual control in UK alcohol policy has been gradual. The precursor of Safe, Social, Sensible was the 2004 Alcohol Strategy (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit 2004). The emphasis of the 2004 policy document leaned towards reform of the advertising and marketing of alcohol to children and young people, and of the licensing laws, while also referring to the activities of
young adult ‘binge drinkers’ and other consumers that were constituted as problematic. The 2004 document refers to ‘partnership’ between government, the drinks industry, advertising and marketing agencies and the retail trade, as well as consumers. After 2004, the Portman Group, an organisation created by the alcohol industry to represent it on social responsibility issues, lobbied government hard not to implement any changes which might impact on the growth of the alcohol industry, and this may have been an element in the change of emphasis in UK alcohol policy statements between 2004 and 2007 (Baggott 2006).

Safe, Sensible, Social (Department of Health 2007) represents the alcohol industry as a responsible partner in the effort to curb the activities of a small aberrant minority: ‘Much of the industry is already working hard to encourage responsible practice…But there are still businesses that act outside the law or fail to consider the interests of their customers or local communities, such as by selling alcohol to people under the age of 18 or to anyone who is obviously already intoxicated’ (p. 10). A proposal in the 2004 policy document to promote social responsibility for alcoholic drinks producers and to encourage good practice reaching down the supply chain was transformed into legislative proposals to create ‘alcohol disorder zones’ (ADZs), which compel licensed premises to contribute to the costs of managing and reducing alcohol-related problems. It could be argued that while the drinks manufacturers remain ‘partners’ in the drive to curb excessive drinking, they do not appear to be held directly responsible for solutions to the problem.

A key construct of the Safe, Social, Sensible document is the notion of ‘sensible drinking’. This is defined in terms of a ‘safe’ number of units of alcohol consumed, as described above. Participants in the Young People and Alcohol Study claimed that the Government’s ‘safe’ levels of alcohol consumption were so conservative they were ‘ridiculous’. Measham (2006) suggests that the limits take no account of the drinking culture of young people, and they ignore the common tendency to drink only at weekends and abstain through the week. The safe limits have also been criticised for not having a scientific basis, a fact conceded by one of the working party which produced the ‘safe’ drinking guidelines for the UK Government in 1987. The member, a distinguished medical professional and former editor of the British Medical Journal, admitted that the limit was ‘plucked out of the air’ and had ‘no scientific basis’ because ‘we don’t really have any data whatsoever’ (Times Online 2007). In Safe, Social, Sensible there is an admission that non-harmful levels of alcohol consumption are related to age, gender, bodyweight and general health (p. 16), yet there is also an attempt to fix ‘sensible’ drinking levels within
closely specified, universal limits. As the document states (p. 16), ‘Consistent with the recommendations of the 1995 Sensible Drinking report, the Department of Health advises that men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units of alcohol per day, and women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units of alcohol per day’.

While the safe limits are arbitrary and expedient, this is not to argue that they are irrelevant. Clearly, it makes little sense to urge drinkers to drink less without outlining what less means. Initiatives to increase awareness of the units concept make sense as part of the solution to the problem. The problem we highlight is the vast credibility gap between the units concept and the reality of drinking culture for young people.

Young people do express an understanding of risk attached to drinking and will plan strategies to manage risk, such as designating one person to be the non-drinking driver on a night out. However, the drinkers in a ‘night out’ group are highly unlikely to listen to exhortations to be ‘sensible’, given that the normal aim of such a night is not to drink but to get drunk (Engineer et al. 2003; Measham & Brain 2005). What is more, it is difficult to calculate the units consumed even if people are interested in doing so, since drink strengths and serving sizes obscure the matter. Finally, government limits and official exhortations to drink sensibly must be considered in relation to the quantity of pro-drinking marketing and advertising activity (Mistral et al. 2007; Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit 2004).

The Safe, Sensible, Social policy document concedes that evidence is uneven and some statistics suggest that young people do, at least sometimes, drink responsibly: ‘Even among 16–24-year-olds…approximately six in 10 young men and young women, when asked to record how much they drank, were found to be drinking within the sensible drinking guidelines’ (p. 13). Some sections of young people are drinking less, for example: ‘Since 2001, the number of young people aged 11–15 who drink alcohol appears to have reduced’ (p. 6). It adds that ‘Even among 18–24-year-olds…of those who do drink at levels above those guidelines, only a quarter actually become involved in antisocial behaviour or disorder’ (p. 10). This was reflected in our interviews, which were striking for the lack of talk about law breaking.

Nonetheless, the individual irresponsibility of young people is consistently implied as a key issue in Safe, Sensible, Social: ‘Government research suggests that this focus should be on young people under 18 who drink alcohol (in particular 11–15-year-olds), many of whom we now know are drinking more than they used to only a few years ago; the 18–24-year-old binge drinkers, a minority of which are responsible for the majority of alcohol-related crime and disorder in the night-time
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economy; and the harmful drinkers, whose patterns of drinking damage their physical or mental health and who may be causing substantial harm to others’ (p. 47). Young people aged 16–24 years are said to be ‘significantly more likely than people in other age groups to have exceeded the recommended daily number of units’ (p. 16). They are drinking ‘more than twice the recommended sensible drinking limit’ (p. 17) and ‘twice what they were in 1990’ (p. 18). Young people aged 18–24 are said to be ‘more likely than any other age group to binge drink… [and to] admit to committing criminal or disorderly behaviours’ (p. 21). The document goes on to state that there are ‘strong links’ between excessive drinking among the young and crime, teenage pregnancy, truancy, exclusion and illegal drug misuse, while conceding that the precise nature of the link is not understood (p. 20; also citing Matthews & Richardson 2005).

We suggest that the overall picture is one-dimensional and serves to privilege the rhetorical force of moralistic arguments for greater self-control (see Billig 1987; Billig et al. 1988; Potter 1996; Willig 1999) while silencing questions about the logic and the evidence-base of the reasoning presented behind the policy. Safe, Social, Sensible ignores not only the subjective experience of young drinkers and the environment they face but also complex issues of social class, education and opportunity in the UK. For example, Safe, Social, Sensible makes reference to the higher rates of drinking and drink-related harm in economically and socially deprived areas and in less-educated demographic segments. Yet there is no linkage between this evidence and policy exhortations to drink more sensibly. The participants in our research study offered accounts which (Szmigin et al. 2008) illustrated that the subjective experience of young drinkers is neither entirely unreasoned nor irresponsible, and reveals the acuteness of the ‘credibility gap’ to which Measham (2006: 265) draws attention.

5. Concluding comment

In this chapter, we have offered a number of selective quotes from the UK Government’s alcohol policy document Safe, Social, Sensible to illustrate our contention that it deploys a discourse of deficit in the way it constitutes the UK’s alcohol problem as a deficit of individual self-control, in a collective context. As we have shown, the document also refers to the cultural basis of drinking in the UK, and to the fact that drinking at a level injurious to health is found across all demographics. Indeed, it points out explicitly that many young people do not drink
to excess, and do not engage in crime or disorder. Nevertheless, drawing on principles of discourse and rhetoric (Billig 1987; Billig et al. 1988; Willig 1999), we have indicated that these disclaimers may distract from, but do not undermine, the implication throughout the document that blame rests predominantly with young people for their deficit of self-control. This discourse of deficit is reiterated at regular intervals throughout the document with references to crime, disorder and drunkenness linked with young people. The repeated assertions of this link have a cumulative effect, giving the document a rhetorical force based on a moral position, and diverting attention from questions about the evidence-base for policy prescriptions and the role of government and industry in creating and maintaining the UK’s drinking culture.

We are not making an argument about the sincerity of policy, nor about the motives of stakeholders. Nor do we mean to imply that personal self-control has no role in drinking to excess. Rather, we take a discourse perspective to highlight ways in which argument and evidence may be constituted in policy discourse to unwittingly privilege some stakeholders while allocating blame to others. The effect in this case is to tap into a discourse of moral condemnation of young people which is more characteristic of sensationalist coverage in the popular media than of a government policy document.

6. Postscript

In July 2008, a subsequent consultation was opened entitled Safe, Social Sensible – Consultation on Further Action1 (Department of Health 2008). This document generally has more substantive comments and is mainly confined to updated statistical evidence. The picture is bleak, as the problem is not abating. Nevertheless, there remains a tendency to couch the problem in terms of economic neo-liberal themes of the primacy of markets and wealth creation:

The economic benefits from the sale of alcohol are considerable. In 2005 the total UK household expenditure on alcohol was £41.9 billion2 supporting employment in the manufacturing, retail and leisure sectors. A year earlier, the Cabinet Office had estimated that the total cost of harm from alcohol was £20 billion a year. We now estimate the cost to be between £17.7 billion and £25.1 billion a year.3 Of this, the cost to the NHS is £2.7 billion per year (p. 3).4

This, at the outset of the document, frames the subsequent alarming figures about the scale of individual harm:
…we now have a truer estimate of how excessive consumption of alcohol is affecting the health of the nation. The new data reveal that in 2006/07 there were 811,443 hospital admissions that were directly related and attributable to alcohol. This is an increase from 473,529 in 2002/03 – and the figure is still rising by around 80,000 admissions every year. This is a huge number, comprising 6% of all NHS hospital admissions'.

There is a continued emphasis on sensible drinking and individual responsibility as the key message, though there is an acknowledgment that industry measures are not effective. A survey by KPMG has suggested that there continues to be

…a disturbing level of irresponsible and harmful practice in significant sections of the industry, along with limited evidence that the current social responsibility standards are consistently applied or effective in promoting good practice.

The change in tone of this subsequent document is welcome. It eschews the more extravagant rhetorical flourishes of the original Safe, Social, Sensible document and is more clear about shortcomings in industry self-regulation; but it retains the core themes and makes no reference to government licensing liberalisation as a possible contributory factor in the problem. The discourse of deficit, though, remains by implication in terms of a discourse of individual choice and therefore, of responsibility: ‘It is up to individuals to decide whether to drink alcohol and how much they drink’ (p. 20). The increased emphasis on measures to help people cut down their drinking is welcome and there is markedly less linkage of young people, drink and crime. Nevertheless, the ease with which such links can distract from coherent policy making is clear, and it is equally clear that policy to date has shown a disappointing lack of success.

Notes

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References


Part VIII

Membership in the Context of Institutional Appraisal
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1. Introduction

This chapter considers the role of language testing and measurement as a technology for establishing and supporting discourses of both educational and linguistic deficit at the national level in the context of a wider discussion of the social and political function of assessment more generally. The growth of international comparative assessments of educational achievement, including in language, is having major impacts on the societies which participate in them. As the results of the tests are released for all countries simultaneously, national results are immediately compared with the results of other countries (the very point of the tests), leading to the construction of international ‘league tables’ of performance on the tests. These league tables, by defining ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, automatically create a ‘discourse of deficit’ about the ‘losers’. The interpretation of the causes of the ‘poor result’ can also introduce or support other discourses of deficit, particularly in relation to the bilingual competence of immigrant children, which is interpreted as being deficient in relation to competence in the national language. This sense of deficit is then internalised by immigrant families themselves, and the resulting self-stigmatisation can lead to a rejection of use of the mother tongue in the family, and particularly with children, in favour of the national language.

The chapter presents a detailed examination of the impact of one such international comparative assessment, the OECD’s PISA assessments of reading, in a single country, Austria. It will examine the prevailing discourses within Austria in relation to both education and immigration into which the results of the test are inserted. It demonstrates that the results are associated with, and trigger, discourses of deficit, both at the
national level in terms of the country’s entire performance relative to relevant points of comparison within the Austrian context, but also in relation to the language competence of immigrants and their children. However, the detailed case study also shows the opposite: that the impact of the tests sometimes has a progressive effect, particularly in relation to the organisation of education at the school level, and in highlighting the significance of the role of language in education. The chapter argues, then, that measurement, even where it has the potential to reinforce discourses of deficit, does not play a single role, but is in a sense inherently indeterminate in its effects, which will be both negative and positive. This point, which addresses the social role of language testing more generally, is interpreted in the light of Derrida’s discussion of the ambivalent character of the shibboleth.

2. Debates about the character of assessment

The last decade has seen an increasing debate about the social and political functions of language testing and assessment (Shohamy 1998, 2001; McNamara & Roever 2006). For a long time language testing was conceptualised primarily in cognitive and psycholinguistic terms, a perspective which is supported by the principal traditions of validity theory, which emphasise the necessary processes through which meaningful inferences about candidates’ ability can be made from test scores. In this tradition, social considerations are restricted to ensuring fairness in assessment for the individual and the groups being assessed. Even where test scores are used at the aggregate level, for example to describe the performance of school populations, their meaningfulness depends largely on the quality of information about individuals that is yielded by the assessments involved. The new socially critical perspective on language testing involves a move away from this individual cognitive emphasis. At the most literal level, this means acknowledging the existence of primarily sociolinguistic constructs in some language assessments. For example, a form of language test is used in the determination of the likely region of primary socialisation of refugee claimants (Eades 2009; Reath 2004). At the micro-level of personal interaction, the reconceptualisation of communication as a joint achievement makes it difficult to isolate the separate contribution of a single individual to the success of the communication (McNamara 1997; May 2009). But the main thrust of the new social and political orientation in discussions of language tests is to consider the uses of tests, rather than the qualities of the instruments themselves. This has led to a debate on the appropriate scope of validity theory in relation
Measuring Deficit

3. International comparative educational assessments and globalisation

A clear example of the social and policy function of language tests is the internationalisation of tests as an accompaniment to processes of economic integration and globalisation. This function may be quite explicit, as in international comparative assessments of educational achievement in language, or it may remain implicit, as in the proliferation of scales and frameworks to guide language education. In relation to the former, governments have been increasingly concerned about education as a tool for producing a workforce that is internationally competitive in a globalised world. In order to facilitate this process, and to put pressure on governments, international agencies have conducted international assessments of educational achievement in member countries. One such agency is the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has been conducting comparative international assessments of the outcomes of school learning since 2000 through its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). From the PISA website (http://www.pisa.oecd.org, accessed 7 August, 2009) we read:

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an internationally standardised assessment that was jointly developed
by participating countries and administered to 15-year-olds in schools.

The survey was implemented in 43 countries in the 1st assessment in 2000, in 41 countries in the 2nd assessment in 2003, in 57 countries in the 3rd assessment in 2006 and 62 countries have signed up to participate in the 4th assessment in 2009.

Tests are typically administered to between 4,500 and 10,000 students in each country.

The domains of assessment are three: reading, in the main national language; mathematics; and scientific literacy (this chapter focuses on the assessment of reading). Tests are administered at the national level, in the main national language or languages, and results are presented in terms of national achievement, the achievement of individual schools, and the achievement of certain social sub-groups, for example immigrants, boys and girls, rural and urban schools, and so on. The results thus give a detailed report card on the national educational system. The primary explicit function, however, is the furthering of the goals of the agency which funds the testing programme, in this case the OECD.

Thus, crucially, PISA is not curriculum-specific (http://www.pisa.oecd.org, accessed 7 August, 2009):

PISA assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society. In all cycles, the domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life.

In other words, a single, universal test, purposely not sensitive to local curricula, has as its construct the ‘important knowledge and skills needed in adult life’, that is, as understood by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, PISA’s sponsor. OECD’s mission is as follows (OECD 2008: 10):

The Organisation’s mission is essentially to help governments and society reap the full benefits of globalisation, while tackling the economic, social and governance challenges that can accompany it.
This overall goal is reflected too at the national level. For example, in the case of Austria, if we consult the website of BiFie (Bundesinstitut für Bildungsforschung, Innovation und Entwicklung des Österreichischen Schulwesens [Federal Institute for Education Research, Innovation and Development of the Austrian School System]), the research institute which is responsible for the administration of PISA in Austria and the dissemination of reports on the national results, we find that the goal of the organisation is ‘visibility’: their slogan is ‘Making the quality of schools visible...’ (http://www.bifie.at/sites/default/files/infobroschuere-en.pdf, accessed 10 August, 2009). The goal of PISA, in other words, is to make subjects not out of individuals but out of entire national educational systems by making them ‘visible’, in the manner described in Foucault’s classic *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977[1975]). But visible as what? Here we can see that PISA is, to use Foucault’s terms, itself a statement within a discourse, the discourse of education in the service of globalisation.

While the PISA tests are, then, an explicit expression of the ideology of globalisation, the ideology underlying the assessments associated with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) remains implicit. The CEFR was developed by the Council of Europe, a policy organisation which operates in the areas of education and culture. Since the 1950s the Council has been involved in the development of policies and materials for teaching the languages of member states as second or foreign languages (Trim 2001), and was responsible for the groundbreaking development of the notional/functional syllabus in the early 1970s (Wilkins 1973), ushering in the European version of communicative language teaching. The initial motivation of the work of the Council of Europe in the area of functional syllabuses was to permit transfer of credentialing for language proficiency across national and linguistic boundaries, to allow recognition to be given outside particular national settings for standards of language proficiency among immigrant workers and professionals. The policy goals of the organisation are described on its website (http://www.coe.int/T/e/Com/about_coe/, accessed 10 January, 2006):

The Council of Europe is the continent’s oldest political organisation, founded in 1949...[It] was set up to...develop continent-wide agreements to standardise member countries' social and legal practices [and] promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures.
Within the area of education, its mission involves carrying out major projects on education policy, content and methods in and out of school... Special importance is attached to... the mutual recognition of competences to improve mobility and employment prospects, and lifelong learning for participation in an international society.

The cultural context of globalisation is obvious, and is strongly reminiscent of the mission of the OECD. Compare (Table 1) the actual wording of the goals of the two organisations (the goals that seem shared have been emboldened).

Table 1  A comparison of the goals of the OECD and the Council of Europe

<table>
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<tr>
<th>OECD</th>
<th>COUNCIL OF EUROPE</th>
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<td>The Organisation's mission is essentially to help governments and society reap the full benefits of globalisation, while tackling the economic, social and governance challenges that can accompany it.</td>
<td>... the mutual recognition of competences to improve mobility and employment prospects, and lifelong learning for participation in an international society [It] was set up to... develop continent-wide agreements to standardise member countries' social and legal practices...</td>
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While the OECD specifically focuses on economic development, and the Council of Europe focuses on education, in a deeper sense they share the same mission, and the institution of assessment regimes of educational achievement, including in languages, is central to the fulfilment of the goals of each organisation.

The linking of language policy to educational goals through processes of examination and certification is of course not new. In a discussion of the linguistic unification of France in the eighteenth century, Pierre Bourdieu (1991: 49) writes:

But it was doubtless the dialectical relation between the school system and the labour market – or, more precisely, between the unification of the educational (and linguistic) market, linked to the introduction of educational qualifications nation-wide, independent (at least officially) of the social or regional characteristics of their bearers, and the unification of the labour market (including the development of the state administration and the civil service) – which played
the most decisive role in devaluing dialects and establishing the new hierarchy of linguistic practices.

Having now set out the debate around the social and policy functions of language tests, and introduced the use of language tests as part of an increasing tendency on the part of governments to see a primary function of education as serving the goal of globalisation, let us now consider the impact of one such test in a single country as a case study in the social and political impact of such tests.

4. The case study: PISA testing in Austria

This section of the chapter will focus on the impact of PISA testing of reading ability in German in Austria.¹ I will argue that the PISA results trigger and play into discourses of deficit, both at the national level and in relation to significant elements of the Austrian population. The significance of the Austrian results of the PISA testing is interpreted within existing discourses within Austria, in particular, discourses on immigration and education. But I also argue that because the results are interpreted within existing discourses, their impact is not always predictable, and is in a sense indeterminate. This has important implications for understanding the social and political character of language tests, which exceed the intentions of their designers.

First, some facts about Austria’s demography and its education system which are necessary for understanding the discourses of immigration and education which are central to the argument of the chapter. Austria shares borders with a number of countries in Eastern, Central and Western Europe: Italy, Switzerland and Germany; Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Its capital, Vienna, is in the far east of the country, and is in fact further east than Prague. Its population in 2001 was 8.0 million, of whom about 9 per cent were non-citizens; by 2006 it had risen to 8.3 million, of whom nearly 10 per cent were non-citizens. The non-citizens are made up of immigrants and their Austrian-born children. Of the parents, 45 per cent were from the former republics of Yugoslavia; 18 per cent were from Turkey; and 16 per cent had been born in Austria but did not have citizenship, a situation that would be impossible in countries that apply the law of ius solis which grants citizenship to anyone born in a country.

Let us now turn to the discourse on immigration currently occurring within Austria. A 2007 political poster for a right-wing party gives a flavour of this discourse. It shows against the backdrop of the Austrian
flag the smiling face of Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the FPÖ, the Austrian Freedom Party, a party founded by the controversial politician Jörg Haider, who died in somewhat embarrassing circumstances in October, 2008. Haider is on record as having stated that the SS guards in concentration camps ‘deserved every honour and recognition’. After a falling out with the party, Haider left it, and it is now led by Strache; the party gained 18 per cent of the vote in the most recent national election in 2008, so it is not a negligible political force. The slogan on the poster reads: ‘No EU constitution, no admission for Turkey; FREE AND NEUTRAL, not an EU slave without rights’. The relevance of the EU here is that its policies are seen as linked with immigration into Austria; this is reinforced by the reference to the admission of Turkey.

The discourse on education centres around the issue of streaming or tracking, whereby different cohorts of students are educated separately, depending on their ultimate destination, particularly whether it is primarily academic or vocational. Austria is marked by an extremely early start to streaming, at the end of the 4th year of primary or elementary school, at age 9 or 10 (Carnevale et al. 2008).

This means that decisions about which stream a child will go into commence very early: admission to the academic stream from primary school is determined in the second semester of the 4th year of primary school, and depends on the grades the child has earned from the 2nd grade onwards. Using the Austrian 5-point scale system, with A (1) being the highest, children need to get B (2) or better in every subject to be recommended for admission to the Academic Secondary School in their 5th year of education; a single C will deny the child admission to the academic track. Comprehensive education, in other words, is only available for the first four years of primary school. Thus, one of the primary subjects of the discourse on education in Austria is the desirability of extending the period of comprehensive education.

Another feature of the Austrian education system is that the education of kindergarten teachers occurs outside the higher education system. Those wishing to become kindergarten teachers begin their training at age 15, in the tenth year of schooling, and graduate at the end of 13 years of schooling, at age 18. The relevance of this in the light of the implications of PISA testing will become clear.

In the first PISA administration, in 2000, Austria was placed equal 11th out of 31 countries, and significantly ahead of Germany. In the 2003 assessment, Austria’s performance had deteriorated. It had gone down to equal 22nd place of 40 countries, and was tied with Germany
and Latvia. In PISA 2006, Austria was 16th out of 31 countries, below Germany, and not significantly different from the OECD average. The next reading assessment took place in 2009, with the results available in late 2010. The results of the PISA assessments are the stuff of front-page headline news in all the papers in Austria when they are released. Their impact is complex. I want to focus on just a few points.

First, the frame of reference for interpreting the significance of the results is not only universal but also local, which in the case of Austria means in particular, comparison with Germany. The 2000 results were modest, but were grounds for some satisfaction as they were better than Germany’s, which were widely seen as disastrous and triggered an immediate educational reform within Germany focusing to a significant degree on language development (Ehlich 2005). By 2003, not only had Austria’s overall rank fallen, but the relative advantage over Germany had been eroded; and by 2006, Germany was technically ahead of Austria, though still within the margin of measurement error. Thus, Austria’s ‘poor performance’ created a ‘discourse of deficit’ around the Austrian education system.

Second, there were two rival explanations in public discourse for this deficit: the early streaming of students in Austria, and the absence of comprehensive schooling (this is notably not true in Finland, which topped the league tables); and the presence of students from immigrant family backgrounds in the school system, depressing the results. The results thus had contrasting impacts within the discourses of education on the one hand, and within the discourse on immigration on the other. Within the discourse on education, the pattern of results played a role in strengthening the liberalising forces in education; within the discourse on immigration, it played the role of strengthening the conservative forces.

In terms of the school system, one notable feature of the results was that they revealed gross inequalities within the Austrian school system. The results of PISA 2000 revealed that Austria (like Germany but unlike many other countries) showed much greater variation in performance between schools than within schools, suggesting a greater inequality of opportunity as a function of the school attended. The situation worsened in the PISA 2003 results, with a decline in performance of low-achieving students. This phenomenon was commented on in the OECD report:

Countries with lower performance in 2003 compared with 2000 include Austria [et al.,] . . . For Austria [et al.,] . . . the decline is due to
a drop in performance among the 5th, 10th and 25th percentiles (the points under which 5, 10 and 25 per cent of the population score). In other words, in these countries the top end of the distribution performed similarly in 2000 and 2003 but the lower end of the distribution performed markedly lower, making the distribution wider. (OECD 2004: 284)

The data were used by parties and groups favouring greater comprehensive education (e.g. by the Greens) to support their arguments.3

The impact of the PISA results in terms of the education system has thus been arguably positive. Not so within the discourse on immigration. The PISA reports themselves invite an interpretation of the results in terms of the language abilities of the children of immigrants:

Not surprisingly, students not speaking the majority language at home perform much less well than those who do…and are much more likely to score among the lowest quarter of students in each country…which can affect a country’s average reading score significantly. In Austria…minority-language students are more than twice as likely as majority-language students to be in the bottom quarter of performance in each domain…The differences in mean reading scores between majority and minority-language students clearly affects countries’ overall performance in reading. As an illustration, if Germany were able to raise the mean scores of minority-language speakers to the same level as that of majority-language speakers, the national mean score in Germany would be above the OECD average…in mathematical literacy, rather than 10 points below it. (OECD 2001: 155–6)

The report goes beyond describing the effect on the national score of the competence in German of children of immigrant background; it offers a suggestion as to what to do about it, and this remedy emphasises working on German language support to the exclusion of the first language:

Concentrated help in the language of instruction could be one policy option for such students. These students may be academically disadvantaged either because they are immigrants entering a new education system or because they need to learn a new language in a home environment that may not facilitate this learning. In either case, they may be in need of special or extra attention. (p. 157)
The reaction of the education system in response to this is perhaps predictable, given the discourses into which the results have played. First, there is growing pressure on immigrant parents to promote their children’s German. For example, a new paragraph has been inserted into the law regulating kindergarten education, which states that ‘Parents are responsible for the language acquisition and development of their children’ (that is, the acquisition of German) and that ‘Children have to be able to follow instruction’ (i.e. in German). Perhaps in response to this, and also because of a perception of German as the key to educational and social success, the parents of children with migrant backgrounds try to speak German at home, and put pressure on the teachers to make the children use only German in the kindergarten.

Second, the PISA testing has led to the introduction of a new language testing regime involving kindergarten children. From May 2008, the German proficiency of all kindergarten-age children is assessed before they start school, using an observation-based instrument known as the BESK 4-5 (Beobachtungsbogen zur Erfassung der Sprachkompetenz) (Breit & Schneider 2008a), which is administered near end of the kindergarten year(s). Teachers, who are given only around 3–4 hours of training, observe the language behaviour of children in deliberately constructed play activities over the course of several days. A model of the language competence of monolingual children at 4:6 and 5:6 is used as the basis for the test construct. The linguistic focus of the test is on morphological, syntactic and lexical development (note that morphology is particularly complex in German). There is also some attention to pragmatics/speech acts (three items), while a single item assesses phonological development. An alternative to the BESK 4-5 is a shorter instrument, the SSFB 4-5 (Sprachstandsfeststellungsbogen) (Breit & Schneider 2008b), which is used to assess children more briefly over a few hours, before they enter kindergarten. On the basis of the tests, approximately 10 per cent of children with a German home language background are currently classified as ‘in need of an early language intervention programme’. In order to measure the language competence of children without a German home language background, a second observation-based assessment instrument is currently being developed for research purposes.

Thirdly, in order to implement these new policies, and because the focus of educational effort is on intervention so early in the educational sequence, there have been calls for greater professional development and support for kindergarten teachers, especially in relation to language behaviour and language development. As was pointed out earlier, the
training of kindergarten teachers currently takes place in the context of secondary education, between ages 14 and 18, and it is likely that may be reformed so that there is a more academic and a more uniform curriculum. Teacher education in primary and secondary education is also being affected; there is a new focus on language at all levels, including the importance of the mother tongue. In primary schools, new yearly standards have been introduced, which principals have the responsibility of enforcing; as a result, kindergarten and primary school teachers will be judged by their principals on the results their children achieve. The focus on morphology in the test instruments and policies, however, is arguably having an undesirably inhibiting effect. Remember that results in 4th grade determine the child’s chances of being directed into an academic stream from the 5th grade; however, the inhibiting effect of the focus on morphology in the 4th grade has meant that frequently 4th grade results are not as good as those achieved in the 3rd grade.

One final point to note is that there is also an interesting differential effect of the testing between children of immigrant and non-immigrant parents. Children of immigrant parents are less likely to attend kindergarten, for a number of reasons: kindergartens have traditionally not been free; in Vienna, where there is the greatest number of immigrants, there are few kindergarten places available; and there may be cultural reluctance to hand over the welfare of children to strangers from the majority culture. As a result, these children are more likely to get the short form of the test, as they are required to at least present to the kindergarten once for assessment, even if they do not subsequently attend. As a possible consequence of this differential, Vienna is now going to offer the kindergarten for free, in order to make sure that ‘no child will any longer have deficits in German’. An alternative, unacknowledged explanation for this development is the need to support ‘middle class’ parents in times of economic crisis, although it is interesting that the official justification is in terms of a response to the PISA results.

5. Mixed impact: the social function of tests as instances of Derrida’s shibboleth

The power of testing regimes such as PISA to initiate discourses of deficit cannot, therefore, be seen in simple black and white terms. In this final section of this chapter, I want to summarise the consequences of testing regimes such as PISA and to consider how they may be seen as in
fact a two-edged sword. Relevant here is Jacques Derrida’s engagement with the notion of the *shibboleth*, a word that functioned as a password in a military conflict in the Bible (*Judges* 12, 4–6). In the Biblical story, knowing the password gave protection; not knowing the password spelled death. The shibboleth is frequently used by writers on language testing (Spolsky 1995; Davies 1997; McNamara 2005) as a metaphor for the social/political function of tests. Derrida explores the significance of the idea of the shibboleth in several texts, in which he discusses its inherent ambiguity, what he would call its ‘undecidability’. On the one hand, it can be seen as a test for protection of the vulnerable:

A password, a… word transmitted like… a handclasp, a rallying cipher, a sign of membership and a political watchword (Derrida 2005: 27)

The PISA tests can be seen in this light, as yielding information which protects the vulnerable. We have seen that there is the potential for the information yielded by PISA tests to be used in the interests of justice. For example, it has revealed troubling inequalities in the Austrian school system, and increased the pressure for reform; it has led to a greater awareness of the role of language at all levels of schooling; it has provoked a greater understanding of bilingualism; and it has been suggested as the reason for making Vienna kindergartens free and thus more likely to be available to the children of immigrant families.

On the other hand, according to Derrida, the shibboleth is a test of not belonging – Derrida refers (1986/2005: 27) to ‘The terrifying ambiguity of the shibboleth, sign of belonging and threat of discrimination . . .’ And certainly we have seen the potential for discrimination as a result of the PISA process: it discriminates against immigrant students and against the language of immigrant families; and it militates against the possibility of a locally relevant language curriculum, and against educational values other than those favouring globalisation.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that language assessment, like language education more generally, is increasingly serving the goals of policy, and specifically of policies supporting a view of education as primarily preparing learners for participation in a globalised workforce. I have also argued that while measurement can be a mechanism for creating
and enforcing a ‘discourse of deficit’, and measurement itself constitutes a discourse (McNamara & Roever 2006), nevertheless the uses of measurement are always complex, and are interpretable within a variety of discourses – including, but not only, discourses of deficit. Research is needed on the impact of tests in different settings and the PISA test offers an interesting possibility here, as the same test (in translation) is used in different countries. A number of researchers are beginning to compare the impact in different countries. In Germany, the impact of PISA has been so pronounced that it has led to the use of a commonly used expression, the ‘PISA shock’, and has had widespread impacts on many areas of education, including not only the teaching of German but also of English as a foreign language. In contrast, in Finland, which tops the league tables of achievement on this test, the educational system has been comparatively little influenced by its performance. In Israel, the reversal of its relatively ‘poor’ performance has very recently become a central platform of educational policy, exercising a significant influence on the discussion of curriculum and assessment in the teaching of reading. In Flanders and the Netherlands, where arguably the same language is being tested (Flemish/Dutch), the results are interpreted within very different national contexts, with different implications for educational policy, particularly L1 education and multilingualism. In Flanders, plurilingualism in immigrant children is now discussed in terms of deficit; in the Netherlands, evidence from PISA has recently begun to dominate discussion of the literacy standards of Dutch students, in spite of contradictory findings from other, arguably more reliable, tests. In the Basque Country, the inclusion of Basque in the PISA reading tests and the results of students educated through the medium of Basque have had complex implications for the controversy over the use of Basque in education, potentially actually strengthening the role of Basque in relation to Spanish.

In conclusion, then, tests such as PISA, and tests more generally, do not have power alone; their power comes from the way in which they are inserted into prevailing social discourses, and this will affect the degree to which they help construct a ‘discourse of deficit’.

Notes

1. Austria has been chosen for a practical reason: in 2007–2009 the author spent seven months at the University of Vienna and had a chance to understand something of the Austrian context.
2. He had been drinking heavily in a gay bar, and was driving at great speed with a high blood alcohol reading when his car crashed.
3. In Vienna in early 2008 through a contact the author happened to have with a senior parliamentary member of the Austrian Greens he was invited to a meeting with the leader of the party and the party's education spokesperson to discuss what he knew about the psychometric and other qualities of the PISA tests, as they were relying on them to support their arguments in favour of reforming current educational policy.

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A Neo-colonial Farce? Discourses of Deficit in Australian Aboriginal Land Claim and Native Title Cases

Michael Walsh

1. Preamble

This chapter draws on the author’s experience (2008) in the highly interdiscursive arena of Australian Aboriginal land claim and native title cases. Among the discourses encountered are those of the judges, lawyers, Aboriginal claimants and witnesses, and a range of experts. My own direct experience has been as an anthropologist and linguist, but other experts, including archaeologists and historians, have played a prominent role in these proceedings. One site for discursive dispute is a perceived straying outside disciplinary borders: historians doing ethnography, ethnographers doing history, anthropologists daring to talk about language! Such ‘transgressions’ are framed in terms of deficit not only by the expert practitioners but especially by the judge and lawyers representing interests opposed to the claimants’. The discourse of experts is further found deficient in the eyes of the law because of accusations of bias. Meanwhile Aboriginal claimants and witnesses find themselves in a discursive environment which is foreign enough for the average Anglo-Australian. For them it presents enormous challenges, not just because of the cultural distance involved and a significantly different use of language but also because of fundamentally different views on the dissemination of traditional knowledge. A ‘discourse’ can, at a broader level, be situated in groups or professions each of which is socialised into that discourse, but at a finer level it can refer to sub-sets, or even individuals, whose discourse has been shaped by their own unique life histories. In practice, any interaction among these discourses involves interdiscursivity ranging from the ease of close familiars
through to the clash of opposing points of view. The latter introduces an array of deficits, here including ‘discursive trespass’, bias, misunderstandings of individual words or larger conceptual configurations, and deceit.

Given the range of participants in this arena there are numerous sites for discursive deficit. Some participants will characterise their practice in such a way as to exacerbate difference: lawyers (just give me the facts), historians (need to consider multiple interpretations), anthropologists (need to negotiate ethnographic fuzziness), etc. Judges and lawyers are suspicious of, and find fault with, expert discourses. There is discord among the lawyers, among the experts and also among the Aboriginal claimants and witnesses. Particularly in the context of native title cases, the proceedings have become protracted and problematic for the participants. Witnesses are subjected to such vicious cross-examination that quite experienced experts are abandoning the field, thus resulting in reduced quality in expert testimony. Aboriginal claimants and witnesses have been harassed and humiliated to the extent that many wonder whether the cost of participation has been worth the occasional rewards.

Given that the legislation under which Aboriginal people attempt to regain their ancestral territory has often been described as ‘beneficial’, the actual discursive practices frequently encountered in this arena are tantamount to a neo-colonial farce.

2. Background

Although the usual discursive practice at this point is to provide the reader with background to Australian Aboriginal land claim and native title cases, instead I will open with a very brief overview from an anthropologist with considerable experience in these arenas:

The Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 produces an event in which a European judge (to date all male) decides whether or not a set of Aboriginal people are who they say they are. The Aboriginal people in question must produce for examination and cross-examination an identity that meets the requirements of an Act produced by Europeans. The onus is on Aboriginal people to ‘prove’ their identity according to an alien means of determining truth and falsehood...Surely neither justice nor reason can be said to prevail under a system that offers ‘rights’ only in the context of its own power to create a discourse of authenticity, to require conformity to
that discourse, and to make final determinations of authenticity. It is difficult to conceive of a more cruel and elegant expression of cultural domination. (Rose 1996a: 35)

For further detail, see Neate (2003) and Walsh (2008), but for our purposes what is crucial is the nature of the discourses in these contexts. There are numerous sources for deficit or clashes from one participant to another, including: judge to judge, judge to lawyer, judge to anthropologist or other expert [henceforth: ‘expert’], judge to Aboriginal claimant, lawyer to judge, lawyer to lawyer, lawyer to expert, lawyer to Aboriginal claimant, expert to judge, expert to lawyer, expert to Aboriginal claimant, expert to expert, Aboriginal claimant to judge, Aboriginal claimant to lawyer, Aboriginal claimant to expert, Aboriginal claimant to Aboriginal claimant. Limitations of space preclude detailed exemplification of all these types, but land claims and native title proceedings provide numerous instances. Clearly the power relations and thus the potential for deficitising are not evenly distributed in this array of interactions, with judges occupying the zenith of the hierarchy.

3. A range of discourses

It is particularly in the context of appeals that judicial discourse is subject to detailed scrutiny by other judges. One instance of this involves the Yorta Yorta people whose traditional country straddles the border of New South Wales and Victoria. It is therefore a more settled part of Australia, in which demonstration of cultural continuity from the time of initial sovereignty in 1788 is likely to be more difficult than such demonstrations for remoter parts of northern Australia, which encountered any significant contact with outsiders at a much later date. As one experienced native title lawyer observes:

The *Yorta Yorta* case was the first native title claim decided in the ‘settled’ southeast of Australia and accordingly it transcended litigation, becoming a highly controversial and politicised ‘complex public dispute’. (Ritter 2004: 108)

The presiding judge, Justice Olney, came in for considerable criticism from many sources, but his decision was also appealed to the Full Court of the Federal Court of Australia and ultimately to the High Court of Australia. In the latter context,
The dissenting minority of Justices Gaudron and Kirby appositely noted that Justice Olney’s decision that ‘the tide of history had washed away any real acknowledgement by the Yorta Yorta people of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs’ was ‘a finding of fact... expressed in terms of a metaphor’, and, as every member of the High Court emphasised, it was that central ‘finding of fact’ that underscored the Court’s majority decision to reject the appeals. (Ritter 2004: 109–10)

So the appellate judges seem to be finding rhetorical fault with a fellow judge. Elsewhere it is common enough to find a judge directing negative commentary to a lawyer either directly during the proceedings or later in a judgement, e.g. ‘There was a wistful futility in this line of questioning, trying, as it did, to make Aboriginal Dreaming Tracks compatible with European boundaries’ (De Rose 82). And a common reaction of judges towards experts is suspicion. This stance is underpinned by surveys which show that magistrates reported that bias was encountered ‘often’ among expert witnesses about 20 per cent of the time, while for judges it was closer to 30 per cent. (Freckelton et al. 2001; see also Curthoys et al. 2008: 104–5; Wootten 2003: 27). Justice Sackville in the Yulara case was particularly critical of the expert witness for the claimants, Peter Sutton, concluding:

These criticisms of Professor Sutton’s approach do not justify rejecting all the opinions expressed in his Report. Some are supported by careful analyses of the available material and are consistent with other evidence. Other opinions, however, require careful scrutiny of the reasoning process underlying them, particularly where the opinions have been challenged in cross-examination. Not all command acceptance. (Jango 338)

This very measured account disguises considerable pointed criticism, not only in the judgement but in transcript, where the judge frequently questioned the technique and professionalism of someone who is probably not only the most experienced, but also the most conscientious, expert witness in this arena.

For some disciplines there is scepticism among judges about whether any special expertise is necessary: judges have opined that any educated person is perfectly capable of reading and assessing historical documents. Here is one judge’s view:
historians [deal] with material that I am perfectly capable of understanding myself. Not because I’m brighter or as bright…as the historian, it’s just that there is nothing…particularly conceptually difficult about the issues the historian is addressing. (Curthoys et al. 2008: 90)

Such scepticism of course undermines the credibility of the expert historian witness before a word is said.

Of course, judges have commented on the evidence of Aboriginal claimants. In the Kenbi land claim, involving land near Darwin, Justice Olney suggested to one witness: ‘you have made up your own rules as you have gone along’ (Australia 1990: 2430; see Walsh 1994: 229–30 for more detail). Here one might have expected Aboriginal witnesses to be circumspect – when talking about restricted information. I believe it was not entirely coincidental that the witness being criticised did not fit the stereotype of a traditional Aboriginal person who would be more bush-oriented, non-literate, and harder to comprehend. By contrast, the witness under attack was literate, highly articulate, and engaging in a lifestyle superficially similar to a middle-class suburbanite. I have never witnessed a more bush-oriented Aboriginal person being challenged in this way over reticence about restricted information.

Recalling the chillingly polite discourse of Justice Sackville about an expert witness, another judge first suggests that an Aboriginal witness is a liar, before softening the full impact of such a description. In a case involving a cattle station in the far north-west of South Australia, Justice O’Loughlin said: ‘I have concluded that Peter deliberately lied when he gave his evidence’ (De Rose 85). But then mused:

If Peter De Rose [Aboriginal witness] said those things to Mr Elliott [anthropologist for the claimants], the most obvious explanation is that he believed them to be true and I so find. That means one of two things. (De Rose 85)

Either the witness lacked the knowledge when he was interviewed earlier or the rules had changed in a mere six years or so. Of course it’s nice to be so certain: ‘That means one of two things’. But it is not so simple, as an experienced anthropologist suggests:

It seems to me that the law and anthropology differ very greatly in their discourse…I expect one could characterize the law as having
the function of bringing disputes to an end. Whereas it seems to me anthropology, its tradition as with other academic disciplines, is to analyse, problematise, interpret, and debate issues rather than settle them once and for all. In fact, we question each other’s work constantly and that’s the strength of the tradition. . . . the courts are actually making decisions of a kind that anthropologists would never presume to make, because they recognise that the social world is in flux. (Cowlishaw 1994: 53) [my emphasis]

Occasionally, one encounters a judge who has pondered the discourse of Aboriginal people at some length: for instance, an answer from an Aboriginal witness, ‘I don’t know’, can be interpreted in at least six different ways (Neate 2003: 23, quoting Gray 1995). Nevertheless, in the Yulara case Justice Sackville commented on an Aboriginal witness’s ‘difficulty of communication’ when a supposedly simple question had been put to him in cross-examination:

I did not attribute Mr Uluru’s apparent unresponsiveness, at the time his evidence was given, to his unwillingness to co-operate with the questioner. Rather, I thought that the answer reflected his imperfect understanding of the question asked or, perhaps, a difficulty in translating his response adequately. (Jango 295)

Chances are it is a problem of anticipated shared knowledge which permits of discursive parsimony, as when, for instance, two close associates meet on a Monday morning and one says: ‘We won!’ Some Aboriginal witnesses have lived pretty much their entire lives in an intimate society and may have rarely, if ever, ventured beyond 50 kilometres from their home community. Such witnesses come to expect deep shared knowledge among interlocutors and perhaps transfer that expectation to a total stranger. The cross-examining barrister is no fool, indeed some are highly experienced and well-regarded lawyers. The barrister conducting Examination in Chief encounters fewer problems because he has anthropologists filling in the missing discursive links should he or she be unaware of them. But in the adversarial system this enriched contextualisation is not broadcast to the court. While the cross-examiner may have his/her own anthropologist/researcher advising, the depth of detail they can offer will be quite meagre in comparison. Judges perceive deficit in the discourse of fellow judges but more often they see deficit in the discourse of lawyers (e.g. ineffectual questioning
of witnesses), in the discourse of expert witnesses (e.g. bias, their reasoning process or whether they really have any special expertise), and in the discourse of Aboriginal witnesses (less than ‘traditional’, lack of candour or understanding).

Lawyers, too, can be seen as deficient in their discourse. Not surprisingly, lawyers are among those attacking the legal process:

… the dominant political and legal system has yet to find a language and means of according any significant recognition to indigenous systems of law, regulation and belief which does not operate to appropriate those systems of law, regulation and belief. (Tehan 1996: 10)

People are not born with lawyerly discourse: it is a matter of socialisation. But how effective is this socialisation as applied to land claims and native title cases? In my experience, lawyers for the claimants, when questioning those claimants, i.e. conducting Examination in Chief, are inclined to ask a series of leading questions eliciting monosyllabic answers from Aboriginal witnesses. This can reduce the quality of their evidence so that some will see their discourse as deficient. So why don’t the lawyers pose more open-ended questions? It would seem that it is a matter of control: they don’t want the witness blurting out something unexpected! In this and other ways (e.g. Cooke 2002: 24–5) lawyers frame their discourse so as to control Aboriginal evidence. From my point of view, this not only renders their discourse as deficient but also creates deficit in the discourse of Aboriginal witnesses from their own perspective as well from the perspective of the court and the novice observer.

Expert discourse has also been perceived as deficient. A number of expert commentators have complained about shortcomings in the understanding of linguistic matters by lawyers and judges. In reference to the Croker Island sea claim, Evans complains about inattention to the significant differences in Aboriginal English:

The need for consciousness raising by linguists here is complicated by a feeling, among the legal profession as among the general public, that such extra commentary is unnecessary, whereas it is obvious in the case of interpretation from a language like Iwaidja, Arrernte or Kayardild. This does not diminish the seriousness of the problem, and I do not believe the native title process will lead to equitable legal judgments until it is solved. (2002: 94)
This raises the issue of some lawyers concluding that Aboriginal languages are deficient because they lack the sophistication to convey supposedly simple notions.

One former judge\(^7\) has sympathised with the considerable difficulties thrown up by the process and, in particular, draws attention to the invidious position anthropologists may find themselves in:

Anthropologists are often caught in the middle, trying to mediate between mutually unintelligible worlds, and painfully aware that the deck is so stacked that telling the truth may well mean the defeat of the claim. (Wootten 2003: 36)

A number of anthropologists have accused fellow anthropologists of falling prey to such temptations:

Leaving aside the possibility that withholding tangible evidence may have been a ruse to conceal the glaring absence of any objects, it could be rated a keenly calculated, utilitarian strategy, almost an invention in the sense of a vast exaggeration of a traditional religious feature; an invention made with the purpose, in the face of the importance of the context and the court's dignity, spectacularly to underline the Aboriginality of the claim and emphasise its spiritual autonomy \textit{vis-à-vis} the powerful Western legal system. Thus, two potent semiotic acts both representing power in their respective cultural setting were impressively juxtaposed: indigenous concealment of religious matter taken to the extreme versus the hegemonic canon of verification and demand for transparency of evidence in matters of jurisprudence. (Kolig 2003: 215, see also p. 224 of the same work)

This is the elephant in the room! There are a number of cases in which experts have accused each other of ‘making it up’ or have been so accused by others (see, for example, Brunton 1996; Maddock 1989; Tonkinson 1997; Weiner 2002). And this can place experts in a quandary:

An abstract scenario: what if the anthropologist is morally certain that the primary materials for a particular case are wishful thinking and imagination?…One's skepticism can range from a sense that there is some fundamental dishonesty to a relatively insignificant sense that some details just do not add up. The severity of one's skepticism must have a strong bearing on one's actions, but in any
case one needs to bear in mind that we are bound to speak truthfully in the witness box; there is no ambiguity about that. What if our truthful words are in conflict with the claimant’s evidence? (Rose 1995: 48)

In fact there is some ambiguity about speaking truthfully: an expert witness may give an answer which is factually accurate but less expansive than it might have been. Particularly under hostile cross-examination, the expert witness might adopt the stance: it’s up to the barrister and/or judge to push me harder for detail if they are not sufficiently satisfied.

Given the dismissive approach towards history from at least some members of the legal profession (but see Ritter 2004), it is instructive to see how historians have fared. Referring to a 90-page affidavit concerning the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, a very experienced historian and expert witness, Peter Read, recalls:

The lawyers were uneasy at my use of the word ‘Argument’ at the beginning of each section. They did not seem to understand the long and difficult processes by which historians arrive at historical judgements. ‘It is for us to argue’, I was told, ‘and for you to provide the historical facts’. (2002: 54)

However, Read was surprised when the affidavit was not presented to the court and then understandably annoyed when told that it was ‘not considered good enough’ (Read 2002: 55), and concluded that the lawyers had not known what to expect and were sceptical about the relevance of what was advanced.

Another experienced historian complains:

Basically, the expert witness can be subjected to all sorts of ridicule and behaviour devoid of the normal respect demonstrated for fellow human beings in most situations…I believe the expert witness becomes entrapped as part of the ‘carceral continuum’ and, as much as one is ‘not in the dock’, one feels to be the accused. Accused of what? Malpractice as an historian by a non-historian? Or bias and thinking in black-and-white as seems to be the aim of the ‘logic’ games of cross-examination. (Curthoys et al. 2008: 82, quoting from an interview with historian, Ann McGrath)

In the context of native title cases there has been a tendency for expert witnesses to withdraw from the process. One impetus is ‘scarification’: people get tired of being a punch bag. But there is also
the issue of liability: professional indemnity insurance can price some experts out of the ‘market’. And there is the catch-22 for experts – either one collects the material in unseemly haste (e.g. McGrath 2003a, especially pp. 240–1) and then feels insecure about the depth and quality of the background information, or one acquires the background over an extended period, thereby forming close relationships with the Aboriginal claimants and further opening oneself up to accusations of partisanship.

More generally, one judge has commented on withdrawal by experts through perceived unfairness:

...a lot of highly qualified people were not prepared to become involved in giving evidence in the adversary process. They didn’t see it as fair, they didn’t see it as aimed at identifying in any genuine way what it was that the expert had to contribute to the case. They saw it as a contest between winners and losers. And so many of the professional bodies were telling me that they just weren’t prepared to become involved. (McLellan, quoted in Cross 2009: 263)

By implication, at least, the discourse of experts has been seen as deficient in that it has been ignored, discarded or ridiculed. Some experts may see their own discourse as deficient as they wrestle with ‘truth’, and some experts find fault with each other. An ultimate deficit in expert testimony is widespread withdrawal of the most knowledgeable and experienced.

The discourse of Aboriginal witnesses provides a number of sites for perceived deficit (see Walsh 2008). For instance, an Aboriginal woman and Yorta Yorta claimant is forthright in her view that a judge’s discourse is deficient:

In Olney’s deliberations and final determination he chose the writings of an ethnocentric, land-grabbing, self-proclaimed expert who wrote his memoirs after leaving Yorta Yorta country some 40 years later, as his primary source, even though Curr was ridiculed by all scholars and experts of the day. Olney dismissed the claimants’ own self recognition and oral history as not being reliable, not as reliable as the written word, and full of embellishment. This is an antiquated, backward notion of Indigenous peoples. (Morgan 2009)

In another case we find considerable animosity from Aboriginal claimant to Aboriginal claimant:
The ‘dissident women’ showed great courage and honesty. They wanted to tell the truth about their history and culture, and to counter what they saw as degrading representations of their past. They were ostracised and subjected to death threats, and a sorceress from Central Australia was brought down to Adelaide – apparently on public money – in order to intimidate them. (Brunton 1996: 6)

Although Aboriginal women have made strenuous efforts to make their voices heard (e.g. Bell 1984–5), this has continued to be a challenge:

This written record of land claims is a product not only of the centrality of men in the professions that prepare and present claims; it also stands as testimony to a tunnel vision approach on the part of land councils which asserts that as long as people get their land it does not matter who gives evidence. In this view, gender equity appears to be classed as an optional extra that land councils simply cannot afford. And as long as male centrality is reproduced, and gender equity defined as an optional extra, that is how claims will continue to be presented. (Rose 1996b: 189)

Usually judges are male, leading some to suggest that male and female Aboriginal Land Commissioners hear land claims together. Although less weight has often been given to evidence from Aboriginal women, it seems that their testimony has the potential to enrich both its quality and quantity in that ‘there was virtually an extra upper generation of women in every family throughout the claimant group’ (Ketley 2000: 58). Although they enriched the depth and extent of genealogical information, this can be regarded as restricted (Rose 1994: 6). But revelations of ‘women’s business’ [secret/sacred and ceremonial material] poses even greater challenges: ‘... the Miriuwong and Gajerrong women were faced with a dilemma that to effectively prove the existence of their Law, they must breach it’ (Ketley 2000: 62).

Even a remedy may be questioned:

Significantly, Lee J went further than any of the NT Land Rights Commissioners in ordering that all records of the restricted evidence (including transcript, computer disk and tape) be delivered up to the applicants’ solicitors for destruction at the conclusion of the litigation. This is to be preferred to the practice that has developed in land rights hearings, where exhibits and transcripts are stored in the Australian Archives in Darwin. (Ketley 2000: 65)
One wonders whether the applicants’ descendants might have preferred this part of their heritage to be preserved rather than destroyed.

The Yorta Yorta case stirred up debates about the value of written over oral material in land claim and native title cases (see also Walsh 1994). For instance, Pitty refers to the judge’s greater reliance on the written work of an early settler, E. M. Curr, despite his work being widely discredited (1999: 54):

The colonial caricature of Yorta Yorta custom reconstructed by Curr forms an essential core of Justice Olney’s judgement, without which his claim that traditional laws and customs had ‘expired’ by 1881 (before Curr’s book was published) would have no reference point.

Simply put, Justice Olney did not use the same standard of proof when evaluating written as opposed to oral evidence. (1999: 61)

An historian, well-versed in Aboriginal land matters, complains of the privileging of documentary sources over oral history:

The implications and consequences were disturbing. Aborigines would inevitably be rendered passive, for it is extremely difficult to portray a group as actors when their words are inadmissible. It was improper, in my view, for Australian history to be told exclusively from a European perspective, but totally inappropriate in an Aboriginal land claim. (McGrath 2003b: 255)

Nevertheless, there have been challenges by counsel for respondents to exclude numerous documents relating to the historical record (Curthoys et al. 2008: 98). This is an instance where the adversarial process has the potential to reduce the quantity if not the quality of information available to a judge.

Fieldnotes can be a problem in a number of ways. A person carrying out fieldwork purely for a land claim must be conscious that anything that is recorded can be used against the claimants as well as the researcher. But if the fieldnotes pre-date the promulgation of the relevant Acts then they are on the one hand ‘innocent’ of the process but on the other hand vulnerable for their alleged deficiencies (lack
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of detail, inconsistency and disorganisation). Here is an example of a witness being challenged over notes used in the preparation of the claimants’ case:

Mr Pauling took Professor Sutton to each of those pages and invited him to identify the entries that supported the matters recorded at par 198 of the Sutton Report. At the outset of this exercise Professor Sutton somewhat defensively volunteered the remark that the proposition in the Report:

‘is not in a sense a simple reflection of every note that is referred to in the footnotes. The material in the footnotes cumulatively adds up to a gradually pieced together picture of the system’.

Scrutiny of the notes cited in the relevant footnote provides scant support for the conclusion that the notes recorded conversations in which traditional law was the focus of assertions of rights in land. Many of the notes (as one might expect) are cryptic and therefore difficult to interpret. But on their face the words recorded do not appear to justify the proposition that the informants ‘continually emphasised Aboriginal Law as the foundation of rights in country’. (Yulara 336)

To talk of the supposed defensiveness of the expert is ingenuous. I doubt that the notes taken down by a lawyer or by a judge would stand up to close scrutiny.

We turn now to a (largely) suppressed discourse: anthropological accounts are shaped by the land claims process rather than being a dispassionate review of the ‘ethnographic facts’:

…certain members of a group constituted as a single entity for the purposes of a land claim in 1980 never in fact reflected social reality, but that the pairing of the two groups had been initiated by anthropologists working for the land claim some years earlier. He argued that while his client’s group had gone along with it at the time on legal advice they now wished to claim their separate identity: ‘This pairing of [the two groups]… was initiated by anthropologists who prepared documents for the land claim and is an artifact not of everyday life and living but of the processes that have been brought into existence by the implementation of the 1976 Act’. (Sansom 1983: 3, quoted in Ritchie 1999: 267)
While this particular situation may be viewed as anthropologists shaping reality, there are situations in which the land claims process has stimulated a different approach from Aboriginal claimants themselves. However, there is now a trail of evidence including transcribed testimony and written documents that fixes in amber a particular view of the world that otherwise would have continued to be dynamic and evolving. It is not that people are now making it up opportunistically – or at least not necessarily so – instead it is a reflection of a complex array of interactions which can be viewed in distinct ways both within and without the community. Simply put, people may identify themselves in a variety of ways according to context and changing circumstances. Nevertheless O’Loughlin J in De Rose struggled with such an ‘exotic’ idea (Walsh 2008).

Of course there need not be just one version of the ‘facts’. Wolfe, referring to the adoption by at least some anthropologists of ‘a radical anthropological orthodoxy’ in land claims and native title proceedings, observes: ‘the idiom’s selection is not an internal anthropological matter’ (1999: 178); instead, Anthropology is ‘a discourse appropriated into state practice’ (1999:177).

This emphasis on some kind of pre-contact, idealised state of affairs is part of what Wolfe (1999: 179) refers to as ‘repressive authenticity’ whereby there must be a sharp divide between ‘authentic’, full-blood traditional Aborigines with no mixtures: the ‘half-caste menace’ to be resolved by an orderly progression to quadroon to octoroon and eventually to what has been referred to as ‘selective amnesia’.

Here we have seen a number of discursive clashes. The discourse of Aborigines may be subordinated to the needs of the land claim process, where anthropologists in effect are finding their unadorned discourse deficient so they re-shape it to make a fancied accommodation to the (quasi-) legal discourse of the land claims process. However, such discourses may be viewed as deficient by Aborigines (that’s not what we really said), by the legal profession (they’re making it up and it does not closely match the Aboriginal testimony), and even by fellow anthropologists:

From the perspective of anthropologists, the requirement that they mould their accounts of Aboriginal connections to traditional country into a form which is in accordance with, and intelligible to native title law can be seen as affronting core principles of anthropological social enquiry. (Martin 2004: 39)
Aboriginal people are expected to have knowledge of the system as a whole that they can make explicit on demand. However if you were to quiz the average Anglo-Australian on the system of local government within which they reside one would usually find that they have a hazy and partial knowledge of the system. Although there is a place where the crucial knowledge is centralised and systematised, the knowledge in the community is distributed and partial, so that plucking people, even senior and well-educated, out of the community and expecting them to produce on demand a comprehensive, coherent account of the system as a whole is a fool’s errand. Nevertheless judges and lawyers are wont to expect this and purport to be amazed by this supposed discursive deficit.

The basic point here however is that Aboriginal people of a more or less traditional cast of mind do not usually communicate overtly in terms of complete paradigms or lists or in terms of objectified and comprehensive analytical schemes. At one point Judy Trigger, when asked about reasons why someone is ngurraritja [roughly, ‘traditional owner’], effectively said that ngurraritja is ngurraritja ([Jango] T1857–1858). There is no Aboriginal tradition of unpacking such complex concepts for the instant benefit of newcomers. Their own usage of complex social or religious concepts is learned gradually over years, mostly from shreds and patches. The anthropological method is to observe many uses of such terms and related ones and piece the jigsaw together so as to arrive at a systemic analysis. Verbally formulated ‘native models’ are grist for the mill of such analyses, but do not determine them. This is possibly an area where attitudes within legal circles may differ from scientific ones. (Sutton 2007:176)

Nevertheless, a judge may roundly criticise an expert witness for these discursive ‘discrepancies’, as in:

Unfortunately, I have come to the opinion that Mr Elliot became too close to the claimants and their cause; he failed to exhibit the objectivity and neutrality that is required of a expert who is giving evidence before the court. Rather, he seemed – too often – to be an advocate for the applicants. (De Rose 352)

Many judges in land claims and native title cases have commented that they value documentary background and expert evidence, but
ultimately the primary material they rely on must come from the Aboriginal witnesses:

The onus is upon the claimants, if they wish to establish their right to a determination of native title, to give the evidence that will establish that right. They had the opportunity to do that in closed session but they failed to do so. Oblique references, serve no useful purpose. (De Rose 342)

Against this is an apparently irreconcilable alternative:

The musical metaphor that seems most apt here is jazz, central elements of which may sound like disorder to some listeners coming to it from the outside. Insiders hear the musical sub-orders of syncopation, improvisation and deliberate variations from harmony consisting of dissonances cast against the main melodic line. What is notable about much ‘disorder’, in my field experience, is its intentionality. (Sutton 2003: 166)

In sum, Aboriginal people may see judges, lawyers and experts as deficient in their discourse. Their own discourse may be challenged in terms of gender, knowledge management and traditionality. Ironically, the legal process may at times privilege the written over the oral to the detriment of the claimants, but may also find fault with them in oral or written mode. And written documents that might have assisted the court are rejected – creating a knowledge deficit.

4. Practical consequences

It should be clear that the discourses of the Law, Aboriginal witnesses and expert witnesses are at odds. Aboriginal witnesses may be framed in legal discourse as being vague, unknowledgeable, less than traditional or just plain liars. Expert witnesses are depicted as partisan, irrelevant, scarcely necessary. Regrettably, it is the legal discourse that holds sway in this environment and this can have significant consequences. We have yet to see an extended account which is ‘an interrogation of the interface of law and language, of rhetoric, and the semiotics of legal discourse’ (Luker 2006: v). Expert witnesses are subjected to vicious cross-examination and have their professional reputations impugned. Aboriginal witnesses are also vigorously questioned, humiliated and become disheartened when they do not win back their land even after
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exposing knowledge that they would much rather have kept private. Even the opportunity to have their day in court and present, cathartic ally, harrowing tales of prejudice, dispossession from land, separation from family and the consequent dysfunctional life passage, can be denied them because of the manner in which the legal process conducts its discursive practice.

5. Envoi

So, given the range of discursive difficulties encountered in land claim and native title cases in Australia, what can be done? One step in the direction of an answer is given here:

It did not have to be like this. Australia is not bound to mean spiritedly hold its Indigenous people to the limited legal rights that ingenious lawyers can find surviving after 200 hundred [sic] years of/trampling on them. We seem to have forgotten that it is open to us be [sic] generous and creative. There are plenty of precedents for creating special laws and special tribunals for issues that are unsuitable for the courts. (Wootten 2003: 36–7)

Notes

1. I have adopted this expression from Cowlishaw (1999: 19–20), in a section on ‘The Meeting’: ‘The meeting to clarify the legal position and prepare for the court case was like an episode in a neo-/colonial farce’.
2. Unlike the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory), for the Native Title Act one must show continuity in the tradition through which connection to country by the putative land-owning group frames its native title from the present back to the time of the establishment of British sovereignty over the land in question.
4. This is ‘the Yulara case’, or Jango, short for Johnny Jango & Ors v Northern Territory of Australia & Ors [2006], FCA 318.
5. De Rose v South Australia [2002], FCA 1342 (1 November 2002).
7. Hal Wootten has been a justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, a legal academic and someone very active in cases dealing with Aboriginal issues.
8. Bern & Larbalestier (1985), anthropologists in the Limmen Bight case disagreed with clients’ instructions, some of whom wanted only patrilineal descendants included as traditional owners while the experts claimed – based on the evidence – that children of women of the patriline should also be included.

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