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**Theoretical issues in the identification of counter-narratives:**

**Response to commentaries**

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I would like to thank the three commentators for their responses to my article (Jones 2002) and for engaging with it in such thoughtful and thought-provoking ways. The three commentators have obviously seen quite different things in the data and in my analysis of it. Clearly the data itself is rich and generates a variety of responses in readers. The differences between the commentaries also demonstrates the many different ways in which researchers work. The commentators are drawing on different academic repertoires to produce unique and occasioned responses to my article which I hope will help other readers to place my work in relation to other traditions. My own response in this article is part of this project. I found the responses very stimulating, especially where they touch on major debates about epistemology and methodology which I am still working through myself. There is not space here to reply in detail to the wide range of comments or to respond to all the criticisms of my analysis. Instead I focus on some major theoretical issues which underlie questions about how counter-narratives can be identified in data.

### **Emic and etic analysis**

Both Spreckels (2002) and Korobov (2002) are dissatisfied with some aspects of my analysis in relation to the degree to which analysis must be demonstrably grounded in the immediate data. Conversation analysis and other discursive traditions which are strongly influenced by it, such as Edwards & Potter (1992), limit analytic attention to those things which are treated as relevant by participants in a particular extract. Clearly I do not do this in either my emic or etic sections. By stating that my own work was not conversation analytic, I meant to signal that I was not proceeding with a conversation analytic understanding of the proper way to treat data. On reflection, my use of the word 'emic' may have been misleading if readers inferred

from it that I was aiming to follow conversation analytic principles in my emic section. This was not what I intended to imply, for theoretical reasons which I discuss below. I meant simply to make a distinction between counter-narratives which are treated as such by participants and those which the analyst identifies in the absence of any immediate orientation by the participants. I was concerned to refute any simplistic notion that the 'asexual older people' storyline was always the dominant cultural storyline and that the 'liberal' storyline was always a counter-narrative. My distinction between emic and etic styles of analysis was focused around different ways in which the two different storylines might be identified, not on different theoretical stances.

### **Theoretical positions**

As Korobov correctly identifies, I am drawing on Wetherell's (1998) reply to Schegloff (1997) to try to synthesise an approach that both pays attention to the locally occasioned nature of narratives and also sets these narratives in their broader historical and cultural location. Such an approach is consonant with other work which is often described as critical discursive psychology (such as Edley 2001; Edley & Wetherell 1997; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell & Phoenix 2002; Wetherell & Edley 1998). However, while work in this tradition may sometimes use micro-analytic *methods*, it does not accept conversation analytic *theory* about the desirability or even the possibility of limiting analysis to those things which are oriented to by participants (in the way further argued by Schegloff 1998). Instead, I consider analysis to necessarily involve the analyst introducing their own categories and would argue that even conversation analysts import their own categories when they talk about phenomena such as turn taking, membership categorisation devices, participants'

orientations, epistemic hierarchies, contrast structures, three-part lists and so on, when these are not participants' concerns. There is nothing improper in the use of such analyst's categories but I do not accept that there is an ontological difference between the categories used by conversation analysts and those used by critical discursive psychologists.

This is part of a much wider epistemological and methodological debate between discourse analysts working within different traditions, as usefully summarised in Wetherell (2001a). I recognise that I am unlikely to convince readers coming from traditions which are strongly influenced by conversation analytic theory since fundamentally different views are typically held of such major issues as; the role of politics in research, the status of the data, what counts as relevant context, the nature of discourse and the status of analyst's findings. These issues are inter-linked and implicated in one another but I focus here on one issue which was particularly apparent to me as I read the commentaries. Spreckels and Korobov seem to be drawing on a particular understanding of what sort of contextual and background information it is permissible to use in analysis. This seems to be consonant with conversation analysis and some forms of discursive psychology which limit analysis to those things which participants themselves treat as relevant.

In contrast, those discursive approaches which are more influenced by post-structuralism theorise context differently which means that the border between participants' orientations and analyst's knowledge becomes less clear. I find Wetherell's (1998: 393 & 403; 2001a: 389) extension of Laclau's metaphor of society as an argumentative fabric a particularly useful way of thinking about the relationship between extracts from transcripts and broader cultural phenomena. She argues that taking a broad definition of discourse as human meaning-making and thinking of

society as an argumentative fabric enables the analyst to have a broader definition of what is relevant and oriented to by participants. If society is imagined as a piece of fabric, extracts from transcripts can be seen as a part of the fabric which has had a circle drawn on it with a pen. Drawing the circle (selecting a piece of transcript for analysis) creates a boundary and an object of study. However, if as analysts we are more interested in modes of representation than in the nature and sequence of talk, we remain interested in the threads that make up the fabric and continue either side of the circle. Thus, the necessarily arbitrary boundary becomes less important and it is possible to define participants' orientations more widely to include the broader argumentative structure of their particular utterances. Participants' orientations remain very important but they need not be understood in a narrow sense as those things which are evident in the immediate piece of transcript. Wetherell (1998) also argues for paying attention to phenomena such as implicit heteronormativity, silences and absences in data. These are necessarily not in the data as participants' concerns in the way understood by conversation analysis but they are in the data in that the analyst, by drawing on their knowledge of other ways in which it could have been talked about, can see that things have been framed in a particular way.

So, for example, Korobov argues that Lesley does not make age relevant or occasion age in the excerpt which I present. He is quite right that she does not do so in this excerpt. However, if we are interested in the argumentative threads which are part of the excerpt, what counts as making age relevant or occasioning it might be more inclusively defined. In other places in the interview Lesley does position herself as an older woman and treats age as relevant. This begs the question: how long does a relevancy last? If someone positions themselves as an older woman at line one of a transcript, where does this positioning cease to apply? You might even argue that

since Lesley had been recruited to take part in an interview about older women's experiences of intimate relationships, age is implicitly relevant throughout the interview. It is not always the topic of our conversation but it is one of the ongoing argumentative threads of the interaction. I included this extract in the emic section because she does clearly orient to telling a counter-narrative, even though, as Korobov and I agree, it is not clear what narrative she is countering. A more inclusive definition of participants' orientations such as this is not without its difficulties, particularly the risk of straying too far from the data. Nevertheless, I consider the risk worthwhile for the accompanying benefits of enabling attention to wider historical and cultural contexts.

### **The benefits of microanalysis**

However, there are also many benefits to focusing on the turn-by-turn construction of talk in a microanalytic way. I am indebted to Korobov for pointing out the tentativeness in Liz's resistance to the 'asexual older people' storyline. Korobov also comments on Win and Rebecca's evaluations of the nurse teaching Win to masturbate and points out that there is more than simple neutrality going on in this extract. It is indeed important to note that while we are using some cautious phrases, we are also positioning ourselves as more sensitive than other people. However, I do want to resist any implication that what is *really* going on is that we are not being neutral because this seems to imply that there is a real event beyond the discourse which is accessible to analysis. Rather I want to say that we are doing both things - 'doing being neutral' and positioning ourselves in opposition to insensitive others. This then raises the further question of what interactional purpose is served by this layered talk that attends both to neutrality and to our own status as knowing better

than other people. It seems highly pertinent that this occurs when Win is talking about something which could be cast as the sexual abuse of children, as she makes relevant with her use of the word 'abuse'. To draw in some of the argumentative threads beyond the circle of the extract, in the current climate of concern about 'paedophilia' in the UK it may be particularly important to frame her story in a way that wards off the accusation that she is defending child sexual abuse. By positioning ourselves as both detached observers and also as people who know better than most people, we simultaneously protect ourselves from accusations of defending child sexual abuse and enable this dangerous narrative. Thus, I might add to my original analysis that some counter-narratives are particularly dangerous to tell and that these are likely to be marked in the text with such cautious and hedging remarks.

### **Co-construction**

Another important point, which all three commentators raise and which was implicit but perhaps insufficiently spelt out in my article, is the degree to which the accounts are co-constructed. Co-construction occurs at both micro and macro levels. As McLean Taylor (2002) emphasises, by setting up these interviews in the way that I did I created a space which allowed interviewees more scope for telling counter-narratives than many other everyday contexts. My influence on the sort of stories that were told is significant at this level. It is also significant at a much more micro level. However, my involvement at this level is far from 'unwilling' as Spreckels claims. I do not theorise interviews to be about gaining as pure as possible access to pre-existing thought, stories or experiences. I make no claims at all that this is the same account that the person would have created had I interacted with them in a different way. As I state in the Abstract of my article, I understand narratives to be "made



moment-by-moment in the interaction between parties drawing on available cultural resources". I theorise my own role in responding, encouraging and suggesting new avenues of talk to be an inevitable part of the creation of the narratives. I want to strongly resist the words 'collusion' (Korobov) and 'manipulative' (Spreckels) to describe my part in the creation of the narratives since this implies a realist notion that my role is improper and that an interviewer could or should be detached and uninvolved in the interview process. I am myself a member of the culture that I am analysing so I am drawing on the same publicly available ways of understanding older people's sexual experiences as those that I describe. It is therefore not surprising that I myself draw on the liberal storyline within the interviews when it suits the action orientation of my talk which includes such activities as eliciting narratives and demonstrating interest. This is not to say that demonstrating the extent to which accounts are collaboratively worked up cannot be a valid form of analysis, and Korobov's analysis is very useful in this respect. However, my focus of interest in this article was not on the detail of how the accounts came to be produced in the way that they were, but on speakers' use of more widely available cultural resources.<sup>1</sup>

### **What counts as discourse analysis?**

Korobov concludes his article with a challenge that demands a response: "if one is going to make claims about the data when there is not evidence *in the data* for those claims, then it begs the question: why even do *discourse* analysis?" It depends, of course, on what you mean by evidence in the data. If you accept the broader idea of context described above, then the question of what is evident in the data is more complicated, as I have discussed. The issue of what makes academic work discursive is an important one and answers are likely to be coloured by an individual's

theoretical position. There is certainly a cluster of features that tend to be evident in discursive work, including a particular concern with tying analysis relatively closely to presented data. However, following Potter & Wetherell (1987) and Wetherell (2001b), I consider the crucial feature to be that discursive approaches have a theory of language which understands it as constitutive not representational. That is to say, analysis is not about trying to discover pre-existing cognition, actions or intentions beyond the words that are used. Rather, analysis is about studying how different ways of talking about something construct the world differently. By imagining alternative ways in which a narrative could have been formulated, analysts can begin to understand the particular interactional work undertaken by the narrative which was actually produced. Such analysis often entails relatively close study of data in order to explicate how things come to be said in the way that they are. But the feature that marks work as discursive, I argue, is not microanalysis but the theorisation of language as constituting the world.

In terms of older women's narratives about sexual experiences in later life, looking at participants' orientations to telling counter-narratives means that simplistic assumptions that the 'liberal' storyline is always a counter-narrative can be avoided. Simultaneously, attention to the broader argumentative threads of accounts means that the analyst can take account of regularities across wider bodies of discourse which mean that some storylines are relatively privileged, such as the 'asexual older people' storyline. These two approaches do not always sit comfortably together but both are necessary if we are to produce analysis which is sensitive to both the locally occasioned nature of talk and the wider cultural setting in which it occurs.

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<sup>1</sup> The level of transcription is also a methodological choice which has analytic implications (Taylor, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.166). What is appropriate depends upon the analytic focus of the work - since my focus was on broader cultural resources rather than on turn-by-turn interaction, I chose a relatively simple transcription scheme. More detailed transcripts greatly reduce readability, especially for readers who are not familiar with their technical notation.