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## **Post-truth Politics and Discursive Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues for the potential of discursive psychology (DP) in the study of post-truth politics. Work produced outside of psychology is considered, particularly from political science and international relations, which have made a promising start. Providing an overview of this body of research, I argue for their respective strengths and weaknesses. The literature so far tends to work with the notion that truth and emotion are matters that are, or at least should be, distinguishable. Instead, I argue that, rather than lament the blurring between truth and untruth, one should look to how these unfold as matters of practical concern in political discourse. DP is a tool particularly suited to the task; it highlights the importance of viewing ‘truth’ as a rhetorical resource. In this light, we can view post-truth politics as a rhetorical matter rather than a degeneration of truth.

Keywords: post-truth politics; discursive psychology; international relations, political discourse

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## Introduction

The recent political climate has come to be dominated by concerns with the decline of truth. This concern is generally referred to by scholars and journalists alike as the rise of “post-truth politics”. My aim is to engage with this concern, how (some) disciplines outside of social psychology deal with this and how a particular variant of social psychology, discursive psychology, can contribute to the engagement with the concept of post-truth politics with promising results. I argue that this concern of a decline of truth needs more nuance, and that the problem may rather present itself as an avenue of further empirical work.

The challenge for scholars interested in post-truth politics is twofold. First, it is a concept lacking a consistent scholarly understanding. It is variously viewed as “an increasing disregard for factual evidence in political discourse” (Lockie, 2017, p. 1), as “the diminishing importance of anchoring political utterances in relation to verifiable facts” (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017, p. 2), as a period in time (Glăveanu, 2017), a place where “truth and consistency are unimportant” (Paxton, 2017, p. 22) or it is discussed without a substantial definition (e.g., Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Muñoz, 2017). This is in part to do with different disciplinary approaches and in part with the following issue. Second, the research in post-truth politics is still relatively emergent. Promising work has been developed since Lockie’s (2017) point (see below), some of which will be discussed here, but there is still some way to go before we have a substantial academic body of work on post-truth politics. Aside from select publications (e.g., Demasi, 2019; Glăveanu, 2017; Muñoz, 2017)<sup>2</sup>, psychology in particular has not had much to say about post-truth politics. This in mind, I provide a necessarily brief overview of academic research on post-truth politics. I give particular attention to some work from political science (Hopkins & Rosamond, 2017), three articles from a special issue of *New Perspectives* – a journal based

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<sup>2</sup> Of the ones mentioned here, only my work represents an empirical enquiry.

in the academic discipline of International Relations – focusing on post-truth published in 2018, and Montgomery's (2017) breakdown of Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 US presidential election. My choice of papers is inevitably selective and brief. I chose the 2017 papers as demonstrative of early empirical work on post-truth politics, and my choice of the special issue of *New Perspectives* is because it represents an early move towards a systematic engagement with the concept of post-truth politics.

At this point, I would like to briefly specify what I mean when I speak of 'politics' in this paper. The discursive psychological view on what counts as political is broad. It is largely determined by topic due to the analytic interest in discourse. This means that anyone in any setting is capable of producing political discourse, and there is a strong tradition of discursive psychological work that looks at political discourse in both formal (e.g., Demasi, 2019; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2020) and informal (e.g. Billig, 1991; 1992) settings. Much of scholarly focus on post-truth politics has tended to focus on the political discourse of elite figures such as Donald Trump, but my point about post-truth politics should be taken to go wider than this. In this paper, I speak of post-truth politics as a form of political discourse that anyone can enact.

While the existing and emergent work on post-truth so far provides a helpful start, discursive psychology (henceforth DP) can help shed light on some of the concerns with post-truth politics. Specifically, I point out the long history DP has in studying fact construction as a social (Potter, 1996) and rhetorical (Demasi, 2019; Demasi & Tileagă, 2019) action. One can engage with the concept of truth as a form of rhetorical action and how this understanding sheds light on how one may view post-truth politics. If this is the case, as I argue that it is, then post-truth politics is less about a decline in truth and more about highlighting the rhetorical nature of what we treat as 'truth' in political discourse (Demasi, 2019). The article concludes

with some considerations – or, more aptly, questions – of how to go forward with an increased cross-disciplinary awareness.

### **Post-truth politics outside of DP**

Post-truth politics is becoming an increasing concern in academic circles. Lockie (2017) noted that research in the area is nascent, but still limited as of only a couple of years ago. Aside from some DP discussion on the topic (Demasi, 2019; Burke & Demasi, 2019) psychology, as a discipline, has yet to contribute on post-truth studies on a systematic scale. At present there is some theoretical considerations on the persuasive effectiveness of the emotional aspects of post-truth politics (Muñoz, 2017) or a call for psychologists to “help people distinguish between beliefs and facts and understand the strengths and limitations associated with each” (Glăveanu, 2017, p. 376). There is no reason to contest Glăveanu’s apt call for increasing awareness of how to engage with news online (particularly social media), for psychologists to be able to spread their research in a manner that engages with the wider public and how a focus on these two can lead to “the creation of practical tools to counter ‘post-truth’ mentalities” (p. 377). After all, one of the most powerful tools that scholarly work can offer society is to encourage critical, active and research-informed thinking. Rather, his point reflects a more general issue in psychology and beyond: the assumption of a distinction between personal belief and ‘objective truth’ of the nature where the two are at odds. I will return to this point, in discussing the contribution of DP, later.

In other disciplines, work engaging with post-truth politics has begun in earnest. Hopkins and Rosamond (2017) is a fitting example. They gave attention to how the depoliticization of policy making has led to an increased focus on political discourse to win votes. This increased political

focus on discourse, in turn, is accompanied by a disregard<sup>3</sup> for truthfulness of political claims, which has created a space for the rise of post-truth politics. The issue, they argue, is that the increased ‘bullshit’ creates a problem for the hypothetical voter. This person, surrounded by a multitude of information, false or not, is at a disadvantage and ends up making poor voting decisions. Hopkins and Rosamond (2017) take the image of the human as a cognitive miser for granted, although this is not the unanimous view in the academic psychological community (e.g., Billig, 1991; 1996). Their argument relies on a very specific view on the human mind, one that areas such as DP do not necessarily endorse.

Next, three articles from a special issue of *New Perspectives* dedicated to post-truth politics. I selected this issue because it presented a substantial piece of scholarly work dedicated to post-truth politics, one of the earliest of its kind, and because it will be useful in shedding light on how other disciplines view post-truth politics. The choice of articles has been unavoidably selective, the other articles of the special issue are worthy of attention too, and their coverage brief – for which the authors have my apologies. These three were selected on account of their particular strengths and weaknesses, and for their suitability in emphasising the potential contribution of DP to a scholarly understanding of post-truth politics.

Wight (2018) by and large attributes the problem of post-truth politics to postmodernism and constructionism. Put briefly, in making a distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘social construction’ Wight presents the characteristic realist argument against relativism: regardless of constructions reality remains reality. Wight assumes a distinction between social constructions and what he argues is reality<sup>4</sup> (though offering little explanation of what this “reality” is). Misunderstanding postmodernism and social constructionism to be singular entities, Wight

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<sup>3</sup> The disregard for truth is treated as something distinct from lying. The former, what Frankfurt (2005) refers to as ‘bullshit’, is an absence for concern for the truthfulness of a claim rather than deliberate lying.

<sup>4</sup> This is a typical misunderstood and oft-repeated realist argument against relativism. For a systematic rebuttal see Edwards et al. (1995) and Iversen (2016).

simplifies their impact to the world at large as a simple matter of the loss of objective truth as a matter of concern for the political society at large. This demonising of schools of thought does injustice in three ways. First, by presenting constructionism and postmodernism as singular entities their nuances, variations and more detailed points, often crucial to understanding them, are glossed over<sup>5</sup>. Second, it is an unjustified assumption that because a social constructionist approach looks at how people work up versions of truth that this means social constructionism treats all truths as false or on equal footing to each other. In claiming that “without the concept of objective truth as a standard against which to hold subjective and intersubjective claims to be in possession of the truth, then all truth claims have to be taken at face value” (2018, p. 18) Wight is producing an argument that is no less political than it is rhetorically rooted in exactly what the postmodernist and constructionist would direct their analytic gaze on. He overlooks the fact that his argument for an objective truth is entrenched in a rhetorical tradition which, upon a close inspection, would undermine the argument for objective truth (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995). Third, by blaming postmodernists and social constructionists one is encouraged to overlook what they can contribute to the study of post-truth politics. To use Wight’s (2018) own argument to illustrate the point, the discursive psychologist would be analytically concerned at the rhetorical practices that Wight uses to reify his argument. Such analysis would make no claims about the truthfulness of his argument – though, in this instance, it does put the strength of Wight’s argument to question – because such an assertion would be, frankly, analytically fruitless (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gibson, 2018). This distinction is crucial.

What is absent from his argument is the recognition that the social constructionist challenge of a simple “objective truth” equally challenges what he refers to as truth as it does what he would refer to as post-truth. This is not the same, though, as treating truths on equal footing: “far from

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Potter (1996) for a brief summary of various approaches.

ruling out the possibility of justification of a particular view, *relativists insist upon it*" (Edwards et al., 1995, p. 39, emphasis in original). Claiming that the error lies in our "flights of fancy where we believe that we construct the world in our discourse" (2018, p. 27) Wight overlooks that he has constructed a particular discourse to argue against constructions in discourse. Wight states that "we need to be prepared to say that some perspectives are better than others and explain why" (2018, p. 26). A social constructionist approach is not incompatible with this, but, in retreating to the clichéd realist arguments already systematically addressed (see footnote 4), Wight has shown little acknowledgment of this. What he blames for the problem of post-truth politics could present, instead, a solution to it.

Hyvönen (2018) approaches the issue of post-truth politics from a different angle. The problem, according to him, lies with the fact that the notion is poorly conceptualised. Taking his cue from the work of Hannah Arendt, Hyvönen argues for a distinction between 'rational' and 'factual' truth. Leaving the former aside (the opposite of which is illusion, opinion, error or ignorance – p. 35), Hyvönen argues that one needs to focus on factual truths. Just because "facts are established, not found" (ibid., p. 35) this does not mean that they are easy to challenge. Instead one needs to consider the *political face* of factual truths and to recognise that "post-truth politics... ought to be understood as a predicament in which political speech is increasingly detached from a register in which factual truths are 'plain'" (ibid., p. 38). Looked at this way, then, post-truth politics is not an exercise in 'bullshit', as Hopkins and Rosamond (2017) argue, but is an attempt at creating confusion. It is impossible to do justice for Hyvönen's argument, but when he asks "what kinds of discourses constitute our shared world in such a way that deviations from commonly 'known' facts are considered politically acceptable or even preferable?" (2018, p. 49) one can, with confidence, suggest that DP may have something of great use to contribute on this point.



Marshall and Drieschova (2018) considered the wider contexts that enabled the rise of post-truth politics in the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Unlike the previous two examples, their focus was not so much on what is post-truth politics or the academic conditions that are guilty of its resurgence. Their focus, instead, was on wider social conditions that enabled it to become such a prominent and influential part in the outcome of the 2016 UK's EU membership referendum. Marshall and Drieschova attribute this to two features in particular: the technological changes involved in disseminating news, particularly the role of unregulated social media, and the rise of public distrust<sup>6</sup> towards political and other authoritative institutions (e.g., academia and more traditional news outlets). These two, together, formed the conditions that enabled for the rise of post-truth politics, expressed by way of the British people voting in favour of Brexit and the American people voting for Trump. Crucially, their distinct approach emphasises a move towards an empirical enquiry of the type that Wight (2018) and Hyvönen (2018) allude as needed to understand post-truth politics. Marshall and Drieschova (2018), thus, give us some indication of wider contexts for post-truth politics.

These three examples from the special issue of *New Perspectives* highlights the issue of post-truth in terms of what it is and what the scholar of post-truth politics can do. Wight (2018), Hyvönen (2018) and Marshall and Drieschova (2018), and indeed the rest of the special issue, gives a rounded image of how one could go about understanding and studying post-truth politics. However, what these approaches tend to do is to treat post-truth politics as some form of loss for “objective truth” (e.g., Michelsen & Tallis, 2018), whatever that is taken to mean, against emotions or emotive language. One issue with the literature from this special issue, and indeed others covered by me, is that they have tended to not specify what is meant with ‘emotion’. It seems that emotion is treated as no more than a contrast to and deviation from ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. A clearer understanding of what is meant with this would be of use; it

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<sup>6</sup> This rise of distrust is particularly attributable to events such as the second Iraq War and the 2008 recession.

could, for example, be meant a move away from the *logos* part of rhetoric (see Montgomery, 2017, below).

I argue, here and elsewhere (Demasi, 2019), that viewing post-truth politics as a plain move away from “truth” simplifies the matter too much. Hyvönen (2018), in particular, emphasises the need for further research. He rightly points that one should look to discourse(s) to better understand post-truth politics empirically. Likewise, Marshall and Drieschova (2018) point to this direction when they suggest that “scholars of politics and international relations thus need to pay more attention to the everyday activities of ordinary citizens and how those shape political decisions, and potentially even political regimes” (p. 91) and the “need to pay heightened attention to the people as active shapers, not just passive recipients” (p. 101). Discourse forms the central part of these everyday activities that Hyvönen (2018) and Marshall and Drieschova (2018) point to, and DP provides an empirical way to explore these activities. Of course, my summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the works above should not be taken as representative of strengths and weaknesses of all scholarly work on post-truth politics. It is impossible for a scholar to be able to read everything in a given area (Billig, 2013); any significant omissions from the literature are squarely my fault.

What the above approaches have not addressed is that ‘telling the truth’ is as much a social activity as it is a political or a rhetorical one. Social acts are necessarily rhetorical (Billig, 1996), and even the most mundane rhetorical contexts can have a political dimension (e.g., Billig, 1995; Billig et al., 1988). In discourse, one cannot distinguish “mere” truth-telling from the social activity in which it is embedded in: “What is to count as mere description, and the objective reality that descriptions merely refer to, are, in other words, rhetorical accomplishments” (Edwards & Potter, 1993, p. 28). Managing to make something come across

as real is a rhetorical achievement (Potter, 1996)<sup>7</sup>. Hyvönen (2018) gets close to this, though he does not ask *how* discourses are constituted to make facts politically acceptable or preferable. Marshall and Drieschova (2018) rightfully highlight the need to focus on everyday practices. This is also a fitting parallel for DP, in that one can focus on everyday practices as an analytic inroad to making sense of any type of discourse. For example, one can observe how everyday language is used to construct what makes for extreme prejudiced language (see Tileagă, 2007; Burke & Demasi, forthcoming).

Finally, I would briefly like to consider Montgomery's (2017) contribution. Montgomery, in his investigation of Donald Trump's rhetorical style in the 2016 US presidential elections, provides a systematic attempt at analysing political discourse that can be understood to encompass 'post-truth politics'<sup>8</sup>. Using Aristotle's concepts of *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*<sup>9</sup> and Habermas' concept of 'validity claims'<sup>10</sup>, Montgomery provides an insightful breakdown of how Trump adopted a particular rhetorical style. Although this style was lacking in its truthfulness, or *logos*, it was nonetheless effective. Montgomery argues that this is because it was designed to emphasise its "folkness" which, in turn, increased his appeal in terms of the apparent sincerity of his speech:

"It is as if Trump's exaggerated and inappropriate claims about himself carried a strong appeal for his core constituency on the grounds that they come across as an authentic form of self-expression: Trump speaks how he feels and says what he means" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 18).

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<sup>7</sup> I say 'manage' because the success of such a rhetorical move is as much reliant on the acts of the rhetor as it is contingent on whether the recipient resists or concedes this rhetorical move (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Though Montgomery (2017) does not explicitly refer to the term outside the title of his paper, it is primarily concerned with the issue how Trump managed to garner support in spite of apparent untruths of his speeches.

<sup>9</sup> "*Logos* – an appeal to argument and evidence; *pathos* – an appeal to emotion; and *ethos* – an appeal based on the character and the qualities of the speaker" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 6).

<sup>10</sup> Validity of utterances are judged in terms of their truth, appropriateness and sincerity.

What Montgomery very importantly highlights is that we need to appreciate the nuanced nature of post-truth politics. Being able to assert the truthfulness of claims has limited effect in gauging the political success or its lack thereof. He rightly suggests that there is more to be understood about political discourse than a mere comparison of the ‘truthfulness’ of claims. However, what was missing from Montgomery’s argument is a detailed unpacking of *how* Trump’s discourse came across as sincere, convincing or however one wants to conceptualise it. Dividing rhetorical styles between logos, pathos and ethos is a move in this direction but analysing rhetoric can be more detailed. DP can tell us about the rhetorical construction of political speeches, in a manner that we understand concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘sincerity’ as rhetorical constructions designed to bolster one argument or discourse over another (Billig, 1996).

### **Post-truth politics in DP**

To focus on truth-telling as social and rhetorical practices is not to deny existence of ‘truth’, but, rather, to highlight that any type of truth-telling cannot be abstracted from its (micro or macro) context. To assume such a distinction, especially that one could successfully carry out such a distinction in empirical research, would be a step too far assuming a simple separation between an abstract and socially embedded truth; much like a misapplied Platonic theory of forms (Kraut, 2017). Such a distinction is not necessary for a DP approach, nor is it fruitful: ‘truth’ does not determine how something is spoken (Gibson, 2018). Instead the focus moves from determining what is or is not true to how something is made to come across as (un)truthful. Just as a purely cognitive psychology only tells one side of the multifaceted human nature (Billig, 1996), so overlooking the social, action-oriented, context of truth-telling gives a limited picture of what post-truth politics is. The act of truth-telling, regardless of its factual accuracy

(however one conceives it), is first and foremost among part of a number of discursive activities that are designed to *do* something in their immediate context (Edwards & Potter, 1992). For example, a politician's priority in a debate is arguably rhetorical supremacy, in appealing to the electorate, rather than factual accuracy. DP is a method particularly well suited to the analysis of these practices. One can empirically study the politician's discourse and its various aspects in how it is designed to appeal for a particular audience, designed to undermine the ideological opponent and other argumentatively relevant avenues. Looking at discourse in this way begins to address some of the questions posed by Hyvönen (2018) but also goes a step further in looking at how discourse unfolds. With that in mind I now consider DP, and some relevant research in the area.

Discursive psychology is an approach that focuses on how the psychological is brought to life through discourse, moving the focus to action over cognition (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Adopting a specific stance of social constructionism – that discourse is both constructed and constructive (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2008) – DP looks at how psychological concepts (attitudes, memories, attributions, etc.) are worked up in discourse as social actions highly attuned to a specific context. To look at facts from a DP point of view is to ask: what discursive practices, as both offensive and defensive rhetoric (Billig, 1996), make facts look like facts in this particular context? As mentioned, the aim is not to deny the existence of facts but to, rather, look at how facts are constructed and deployed *in situ*.

At this stage I should mention that there are a number of various ways of doing DP analytic work<sup>11</sup>. My intent is not to advocate any particular type of DP over another (see, for example, Potter, 2010, for an overview). I follow Gibson's (2018) footsteps in talking of DP in a broader

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<sup>11</sup> For example, there are more conversation analytic flavoured DP and DP that refers to itself as critical.

sense, as originally introduced by Potter and Wetherell (1987)<sup>12</sup>, in a manner that should appeal to all varieties of DP: discourse is constructed (see above), functional and varied (ibid.). It is functional, in that discourse is designed to perform particular actions in particular settings. It is varied on account that the function of discourse is dependent on the context in which it unfolds.

From its earliest days, DP has been concerned with fact construction. The core book of the field, *Discursive Psychology* (Edwards & Potter, 1992), often relied on examples from political discourse and on political events of the time. Same applies to other influential texts from the early days of DP (e.g., Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), with the work of Edwards and Potter (1992) out of the early literature of DP focusing most explicitly on fact construction. While subsequent work focusing on political discourse is substantial (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Byford, 2006; Condor, Tileagă & Billig, 2013; Goodman, 2010, 2014; Tileagă, 2013; 2016) the focus on fact construction in political discourse had not necessarily remained in focus.

My previous work (Demasi, 2016, 2019; Burke & Demasi, 2019; Demasi & Tileagă, 2019) is an exception. It has looked at various aspects of how people use ‘facts’ and ‘knowledge’ in an argumentative manner in political debates on the European Union. Drawing on rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1991) and epistemics, borrowed conversation analysis (Heritage, 2013; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006), I adopted a DP analytic framework that paid particular attention to how speakers demonstrate their knowledge – both in terms of content and their ‘rights’ to this knowledge – and deploy ‘facts’ as rhetorical tools to bolster their position in broadcast debates on the EU.

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<sup>12</sup> Though they did not speak of their work as ‘discursive psychology’, it has since become one of the earliest texts advocating what is now known as DP.

This focus is particularly helpful in analysing how a politician can provide counterclaims to factual claims without resorting to calling their opponent a liar or implying that the opponent has uttered an untruth (Demasi, 2019; see also Burke & Demasi, 2019) – something that would be arguably a counterproductive manner of discussion in broadcast debates. Without claiming an exhaustive list of rhetorical moves, I demonstrated that politicians could challenge factual claims by claiming that the fact challenged is not relevant, recontextualising the fact to put it in a different rhetorical light or providing a hypothetical scenario as a challenge. See extract below for an example of how a factual claim can be recontextualised (from Demasi, 2019):

Extract 1

1 FAR: but=y'know this argument about what it cost British people .hh  
 2 whether we talk gross or net this year our net contribution to  
 3 the EU is gonno be <nine billion> pounds. and what people see  
 4 (.2) .h is (.) they see in their own lives at the moment y'know  
 5 the local gravedigger or sweep streete- being sAcked as a result  
 6 of local government (.) ah cUts and ↑what they see ↓here

(Approximately 70 lines of transcript omitted)

77 WAT: where Nigel's argument falls down is he's said it's terrible  
 78 that the UK is paying nine billion .h every every year to to- in  
 79 net to the European Union which will be case next year. .h ↑but↓  
 80 what he doesn't point out is that we're paying sixty billion a  
 81 year for health .h we're paying a hundred and thirty two billion  
 82 a year for social security and b[enefits ]  
 83 X: [(coughs)]  
 84 WAT: ↑for nine billion↓ it's all that's costing us we're ↑getting a  
 85 fantastic [deal↓ from the European] Union  
 86 FAR: [what are we ( ) about ]

Here we see how the original fact-based claim, put forward by Farage on lines 1-3 is addressed by Watson on lines 77-85. The latter puts this ‘fact’ in a new context, one in which its rhetorical significance is undermined and downplayed. Furthermore, the implication is that in this new context challenging the cost of being in the European Union implies challenging other costs, such as health and social security, too. The point here is that one can make analytic sense of this extract not by trying to assess the truthfulness of what was said, which of the speakers is wrong, and so forth. Rather, an appreciation of how ‘facts’ can be used rhetorically and flexibly to argue for and against positions allows one to see that “constructions of facts are not neutral reflections of an objective reality” (Demasi, 2019, p. 18). Viewed this way, the idea of post-truth politics takes on a new meaning. That we are recognising that ‘truthfulness’ is a poor judge of the success of political discourse (Montgomery, 2017) suggest that we should look elsewhere for an explanation. Understanding the rhetorical nature of facts, as understood by DP, is a major way forward.

Focusing on fact construction is an analytically fruitful start, but one should be also prepared to consider how these challenges are presented with other interactional phenomena. For example, while overlapping talk is relatively normal in everyday interaction it can become a highly strategic manner of challenging factual claims of one’s political opponent (Demasi, 2016). Everyday conversational features can readily be deployed as argumentative practices when challenging an ideological opponent. Laughter, too, can be a strategic resource (Demasi & Tileagă, 2019) used to discredit, disparage and challenge political opponents and their factual claims. For one, laughter can serve to delegitimise factual claims. Snorts, a form of laughter-based interaction, can provide highly disparaging responses that leaves little doubt to the stance taken towards one’s ideological opponent. Laughter, then, not only tells us how politicians position themselves ideologically but also it tells us something about how politicians position themselves as knowing something in a particularly superior manner to their political opponent



(ibid.). To laugh at one's ideological opponent is to claim superior access to relevant knowledge at hand. Such rhetorical moves to display knowledge cannot be abstracted, even in the case of laughter, from the rhetorical role of truth-telling. Who-knows-what and who-knows-more are matters of analytic concern indistinguishable from what-is-true. Therefore, the scholar who is interested in post-truth politics would do well to look at not only *what* is treated as true in discourse but *how* these treatments are worked up and resisted for these all unfold jointly.

To repeat an earlier point, the aim of the work done in DP, particularly in looking at fact construction, is not to assess whether the facts deployed by speakers are, in a realist sense, "true" or "false". Rather the focus is on how facts and descriptions of them are designed to perform a particular type of action (Potter, 1996). Viewed in this sense, we can begin to appreciate how 'facts', 'truths' and so forth are forms of social action rather than neutral reflections of an objective reality or of someone's inner mental states<sup>13</sup>. This has implications to how we view post-truth politics *in situ*. If we recognise that portrayals of fact and truth, in discourse, are primarily a medium for action, then we begin to get a better idea of post-truth politics as social phenomena. It can be source of optimism for scholars looking to study the phenomena, giving something concrete and empirical to grapple with. Unlike Wight's (2018) claim that postmodernism and constructionism is to blame, we can, instead, look to DP, as influenced by postmodernism and social constructionism, as means for rendering post-truth politics empirically tangible. A discursive psychological approach is a tool for empirically approaching post-truth politics.

What links political discourse from before post-truth politics to how political discourse unfolds today is that the concern for utilising factuality as a rhetorical resource has remained much the same. Postmodernism and constructionism are not what caused the problem, as Wight (2018)

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<sup>13</sup> For a critique of viewing the language as a transparent window to the mind see, for example, Edwards and Potter (1992) and Tileagă (2013).

argues. Rather they are what has given us the means of making scholarly sense of post-truth political discourse.

## Conclusion

Murray Edelman (1977) argued that political discourse is about facts and values. What I argue is that, using DP, a close inspection of how political discourse unfolds shows how ‘facts’ are rhetorical resources used to vie for argumentative supremacy over an ideological opponent in public political discourse. Hopefully this type of approach is useful to the scholars of politics, political science, economics and international relations in highlighting the action-oriented nature of truth-telling. I have argued that *in situ* the distinction between truth and untruth is a problematic one: people work up factual claims and counterclaims in a live, context-dependent, setting where issues of who-knows-what and who-knows-better are at stake. The DP work discussed here reiterates Edelman’s (1977) point that political discourse is about facts and values. Having a sound conceptual grasp of post-truth politics, as Hyvönen (2018) argues, is essential for a scholarly grasp of the matter<sup>14</sup>, but this needs to be accompanied by an appreciation of how this unfolds in practice. Rarely does the discourse of politics, or any discourse for that matter, unfold with a theoretical and conceptual neatness a scholar might hope for – ideologies, in action, are messy (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This is not an issue; it is precisely a rhetorical vagueness that allows issues such as ‘facts’ to be produced and challenged. Vague wording can do very precise rhetorical work (Edwards, 1997) and dilemmatic, contradictory, ideological positions is how we reason our way through social life and its various challenges (Billig et al., 1988). My previous work (Demasi, 2019) focussed on the role of ‘facts’ as resources; the next step, if we are to take Edelman (1977) seriously, is to

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<sup>14</sup> Though we need to bear in mind that some level of inconsistency is present, and necessary, even in more formal conceptual systems (Billig, 1982).

look at how fact and truth as rhetorical resources are assigned particular moral and ideological values. It may give some link between matters of 'truth' and 'values' as expressed in contemporary political, lay or elite, discourse. This work should be of particular use outside of DP, too, in helping to understand that post-truth politics, when looked at in context, is not about a decline of truth but an argument for a very particular ideological position.

What this means in practice is that we need more research that appreciates the situated and rhetorical nature of what is treated as (un)true, recognising that these are better treated as social action rather than conceptual entities. Scholars concerned with the decline of truth should look to the contribution of discursive work that looks at the rhetorical nature of political discourse. Maybe this can give a way to get to grips with making sense of political discourse which is, despite its apparent untruthfulness, effective in garnering public support. To return to two examples of what has concerned scholars: Brexit and Donald Trump. How did political discourse that shocked so many manage to 'defeat' the reasonable alternatives? The answer must be looked at empirically. One should look, in detail, at the situated construction of the arguments, and instead of dismissing such discourse as untruthful appreciate the rhetorical complexity of *how* these arguments were made. Recognising the rhetorical nature of political discourse can give a clearer understanding of what post-truth politics is; possibly no more than a rhetorical style of our times. These should enable a more measured response to post-truth politics, beyond a lamentation of a loss of truth.

This is what DP can contribute to other disciplines, and the promise is substantial. The question is: what can DP learn in return? Particularly, how can DP play a part in providing a rounded, interdisciplinary, understanding of notions such as 'post-truth politics' and its various manifestations (e.g., Brexit)? DP has a multidisciplinary foundation readily observed in the key texts of the area (Billig, 1987, 1991, 1996; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, etc.) but one must be cautious about how to apply DP with other approaches.

Potter (2003) highlights that mixing DP with other paradigms comes with several considerations, mostly to do with potentially incompatible conceptualisations of discourse and its place in empirical research. There is a tendency to accord discourse a secondary place or to treat it as evidence of something outside of itself, rather than recognise that it is a medium for intelligible social action in and of itself. This does not by any means exclude a cross-disciplinary approach, only that such need to be made with great care. This in mind, I have no ready answer to my own question though I am by no means the only one suggesting cross-disciplinary considerations (e.g., Tileagă & Byford, 2014; Tileagă, 2019). Considering the multidisciplinary history of DP, I now reach out to other scholars for suggestions. What can DP learn from political science, international relations and their related disciplines?

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