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SAGE Research Methods Cases

A Discursive Social Psychological Approach to First Impression Formation

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A Discursive Social Psychological Approach to First Impression Formation

The study aims to develop a discursive approach to first impression formation. A topic of social psychological inquiry for over 85 years, first impressions are currently studied employing an experimental methodology and a cognitive framework. This research tradition has generated a wealth of knowledge on first impression formation as a cognitive phenomenon, while systematically neglecting its vernacular manifestation. The article addresses this matter through the use of discourse analysis informed by a social psychological framework, examining both verbal and written naturally occurring first impression reports. In this case study, I recount the strategies, techniques and resources employed for carrying out a discursive analytic attempt within a discursive social psychological framework. I begin by pointing out the main aspects that discursive social psychology brings to bear upon a theoretical and methodological respecification of first impressions. Then, I describe the stages of my analytic endeavour. Each component is accompanied by practical suggestions derived from experience, as well as by reflexive considerations of the encountered methodological issues and their proposed solutions.

Learning Outcomes

This text is a methodological account of a study using discourse analysis accompanied by a discursive social psychological framework. After reading it, you should be able to

- Recount the features of discourse analysis informed by a discursive psychological perspective
- Understand the role of questions in guiding discourse analysis
- Indicate the main steps of a discourse analytic study
- Be aware of some of the difficulties accompanying discourse analysis
- Be able to name and discuss the pros and cons of employing discourse analysis for the study of social psychological phenomena

Project Overview and Context: Respecifying First Impressions

Grown-ups love figures. When you talk to them about a new friend, they never ask about essential matters. They never say to you: 'What does his voice sound like? What games does he prefer? Does he collect butterflies?' They ask you: 'How old is he? How many brothers does he have? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father earn? It is only then that they feel they know him. (De Saint-Exupéry, 1995, pp. 21–22) Imagine getting home from a blind date. Seconds after you carefully close the front door trying hard not to make any noise, you notice your housemate, still awake, lurking in the shadows. Your dreaded anticipation comes to life: she corners you with prying questions regarding your evening. What did your date look like? What did you talk about? What kind of a person is he? Do you fancy him? And, the ultimate question: is there going to be a second date? You have no choice but to produce a detailed account of your evening to satisfy her curiosity.

This short anecdote features just one of those moments of everyday life in which individuals share their first impressions of others. Speakers usually furnish them with details of the settings in which the meetings took place, the appearance of the encountered persons, or their own reactions as thoughts and feelings triggered by these interactions. Naturally occurring first impression stories have variable length and employ an assortment of linguistic and discursive resources. Ultimately, their shape is fitted to the purpose of the conversations which occasion them. As De Saint-Exupéry (1995) remarked, in talking about others, we choose from the variety of reportable details those features we deem appropriate for our interlocutors or the aspects they specifically inquire about.

These observations rest on and reinforce a conceptualisation of 'first impressions' as interactional resources, meticulously constructed and artfully deployed in talk and text, discourse analysis being the tool of choice for exploring their composition and functioning. It enables researchers to study how people produce and use first impression reports in everyday life whereby scrutinising naturalistic verbal and written

accounts as both constructed out of various linguistic elements and constructing the world the speakers inhabit.

In embarking on a PhD on the topic of first impression formation 3 years ago, I started with personal observations of moments accommodating first impression talk such as stories about initial encounters or advice on how to make a good impression on various occasions. The latter draw heavily on social psychological studies documenting the cognitive mechanisms involved in forming first impressions, the conditions impacting their accuracy and their relevance for subsequent interactions.

After becoming acquainted with previous research on this topic, conducted mainly within a cognitive framework, I started noticing several common shortcomings of this approach. For instance, most studies employ an experimental methodology, fabricating artificial first encounters between participants. Ensuing evaluations, recorded in an oral or written form, are taken as evidence of putative mental processes and images, without factoring in the characteristics of the interactions they occur in. Finally, diversity of first impression reports is reduced either through predefined answers or through coding, leaving out a wealth of meaningful social actions done through references to first impressions engendered by naturalistic discourses.

Conversely, discursive social psychologists recuperate the plethora of sensible actions speakers do through talk and text. They enquire into the constructed nature of utterances by investigating participants' practices for managing conversational settings. These practices are also constitutive for social psychological phenomena relocated in talk-in-interaction, such as first impressions.

Discursive social psychology (DSP) is the study of psychological phenomena in and as parts of individuals' daily lives. It selects the vast, spectacular and previously unexplored realm of everyday interactions through talk and text as the place where people construct, employ and display their understandings of attitudes, memory, cognition or emotion. Thus, discourse analysis embedded in a discursive social psychological theoretical framework becomes the appropriate tool for undertaking a respecification of first impressions as stories people recount about initial interactions with previously unknown persons.

Discourse Analysis and Discursive Social Psychology

A frequently employed method in qualitative research in a variety of scientific disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, communication and political studies, discourse analysis is a label accommodating diverse organisations of research practices. There are several edifying articles and books comparing and contrasting different ways of doing discourse analysis together with their theoretical and methodological underpinnings such as *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002), *Discourse Analysis: Dimensions of Critique in Psychology* (Parker, 2013) or *Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis* (Wooffitt, 2005), as well as extended compendia featuring studies illustrating the use of discourse analysis in exploring a wide range of topics, for instance, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2008).

Discourse analysis as a research method originated in linguistics and literary studies. It quickly expanded towards other disciplines, while taking new forms due to diverse theoretical and epistemological framings. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is considered to be one of the most prominent developments. It emerged in the late 1970s, through the work of Teun van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, and bloomed during the 1980s. CDA links discourse to social structural phenomena such as power and ideology. Its critical roots can be traced back to social theorists such as Michael Foucault and Jürgen Habermas (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Discourse analysis as employed by discursive social psychologists (DA), which was developed in the late 1980s, constitutes another adaptation of the initial method, by employing it for the study of naturally occurring social psychological phenomena. Its distinctive features can be traced back to a conceptualisation of discourse as employed by sociologists of scientific knowledge, for instance, Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay (1984) in *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*. It focuses on talk and text produced in interaction, as the result of practices and resources individuals utilise for getting things done in everyday settings. An initial outline of DA appears in Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's (1987) book *Discourse and Social*

Psychology, a first successful attempt at crystallising the main features of this novel approach to psychological phenomena:

- discourse is action, not just an epiphenomenon accompanying substantive psychological processes.
- discourse is deployed for accomplishing diverse interactional outcomes, not an imperfect reflection of hidden mental workings.
- alternative versions of accounts are regarded as tailored to the specifics of the contexts they are deployed in, instead of been scrutinised for their truthfulness.
- discourse is seen both as constructed, through selecting from available linguistic, semiotic and rhetorical resources, and constructing 'reality', through operational renderings of events, identities and actions.

Since then, DSP has been developed through numerous contributions. Most notably, it integrates the rhetorical approach advanced by Michael Billig (1987). More recently, it has developed a close relationship with conversation analysis by using its analytic toolkit for the study of social psychological phenomena in talk-in-interaction and by advocating for the employment of naturalistic empirical evidence.

Data Generation

Discourse analytic endeavours employ a wide range of oral and written empirical materials from a variety of sources, generated through diverse methods and techniques. They encompass qualitative, unstructured interviews, audio and video recordings of ordinary conversations, audio and video recordings of talk-in-interaction in specific institutional settings (e.g. scientific conferences, medical visits, news interviews and playgrounds), newspaper articles, scientific texts, blogs, forums and even textbook marginalia. Researchers use their craft and imagination to find, produce, collect or record those bits and pieces of social life where the sought phenomena become visible.

As opposed to active methods of data generation, collecting instances of first impression talk posed the challenge of finding a sufficiently large number of fragments

relevant for my research interest. This undertaking was not driven by the need for quantitative legitimacy, but by methodological and practical considerations:

- enabling the mapping out of diverse practices and resources used for referring to first impressions, as well as investigating the relationship between alternative constructions and their subsequent interactional effects
- facilitating the marking out of the discursive components of first impression reports
- permitting the exploration of the link between first impression references as practical accomplishments and conversational and textual practices
- allowing comparative evaluations of verbal and written accounts of first impressions

Sources

Assembling a preliminary collection of fragments of discourse referring to first impressions constituted a priority at the beginning of my research endeavour. Due to the fact that it was difficult to anticipate the time it would take to draw together enough instances, I simultaneously employed several strategies.

An initial step in gathering verbal accounts of first impressions was to browse through previously generated empirical materials. Then, I asked colleagues and collaborators to permit me to go through their data as well. In doing that, I took into consideration any recordings of talk-in-interaction which did not stem from projects explicitly addressing first impression formation. At this stage, I did not address distinctions between 'naturally occurring' and 'contrived data', nor between 'ordinary conversations' and 'institutional talk'. These categories derive mainly, but not solely, from the analytic orientation to the data, establishing the type and characteristics of the speech-exchange systems regulating a fragment of talk-in-interaction being an investigative task.

Simultaneously, I sought to generate novel empirical materials through recordings of talk-in-interaction. In an initial phase, in order to familiarise myself with recording technology and techniques as well as with the experience of being taped, I started recording conversations with friends and family, usually during or after mealtimes

at home as well as in restaurants and coffee shops. Additionally, I made a habit of recording larger meetings at work (e.g. weekly briefings) and public events I took part in (e.g. book launches).

A third strategy for generating empirical evidence consisted of asking a small number of colleagues to record their get-togethers with friends, preferably, but not necessarily, during mealtimes, as well as asking a couple of friends to record business meetings at work. Drawing on the insight generated by previous recordings, I was able to anticipate potential difficulties and answer their questions regarding the practicalities of recording.

Finally, recorded friends and family members were quite curious about the purpose of my study and inquired especially into the sought outcomes. They offered to be 'good participants' and help achieve expected results. To these reactions, I usually responded that I did not seek any specific outcomes; instead, I looked to record casual talk. In addition, I mentioned that at that point during my research, I was mainly conducting a simulation with the purpose of becoming familiar with recording environment, and that it is difficult to tell if I would actually come to analyse any parts of that conversation for my study.

As a result of deploying these strategies, I ended up with over 30 h of recorded talk-in-interaction in which I identified several accounts of initial encounters and subsequent impressions. In order to extend this initial collection, I also browsed through interactional data available online. As a further option, I looked into the possibility of using callbanks recordings (such as Callfriend or Callhome). However, my university did not have an institutional subscription to those databases.

At the same time, I undertook a search for textual fragments containing references to first impressions on the Internet using key phrases like 'my first impression', 'at first I thought', 'when I first saw' or 'when I met' in various combinations. The main sources for written account of first impressions turned out to be newspaper articles, blogs and forums.

Although I began assembling my collection at an early stage of my research, I continued recording and gathering materials until I started writing up my analytic chapters. By then, I had amassed over 40 fragments encompassing references to first impressions.

Ethics

In employing discourse analysis, I took into consideration several ethical issues. First, I needed to inform all individuals taking part in the recording of private interactions about the purpose of the undertaking they were becoming a part of and obtain their informed consent prior to the recording. In addition, when asking friends and colleagues to record their interactions, I ascertained that they followed my instructions on informing future participants and also offered my contact details in case there were additional questions.

Second, I made sure that the identity of the speakers would be protected by using false names in transcriptions, analysis and subsequent academic presentations. I replaced both first and last name of speakers and persons they mentioned during the conversations. I also changed the companies and public institutions they were referring to, when those references could have engendered the person's recognition (e.g. her workplace).

Finally, when I prepared a number of fragments for a conference presentation, I secured the anonymity of the speakers by erasing, with the help of audio software, the bits of talk containing details which would have permitted their identification. In addition, using a video editor, I blurred the faces of the participants. While this last move ensured their anonymity, it caused difficulties for the presentation, due to the fact that the analysis referred to nonverbal features (e.g. facial expressions and gaze direction) which were no longer visible.

Getting Ready for the Analysis

Preparing the data for analysis and for the final write-up requires a lot of time and concentration. Although it may seem a superfluous, mechanical and tedious undertaking, it constitutes an integral part of the analysis, bringing the researcher even closer to his or her data. It can be a source of valuable insight, based on a thorough acquaintanceship with the materials, which will be expanded on during subsequent stages of the research.

Transcription and Labelling

Like data generation, the transcription is not a finite phase. After listening to each recording, I selected those parts of the interactions which appeared to be referring to first impressions and transcribed them using Gail Jefferson's (2004) system, which is widely employed in DSP. It is an extensive procedure, meant to capture and represent features of speech delivery (e.g. pitch, volume and contour) and temporal localisation of speakers' utterances. While these transcriptions were useful throughout the analysis, I mainly employed them during the writing-up phase.

At subsequent stages of the analytic enterprise, I often went back to the recordings for additional information regarding what preceded and what followed the fragments I had extracted. Often, I decided to add parts of the interaction I had initially left out, so I transcribed those bits as well.

As mentioned in the ethics section, I replaced all individual or company/institution names which could have led to participants being recognised. In doing that, I substituted names with similar sounding ones, usually having the same number of syllables and initials. I used these pseudonyms starting from the transcription stage, in order to avoid later confusions and to get familiar with them. I made sure I jotted down the correspondence between the real names and the chosen ones; otherwise, it would be difficult to remember these details at later stages of the study.

Doing Discourse Analysis

As with every research endeavour, my exploration of first impressions as discursive constructions started out with a set of questions arisen from personal curiosity and observations, while constrained by theoretical and analytic considerations. Throughout the duration of the project, my questions changed form and content several times as a result of transitions in theoretical position, accumulation of knowledge and shifts in research interest. Nevertheless, they have always steered my literature review and analytic pursuits, just like a lighthouse directs boats into the safety of the harbour during a stormy night.

The Guiding Role of Research Questions

As an inductive undertaking, discourse analysis is driven by broad questions concerning locating and circumscribing the phenomena under scrutiny. In setting out to respecify first impressions, an initial step was the identification of my object of inquiry in everyday talk and text. Specifically, I considered: what counts as a mentioning of a first impression?

A first criterion guiding my selection was the explicit use of words and phrases like 'first impression', 'initial thought', or 'when I first saw her'. This inclusion principle permitted me to assemble a preliminary collection of talk-in-interaction and texts where individuals spontaneously report their first impressions of previously unknown persons.

I also noticed that each mentioning was accompanied by explicit or implicit references to prior encounters. Consequently, I considered expanding my searching strategy to include fragments referring to initial meetings. However, this transformation needed to be supplemented by restrictive measures, in order to ensure that I added in only talk of and texts about first interactions mentioning ensuing impressions. As a result, I scrutinised my collection for further clues. I observed that the variety of forms in which impressions were delivered exhibited additional regularities. They usually contained references to the appearance of the encountered person, as well as an account of the speaker's reaction to the acquaintance. With these newly established criteria, I was able to enrich my empirical evidence with additional fragments.

The next phase consisted in the deconstruction of the first impression reports. At this stage, I aimed to delineate the 'building blocks' of each fragment, in order to identify recurrent patterns throughout the collection. Based on successive examination of the collected fragments, I concluded that first impressions encompass three recurrent components, which differentiate them from other similar types of person descriptions or reports of previous interactions:

- the mention of an initial meeting
- the as-seen description of the encountered person
- the as-experienced reaction of the storyteller

Initial observations regarding the composition of first impression required further elaboration through a detailed investigation of each fragment. This step was guided by a set of second-order questions, which draw on conversation analytic and rhetorical research traditions. Providing answers to these questions constitutes an integral part of the analytic undertaking of the study:

- what are the conversational practices and technologies speakers use for accomplishing first impression reports?
- what are the textual practices and technologies writers use for accomplishing first impression reports?

Finally, a third set of questions looked into the functioning of first impression reports in naturalistic settings. It sought out the interactional consequences of employing specific formulations of first impressions as visible through participants' orientations to their effects:

- what are the interactional affordances of first impression tales?
- are particular forms of stories associated with specific outcomes?

Discourse Analysis in Action

In this last section, I illustrate the employment of discourse analysis in the examination of just one fragment of talk-in-interaction containing a first impression report. A complete discursive analytic endeavour consists of combining observations based on several extracts in an attempt to delineate similarities, as well as to account for noticed differences. This is an iterative process, consisting of recurrent shifting between detailed examination of single fragments and a more general overview of the collection as a whole. I traced initially observed regularities, based on a couple of extracts, throughout the collection, and then specified and refined or refuted the hypothesised patterns.

In the following paragraphs, I showcase a discursive examination of a first impression report. Since I have already gone through several cycles of the analytic process, although the observations draw on the available fragment, they are informed by

regularities observed in the entire collection. Consequently, I would like to point out that the subsequent analysis illustrates one of the later stages of the investigation.

Extract 1 Marcella 17.35-20.12 Skinny neighbor (Jeffersonian transcription)

Eve: Ever since I've known her shesa girl-

(0.1) very slender bu not slender like

Oh thin as a rake #she has curves you

know¿=She has a butt breaths=very okey

you'd say she has <implants> but she

does°n't. ((swallowing)) I've known her

since she was little, you know?

(0.4)

Eve: Taken care of, like°uhm¿ so=v- (0.1) An-

#I kept #asking man bU:t what is she

doing sin- #she's older than me she's

a different generation an- I saw her

again last year afteor several years at

her sister's wedding #whery went. (0.1)

When she entered because she also

arrived much later u- everybody was

<W:OW:>

Marcella: Uihhi [hui]

Eve: [So] to me this [see]med=#MAAn=

Marcella: [°°hi]

Eve: = [so] what is she do:ing? So no- she

Marcella: [°hii]

Eve: = had not changed #at a:ll at all not

her face not=#and she's got a- (0.2)

besides body she alos has one of

those faces with lips (.) sensual a set

of teeth black hair- (.) an ebony

brown <gorgeous you know?.uHHhua:

Extract 1 stems from a conversation – rendered using Gail Jefferson's transcribing system for conversation analysis – between two friends, Eve and Marcella, about diets and physical exercise. In this context, Eve mentions her neighbour, Christine, whom she admires for her slender figure. Marcella does not know Christine; therefore, in lines 1–7, Eve takes up the task of describing her amazing looks, simultaneously justifying her laudatory stance. This action continues, after a 0.4 gap attributable to Marcella, with a further description in line 9, 'Taken care of like °uhmç'. This turn construction unit is not brought to completion. Instead, after a cut off 'so=v-, and a 0.1 pause, Eve switches from Christine's physical appearance, to an expression of personal interest 'An- #I kept #asking man bU:t what is she doing' (lines 10–11). This functions as an upgrade of the already positive depiction which had not received any response from Marcella. The upgrade is achieved through the use of reported direct speech. The formulation 'An- #I kept #asking' depicts Christine's physical appearance as a pressing long-term interest for Eve. The latter has been pondering about it more than once, but without coming up

with a satisfying answer ‘#she's older than me she's a different generation’ (lines 11–12).

It is in this context that Eve employs a first impression report. A noteworthy feature of this fragment is the fact that the narrated episode does not depict Eve's initial acquaintance with Christine. Instead, the speaker describes an incident she has witnessed directly: Christine's arrival at a wedding and its subsequent impact on the participants. This witness position (Potter, 1996) is associated with specific epistemic entitlements for depicting the scene as seen by the conversationalist.

The story encompasses the three elements of a first impression report. It starts out with the mention of the time and place of the initial contact ‘I saw her again last year after several years at her sister's wedding #wherey went’. (lines 12–14). Then, Eve continues by describing the wedding participants' reaction: ‘When she entered because she also arrived much later u- everybody was <w:ow:>’ (lines 15–17). Finally, she resumes Christine's flattering description with a detailed account of her beautiful face ‘she's got a- (0.2) besides body she also has one of those faces with lips (.) sensual a set of teeth black hair- (.) an ebony brown <gorgeous you know?’ (lines 24–28).

The location of the narrated event is a wedding party both Eve and Christine attended a year ago. This setting makes talk about appearance salient, a wedding being an occasion for which participants usually dress up. In addition, Eve hints towards the fact that it is at such ceremonies that people frequently get to meet acquaintances and relatives they had lost touch with, giving them an opportunity to observe and evaluate them ‘I saw her again last year after several years’ (lines 12–13).

A wedding party usually features a large crowd, on which the speaker also draws in her story. She depicts the wedding participants' first reaction to seeing Christine ‘When she entered because she also arrived much later u- everybody was <w:ow:>’ (lines 15–17) as a shared, consensual astonishment. This is achieved through the extreme formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) ‘everybody’ and the surprise reaction token (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006) ‘<w:ow:>’.

The crowd's intense admiration is attributed solely to Christine's looks, thus convincingly reaffirming her attractiveness. The reaction, available to Eve due to her witness

position, corroborates the speaker's prior description of Christine. Consequently, this first impression report could have been employed by Eve in order to warrant her appraisal of Christine. It supplements her evaluations with additional non-subjective evidence and deals with Marcella's lack of involvement in the conversation, which is visible in line 8.

To conclude, in this section, I illustrated the use of discourse analysis in the examination of a fragment containing a first impression report. I described its sequential emergence from the prior conversational context. I pointed out the three components encompassed in a mention of a first impression: an initial contact, an as-seen description and an as-experienced reaction. Last but not least, I examined their employment in relationship to the interactional business the report as a whole can be seen to accomplish.

Conclusion

I proposed a discursive respecification of first impressions as stories of initial meetings containing participants' as-seen descriptions of the encountered individuals, as well as their as-experienced reactions to these events. In order to do that, I relinquished the traditional cognitive approach to first impressions in favour of a discursive reconceptualisation. I employed discourse analysis for delineating the practices and resources individuals use to accomplish different formulations of first impressions and for investigating their interactional effects.

In this case study, I aimed to describe the activities and resources underlying this analytic endeavour. I organised the exposition around central conventional methodological concerns, while emphasising their intertwined relationship. In addition, I pointed out practical considerations associated with the stages of DA and made recommendations based on my experience with this research method.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- The study originated from my dissatisfaction with experimental research on first impression formation. What did I identify as the main issues of this approach? Can you think of other predicaments?
- This study employed naturalistic empirical evidence. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this type of data?
- What are the main features of discourse analysis as employed in discursive psychological studies?
- This study employed discourse analysis informed by a discursive psychological approach. Can you think of other types of discourse analyses?
- Assembling a collection of naturally occurring references to a specific topic or phenomenon is a difficult undertaking. What strategies would you employ in order to accrue your empirical set?
- In the text, I point out the relationship between discursive social psychology as a theoretical framework and discourse analysis as a method. What are your reflections regarding the intricate connections between theory and method underlying a research endeavour?

Further Reading

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