COGNITIVE COUNSELLORS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL POWER

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ABSTRACT *The theory of cognitive counselling makes little reference to issues of social power but, nonetheless, we are likely to find ideas about social power (whether implicit or explicit) embedded within cognitive counselling discourse. For this research five cognitive counsellors were interviewed about the social context of counselling. The transcripts were analysed using a discourse analytic approach, and four interpretative repertoires around social power were identified. In this paper we discuss how these four repertoires are used by the interviewees to manage the ideological dilemma of individualism and social responsibility described by Billig (1988). We conclude with a discussion of the potential significance for counselling of the multiple and flexible explanations of social power construed in these interviews.*

Key words: cognitive counselling; power; interpretative repertoires

INTRODUCTION

This is a preliminary study that discusses how counsellors influenced by the cognitive paradigm manage issues of social power as they talk about their work. It arises from our interest in the political positioning of counselling, and of cognitive counselling in particular.

Few authors writing within the cognitive behavioural tradition of therapy have directly addressed the political or social implications of their counselling/ therapeutic work (Milton and Legg, 2000). This led us to ask *why* does the cognitive-behavioural tradition engage with issues of social power less, even, than the other main traditions of counselling? In pursuit of this we are interested in:

- the potential theoretical fit between the cognitive-behavioural tradition and a sensitivity to issues of social power.
- how cognitive counsellors talk about social inequality and social power in relation to their counselling.

An initial exploration of the second of these is the subject of this paper. The first we have discussed elsewhere (Spong and Hollanders, 2003).

Social power is defined here as the exercise of control by members of one group over members of another, whether through coercion, persuasion or hegemony (Van Dijk, 1997). Social power is regarded as manifest throughout the structures and relationships that make up society. Discourse about the *social context* of counselling will

inevitably involve constructions of *social power,* whether implicit or explicit.

Power is concerned with the control of resources, both material and discursive, and can involve control over what the subordinate group can *do* and over what they *want* (Lukes, 1994). Women's choices, for example, have historically been constrained both by economic dependency and by socially constructed, internalized images of how women are and what they want. This conceptualization of power has clear implications for understanding counselling as a social practice in that what clients want for themselves from counselling may be to a significant extent a reflection of societal power relations.

This study comprised five interviews with cognitive counsellors, which were analysed with regard to the ways in which the counsellors constructed social power in their discourse. In doing this we were firstly concerned with direct references to social power, and secondly to the presence and absence of constructions of social equality/inequality in relation to counselling. We also looked at ways in which the interview participants constructed the relationship between counselling and its social context on a socio-political level.

In this research, when we explored how the five counsellors interviewed constructed the relationship between individuals and their context and how they managed this in terms of social power, we were interested in the complexity and richness of the individual's discursive resources around this topic. This meant we were not anticipating a simple or coherent account but were alert for variation, complexity and perhaps contradiction within each person's accounts. A fundamental tenet of discourse analysis (and one in keeping with a post-modernist perspective) is that people are not necessar-ily or indeed usually consistent in how they construct the world in their interactions, and this view is reflected in this study. Other implications of adopting a discourse analytic perspective are discussed below.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

In a discourse analytic perspective language is conceived as *constructive,* both in the sense that it is constructed by participants from socially available resources, and also in the sense that it constructs or creates social reality (Wetherell, 2001). Discursive psychology (for example, Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992) uses discourse analysis to challenge psychological concepts such as attitudes and beliefs, and it is this tradition we draw on here.

Taking a discourse analytic approach to the relationship between counselling, social context and social power allows us to explore methodically the variation and contradiction we have heard in everyday conversation between counsellors about these issues. We hope thus to access the richness of the ways in which the counsellors in this study may draw on differing constructions of social power.

Interpretative repertoires

Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) notion of 'interpretative repertoires' provides a useful tool for analysing how people deal with contradictory explanations in their talk. They suggest that rather than having one view or attitude on controversial topics, instead people have available to them a range of different explanations (or repertoires) which they draw on for different purposes in conversation. For example Edley

and Wetherell (2001) describe the young men in their research as having two alternative explanations of what 'feminists' are: firstly as women who want equality, and secondly as man-hating/masculine/possibly lesbian. These young men sometimes used the one explanation in conversation, and sometimes used the other: they used the two explanations as resources in argument.

Interpretative repertoires offer an approach to discourse that does not anticipate that people will be consistent in their explanations. This does not mean there is no pattern to the way in which different arguments are advanced. Rather there is a consistency in the way interpretative repertoires are used to perform different functions in discourse. The interpretative repertoire is a 'building block' (Wetherell and Potter, 1988, 172) called upon by a speaker to create an explanation which is credible.

When a speaker chooses an interpretative repertoire to use at a particular point in a conversation, this may have a *local function,* specific to that context. In the local (immediate) context, the interpretative repertoire may, for example, serve to make the account or story plausible by emphasizing the speaker's knowledgeability or moral status. The use of a particular interpretative repertoire may also have a *broader sociopolitical function*. For example a statement from a counsellor 'it's very much your choice as to whether you look for a job at the moment' may have different functions. It might emphasize the importance of the empowerment of the client to make choices; it might position the counsellor in the conversation as a non-authoritarian sort of person, and on a socio-political level it might position the problem of joblessness within the individual rather than within the social structure. We discuss below the multiple functions of some interpretative repertoires around the social context of counselling.

Ideological dilemmas

Billig (2001) and others have discussed the socio-political factors involved in constructing an argument in terms of ideological dilemmas. Billig argues that one only has *attitudes* on subjects for which a credible alternative view exists. Attitudes are seen by Billig not as fixed intra-psychical elements, but rather views that people present as part of argument: 'attitude-statements tend to be uttered as stances in matters of public controversy' (Billig, 2001, 214).

Thus opinions expressed are seen as having a rhetorical nature, and the statements made and the way in which they are made are concerned at least in part with the participants' interpersonal positioning. This is not to suggest that a person will not have inclinations towards certain opinions more than others: rather the emphasis on the rhetorical nature of discourse counterbalances the traditional psychological bias towards the notion of attitudes as relatively stable mental entities. Billig further develops his analysis of the dilemmatic nature of opinion by considering how both argumentation and social practices relate to ideological dilemmas.

Billig et al. (1988) argue that language and culture contain a variety of resources that people draw on to construct argument and that our thinking and speech have an essentially rhetorical nature. To this extent the concept parallels that of interpretative repertoires, but in addition it pays attention to the ideological or value base of explanatory resources. Billig and his colleagues focus on tensions that are central to the ideologies of a given society – for example the dilemmas around individualism and social

responsibility in modern capitalist society. Individualism, although a dominant principle, is countered by notions of social responsibility and the dilemma between these two facets of our lived ideology is expressed in everyday dialogue. Psychological ways of thinking might be expected to reflect the dominance of individualism (Sampson, 1977, cited in Billig et al., 1988) but according to the notion of ideological dilemmas, implicit in even psychological discourse will be the other side of the argument – social responsibility.

SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theoretical perspective detailed above provides the context for this research. Elements are drawn from three approaches to discourse analysis. First is the understanding of social power that follows that of Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1997). This forms the topic of the research, and reflects our own critical stance with regard to unequal distribution of social power and the resources that are associated with this. Secondly, the method used to analyse the rhetoric and structure of argument by identifying interpretative repertoires is drawn from the discursive psychological approach described by Wetherell, Edwards and Potter amongst others (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992). Thirdly, an understanding of how the arguments made by the participants relate to broader social and philosophical debates is informed by Billig's notion of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988; Billig, 2001).

The intersection of these three approaches to discourse analysis enables us to address the constructive nature of discourse not only in terms of the action orientation of the participants but also by considering reflexively the effect on all the participants of undertaking this study. We are interested in the potential impact of this research on counselling practice through both the research and its dissemination.

THE RESEARCH METHOD

The research process was informed by discussions of discourse analysis method by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Wood and Kroger (2000) and broadly followed the discourse research method described by the latter.

Interviews

There is a considerable tradition of using interviews in discourse analytic work although the contrived rather than naturalistic nature of this form of data has some disadvantages (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Interviews were chosen as the approach to data collection both for simplicity of organization, and also because it allowed the focus of the discussion to be directed by the interviewer to a topic of interest that might otherwise have been marginal to the discourse of the research participants. In these circumstances interviews become an economical approach to gathering variety in data.

Interviews were conducted with five counsellors who were cognitive therapists, rational emotive behaviour therapists or counsellors whose work was influenced by the cognitive behavioural tradition. The five counsellors interviewed were chosen on pragmatic grounds of access through personal knowledge, common contacts and availability. All had at least five years experience as counsellors whilst two had very considerable experience in practice, teaching and research.

The interview structure consisted of a series of trigger questions designed to encourage the participants to talk broadly

about counselling and its relationship to wider social structures and beliefs. The participants were encouraged to enlarge upon their answers and to pursue digressions and personal narratives in order to enrich the range of explanations given.

Interviews were undertaken by the first author either in her work environment or that of the participant, according to their convenience. All were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed using a simplified version of the Jefferson transcription system (see Wood and Kroger, 2000), which indicated such characteristics of the conversation as hesitation, repetition, pace, talking over one another, intonation, and an approximation of the length of pauses.

Coding and analysis

The coding and analysis of the data was carried in four stages:

- *Selection* and collection of all sections of transcript relevant to the discussion of social power and counselling. This was carried out first by marking relevant sections by hand onto printed out interview transcripts.
- *Identification* of possible interpretative repertoires. As potential repertoires were identified material for each was collected into a common document using the 'cut-and-paste' function of the word processor.
- Checking whether participants *orientated* to these repertoires as being different (Wetherell and Potter, 1988). By this is meant whether the interviewee and interviewer demonstrated by their behaviour that there was a potential conflict between different ways of conceptualizing counselling and social power. This might occur, for example by separating the use of different repertoires in time, or by offering an explanation for conjunction of two different repertoires.

- Looking at the *function* of the identified repertoires in the interaction. For what purpose was one or another chosen as the preferred explanatory resource at a given moment?

As anticipated, this process did not follow a linear progression and an initial coding of the early interviews was rejected as further data failed to fit it. It was replaced by a first draft of the interpretative repertoires described below. This draft also was developed and simplified (from five to four repertoires) into the form in which it is presented in this report.

Checking for participants' *orientation* to the proposed interpretative repertoires was not a separate stage chronologically, as it was seen as intrinsic to the process of identifying interpretative repertoires. Instead the clarification of repertoires, and the identification of separation of repertoires and other indications of participants' orientation to these as distinct, were interwoven into one process.

Developing an analysis of the *function* of the interpretative repertoires occurred as a separate stage.

Using the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) to explain the function of the different interpretative repertoire emerged during the analysis; it was not determined in advance.

Validation

The validity checks of the analysis were threefold:

- Participants' orientation: internal validity of interpretative repertoires was checked by considering whether the participants orientated to the repertoires as different, for example through temporal separation.
- Circulation to participants: a draft

version of the paper was circulated to all the interviewees, although the absence of critical comments from the participants is not claimed as evidence of their agreement with it.

- Reader assessment: the detailed presentation of data in this paper is intended to facilitate the reader in assessing the validity of the analysis.

Application

This research is concerned not only with reporting what is found, but also with addressing issues of social inequality. This agenda is met primarily through a process of consciousness raising, or the provision of 'space for alternative constructions or versions which are not usually heard' (Taylor, 2001, 326). The act of speaking about a marginalized issue can itself be a potent intervention. In addition, the identification of a variety of interpretative repertoires within counsellors' discourse about social power in relation to their practice could also emphasize and give weight to the less frequently heard positions.

RESULTS

The analysis identified four interpretative repertoires drawn on by the counsellors participating. These are referred to as:

A: worlds apart;
B: problems cause other problems;
C: changing that environment;
D: we all exist in society.

The title of each interpretative repertoire is drawn from the dialogue (three are taken from participants' words and in the fourth the words are used by the researcher in a reflection of a participant's turn). Each is illustrated in turn below. In the following extracts the researcher is referred to as SS; participants are anonymized as CD, GH, JK, LM and RS. Numbers following the speaker's initials indicate the number of the speaking turn within the interview.

REPERTOIRE A: 'WORLDS APART'

In this repertoire the respondent sees counselling and social power as in different frames. This is the dominant repertoire identified, used by all five respondents. It was manifested in three main forms: explicitly; by omission; and through the construction of delicate objects (Silverman, 1997).

- Explicit manifestation of the 'worlds apart' repertoire:

  GH 14 And I just feel that as a therapist, y'know I'm just not in a position to um tackle, y'know, a person's socio-economic y'know um um err disadvantages.

- 'Worlds apart' repertoire manifested by omission. In some cases the absence of reference to social explanations can be a manifestation of the 'worlds apart' repertoire. In the example below, when discussing why clients who have experienced domestic violence return to their abusive partner, the counsellor focuses only on a psychological explanation.

  RS 21 ((the client)) y'know, sort of really tried to put the case forward as to why they needed to be in this relationship and they have, actually they have their own issues as to why they need to be there, whether it's y'know continuing the victim because I can feel a bit of a ↑martyr, show the world look y'know <under these difficult circumstances >so they have their own issues. And naturally it depends from client to client as to how far they want to work at those issues.

They may just want to y'know to put a plaster on it [umhm] and help you t- to do that and that's all they want they don't want life changing situations umm

- Manifestation of the 'worlds apart' repertoire by the construction of issues around social power/ politics as 'delicate objects'.

'Delicate objects' is the term coined by David Silverman to refer to matters that are constructed in conversation in such a way to indicate that it is potentially sensitive and is being approached with caution. This categorization is identified by indicators in the conversation such as laughter, hesitation and repair.

LM 69 I have got got increasingly . . . despairing about what happens to true, altruistic °. . . oxymorons° . . . I mean um hhh politicians (laughter from both) [yes] and I don- can't I can't I can't comment really because it seems to me that that in order to do the one , you have to stop doing the other [right] so hh . . . hhm . . . I've . . . hh . . . if we're looking at people who try very hard in terms . . . mediation [umhm] then I think, yes umm . . . to allow people to communicate . . .

REPERTOIRE B: 'PROBLEMS CAUSE OTHER PROBLEMS'

Using this repertoire, social powerlessness and social deprivation are described as contributing towards the psychological and emotional problems that may bring clients into counselling.

GH 14 (. . .) I mean it is undoubtedly true that people further down the social order as it were, have a lot more life problems of a much more pressing nature [yeah] and y'know from an *aggregate* point of view y'know they're more susceptible to depression umm . . . but it's also true that um y'know err there is a certain cognitive, er psychological profile which is associated with depression across the board which

whatever problems you're facing, that cognitive profile makes them worse. [Yeah] So you can always help people with that.

REPERTOIRE C: 'CHANGING THAT ENVIRONMENT'

Using this repertoire, counselling /psychotherapy are constructed as a force that can address problems in the social environment.

CD 25 let's suppose you're in a position whereby you are being harassed, bullied, racially abused, let's suppose that. Now how can you, in a sense, work towards changing that environment. And we say . . . the best way of changing your environment is *when you're not disturbed.*

REPERTOIRE D: 'WE ALL EXIST IN SOCIETY'

In this repertoire the respondent constructs counselling as a force that helps the individual to fit in better to society as it is.

SS 3 . . . which is, what do you see counselling as, what is counselling?

JK 4 Umm in a nutshell, I suppose it's helping the client to help themselves. To, I guess . to fit better in society because we all exist in society.

DISCUSSION

Relationships between the four identified interpretative repertoires

Repertoire A ('worlds apart') was the dominant repertoire for explaining the relationship between counselling and issues of social power. All the participants used this. Moreover, at times participants drew on repertoire B ('problems cause other problems') to provide support for the 'worlds apart' repertoire. 'Problems cause other

problems' was used as a way of acknowledging the complexity of influences on clients' psychological wellbeing whilst maintaining a depiction of the autonomous self-determining individual. In this way the speaker anticipates and negates potential arguments against his/her position: repertoire B acts as a disclaimer for repertoire A.

In other ways, too, participants oriented themselves to potential critique of the 'worlds apart' repertoire. One participant used autobiographical statements of left-wing political commitment in a way that offers a counterpoint to the 'worlds apart' repertoire; another used professional history in the same way invoking the positive attributes of caring associated with the category of social worker. Each of these implies the speakers' awareness that their position in using the 'worlds apart repertoire' could be challenged as uncaring about social inequality.

Repertoire C ('changing that environment') is used much less frequently than repertoire A. Only two respondents draw clearly on this repertoire, although an instance from a third participant could arguably be included here. Respondent CD uses this repertoire extensively in discussing his or her approach to therapy, using various justificatory devices. For example this participant used morally compelling examples (Gandhi, Martin Luther King) and extreme case formulations (references to the Holocaust) to support REBT as a potential tool of social justice, in the way that Potter and Wetherell (1987) describe as typical in constructing accounts as convincing.

Repertoire D ('we all exist in society') is frequently used to emphasize the common-sense, practical aspects of cognitive-behavioural counselling/therapy as in the example below:

GH 6 I suppose that one of the takes I have on it is a, umm what I see as a relatively down to earth one which is like er you help people with their problems y'know and I'm not a great fan of adding existential, spiritual, philosophical dimensions to it. You know, I tend to, most of the people I work with really do want to work on the kind of things that are troubling them right now and umm they want some help in managing things better. So I tend to, I yeah I tend to see it in that way and I may be mistakenly, but I may as well get the ideology up here at the front from at the start [yeah, yeah] one of my background factors is that I'm from a relatively working class background and um I I kind of see some aspects of the counselling world as being rather er middle class, pretentious errm y'know sort of thing, so I like to ground myself in y'know more down to earth really work .

In this example the participant supports the stance taken with reference to autobiographical material, so enhancing the authority of the position taken: an example of the use of categorization ('class') as a device for strengthening an account. In this case the categorization chosen carries an implication that the working class has particular authority on questions of social inequality and so the accounting of counselling as of *practical* help to people is justified. This 'common-sense' categorization of the cognitive-behavioural is used as a justification device in respect of this repertoire by other participants as well when describing their approach to counselling.

Using the four interpretative repertoires to manage an ideological dilemma

Having identified the four interpretative repertoires described above the question arose as to the function played by these in the dialogue. The systematic use of the repertoires was not immediately clear, particularly as the participants varied

significantly in the frequency of use of each. It became apparent, however, that the usage was related to what initially seemed to be the taking of *moral* positions around social power. On further analysis, this appeared to be concerned instead with the management of an ideological dilemma, using a variety of rhetorical devices.

Billig et al. (2001) identify a number of key contemporary ideological dilemmas including that between social responsibility and individualism. In these interviews counsellors faced the task of working within a psychological framework (emphasizing the individualistic arm of the liberal individual/ social responsibility dilemma) but dealing explicitly with the interaction between the individual and the social, this being the stated focus of the interviews. This conjunction emphasized the social responsibility/ individualism dilemma for the participants. From the data it is possible to identify five main strategies for dealing with this manifestation of this dilemma:

- Using the 'worlds apart' repertoire; either giving no attention to the notion of social responsibility or constructing social/ political issues as delicate objects.
- Using the 'worlds apart' repertoire, and offering a justification for taking an individualistic stance through an invocation of personal and political autobiography.
- Using the 'problems cause other problems' repertoire as a disclaimer to support an emphasis on the individualistic arm of the dilemma expressed in the 'worlds apart' repertoire.
- Invoking both arms of the dilemma through the 'we all exist in society' repertoire.
- Using the social responsibility arm of the dilemma as part of the argument for counselling/therapy, as when CD states

'the best way of changing the environment, is when you're not disturbed'. This strategy may use significant moral rhetoric as part of the 'changing the environment' repertoire.

APPLICATION

The application of this study to the *practice* of counselling is primarily through raising the profile of the 'social responsibility' arm of the ideological dilemma described by Billig, and the relevance of this to counselling. As Taylor (2001) comments, critique and analysis can be instrumental in change. We hope that the presentation of the research to a wider audience might encourage readers to consider their relationship to the interpretative repertoires identified here, and the ways in which they construct their counselling as reflective of, or critical of, relations of social power. It is our hope that reporting this work, alongside other studies focusing on the aspects of the question of the relationship of cognitive-behavioural counselling to social power (Spong and Hollanders, 2003) might problematize any assumption that cognitive-behavioural counselling is intrinsically unsuited to addressing issues of social power.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

This is a small exploratory study. It is a characteristic of this approach to research that the knowledge produced is situated and local, and generalizability cannot be assumed: it may tell us something about how some counsellors talk sometimes about counselling and social power, but it cannot pretend to state general rules of how counsellors construct their representations

of social power. The broader usefulness of the work is, however, dependent on how any insight generated by the analysis impacts on the theory and practice of counselling. In considering this, some of the assumptions on which this work is founded need to be explored further. For example, there is an assumption here that there is a specific discourse of cognitive counselling, whether it is a sub-discourse of a counselling discourse, or is separate. For this reason, all the interviewees worked within, or largely within, the cognitive-behavioural tradition of counselling. In future work it would be useful to look at differences and similarities between the discourses of cognitive counsellors and others, to develop a greater understanding of how those within different traditions of counselling construct their discussions of counselling and social power. It would also be useful to look at naturalistic data rather than using interviews.

One point we have made in the discussion and conclusion is the range of ways in which the participants discuss the relationship between counselling and social power. We are unable, however, from this study to explore the relationship between the use of these interpretative repertoires to manage the ideological dilemma of individualism and social responsibility, and the actual practice of the counsellors concerned. Subsequent work may be able to look towards integrating an understanding of the richness of counselling discourse in this area into the development of counselling practice that is firmly located in relation to issues of social power.

CONCLUSION

The five counsellors who were interviewed primarily constructed social power and counselling as separate: repertoire A was most frequently drawn upon. To some extent this repertoire was supported rather than challenged by descriptions of the social environment (including social deprivation and powerlessness) as a factor that might increase the likelihood of emotional disturbance, but which could be overcome with greater or less difficulty by individual psychological change. Three or possibly four participants also drew on a repertoire that emphasized the practical nature of cognitive behavioural therapy/counselling as helping clients to get along in society as it is.

Perhaps none of these three repertoires is surprising: each corresponds to a potential criticism of counselling and therapy. Repertoire A ('worlds apart') reflects the criticism that counselling individualizes social problems by abstracting them from the social context. Repertoire B ('problems cause other problems') positions social disadvantage as complicating or predicating factors but nonetheless interventions are seen as purely on the psychological level. 'We all exist in society' (repertoire D) can be seen as paralleling the criticism that counselling, and perhaps cognitive counselling in particular, is concerned as much with increasing social conformity and maintaining social cohesion and productivity as with personal development.

However, in repertoire C ('changing the environment') is seen a sense that counselling can be concerned not only with individual psychological change but ultimately with social change. In this repertoire counselling is constructed as part of a broader project and, using this repertoire, the client can be located as both agent and subject, and the counsellor moves within a central ideological dilemma of modern society. The potential criticism that this repertoire parallels would be of counsellors

influencing the client towards their views on the potential for social change, so overstepping the ethical and role boundaries of counselling.

SUMMARY

The counsellors who participated in this research all drew on at least two, and in some cases all four of the identified repertoires in managing the ideological dilemma of individualism and social responsibility. The distinction between repertoires was such, moreover, that counsellors used them either alone or in conjunction with one another to strengthen their arguments or justify the position they took, thereby acknowledging and giving credence to positions different to those they were drawing on at that moment. Perhaps the key conclusion to be drawn from this project is the acknowledgement of the complexity of ways in which counsellors talk about social power in relation to counselling.

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