Protean experience in discursive analysis.

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Abstract
This article reflects on what we mean by experience in discursive analysis in light of James Cresswell’s critique (Cresswell, this issue). Experience does matter, but experience does not determine or presage the narrative or accounts we will give about it. Experience is a resource that we can draw upon and make relevant for our own purposes. Experience is malleable and can be used to tell various stories, depending on the context and the interlocutors. As analysts, our job is to ascertain how social actors show that experience matters to them through their discourse and embodied action.

Keywords
Accounts, affect, discursive analysis, emergent experience, experience, experience as resource, narrative

In my reading, the main thrust of James Cresswell’s critique is that discursive analysis merely focuses on people’s talk about experience, rather than on the experience itself. This is a problem for discursive analysis because experience matters to people, especially experience such as that of being the victim of racism or difficulties in being an immigrant. This critique challenges discursive analysts to reflect on what is captured and what is missed in current ways of working. So, here I want to consider how experience is conceived in doing discursive analysis.

Varieties of experience
Experience is in many ways a slippery term with a variety of meanings. Experience is an old concept with a long lineage in philosophy. Just to quickly mention a few uses that...
come to mind, for empiricists our knowledge of the world is based on our experience. Our experience of material objects is ‘given’ to us through our senses (Heath, 2006). This leads to the distinction in our ways of knowing, between a posteriori knowledge, based on experience (science), and a priori knowledge which is derived by reason alone (metaphysics). ‘Experience’ and ‘empirical’ become closely allied terms. Phenomenologists, such as Alfred Schutz (1970), take experience as the intentional objects of consciousness. These need to be bracketed from posited real objects and then phenomenologically reduced. Schutz’s phenomenology influenced Harold Garfinkel (1967), the founder of ethnomethodology, but the notion of experience does not get picked up (see Cresswell’s footnote, p. xx [add cross-refs at proof]). In more recent philosophy, the subjective or qualitative aspects of experience become characterized as ‘qualia’ to indicate the characteristic feel or properties of experience. The qualia of experience involve states such as perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, emotions, and moods (Kind, 2008).

Another development was the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and the social sciences. Instead of analyzing the object domain, the tact here is to examine how we talk about objects. Wittgenstein’s (1953) ‘meaning-as-use’ dictum provides support for this turn to language use. So experience and the empiricists’ emphasis on individual perception get transformed into discourse and the ways we make sense of our world through social interaction. For the discursive approach, ‘experience’ is used in the colloquial sense of the term as that about which we tell narratives or accounts, such as Labov’s (1972a) study of stories about the time one almost died (1972), or Wooffitt’s analysis of accounts of paranormal experiences (1992). Interestingly, the term, ‘experience’, is not to be found in the subject index of many of the canonical works in discursive analysis.

Cresswell’s critique gives us pause to consider the different senses of experience and how discursive analysis deals with these. In characterizing what he means by experience, Cresswell uses the descriptive term, ‘phenomenologically immediate experience’ (p. xx): ‘phenomenological’ presumably to bracket any claims to objective reality and to focus on the subjective, individually lived aspect of experience; ‘immediate’ to indicate that which is directly given to one’s senses, that is, what is directly perceived or felt or understood in experience. It is helpful to think about this definition of experience through considering the examples he provides: (1) ‘an immediate feeling of relief’ ex-patriots find in meeting up while in a foreign country; (2) ‘an immediate revolt at a racist remark’; and (3) ‘an immediate experiential commitment to an ethnic identity’ (p. xx). In each of these cases, experience is specified in terms of some sort of immediate, subjective reaction – a sensation, an affect, or state-of-consciousness arising during a social encounter. Each of these three examples is social; these immediate experiences arise in the course of talk and interaction.

Cresswell ties his sense of experience to a ‘social discourse’ (p. xx). The notion of social discourse draws from the early work of Bakhtin to capture the taken-for-granted knowledge and feelings of how to carry on with others in doing a certain kind of social interaction (Cresswell and Teucher, 2011). The concept of social discourse seems similar to Bakhtin’s speech genres (1986). A social discourse is ‘rooted in living life with others’ (p. xx), which reminds me of Wittgenstein’s ‘a form of life’ (1953). Presumably social discourses involve patterned forms of talk such as, for example, white working-class men’s speech codes in ‘speaking like a man in Teamsterville’ (Philipsen, 1975), or
African-American, adolescent males ritualistic insults in ‘playing the dozens’ (Labov, 1972b). Each of these social discourses are understood and practiced within these communities. Experience, then, is not simply ‘given’ to the individual, but rather is interpreted within the social discourses one knows.¹

To expand on case (2) above – a racist remark – imagine a situation, say a reunion with one’s extended family, where while conversing with family members an uncle utters a racial epithet which occasions the above-mentioned feeling of ‘an immediate revolt’. Looking at it from the uncle’s point of view, he may be using the racial epithet in a jokey way to stigmatize a certain group. The uncle’s background, age, and politics may be such that such epithets are not an uncommon feature of his social discourse and are part of his life world. The general point here is that since you and your uncle may participate in different social discourses on race, your respective experiences of the racial epithet will be vastly different – to your uncle, the epithet is intended as funny, but to you it is heard as offensive and racist.

Returning to the larger issue, if experience is something which we are continually having, then it seems problematic to equate the notion of experience with feelings or affect. For what about those experiences that are less memorable, more ordinary, say those that occur before the uncle’s racist remark with no discernable feeling at all? The above three examples of phenomenologically immediate experience seem to be extraordinary rather than ordinary and involve some heightened intensity of consciousness. It becomes difficult to see how we can characterize ordinary experience in terms of some immediate affect or feeling.

Turning to Cresswell’s critique, he argues that discursive analysis focuses on people’s talk but gives insufficient attention to the immediate phenomenological experience which is the basis for people’s talk (p. xx). It is such experience that makes talk relevant for people (p. xx). Just analyzing how interlocutors rhetorically manage a situation is insufficient in understanding why such talk matters to people. Experience is said to be the grounds for our accounts; experience provides the basis for why we offer the accounts that we do. Experience, then, is more basic than mere talk. Applying this to the transcript excerpt (p. xx), we can say that Linda’s experience of growing up in Chinese culture matters to her, and consequently she will be committed to it in her accounts. Cresswell’s criticism is that discursive analysis is limited to just looking at the rhetorical aspects of the interview, presumably how Linda’s accounts justify her wanting to pass on Chinese culture to her children.

In my view, experience does matter, but experience does not determine or presage the narrative or accounts we will give about it. Experience is a resource that we can draw upon and make relevant for our own purposes. Experience is malleable and can be used to tell various stories depending on the context and the interlocutors. As analysts, our job is to ascertain how social actors show that experience matters to them through their discourse and embodied action.

Approaching the question of experience from the accounts literature, a main impulse of this line of research is the recognition that people can and do offer different accounts for their experience, depending on the audience and other contextual factors (Buttny, 1993). Persons can be strategic in what they tell or do not tell others; they may be motivated to manage impressions or save face (Goffman, 1967). They may be less concerned
with a careful rendering of their experience and more with the social exigencies of the situation. Interactionally managing a problematic situation with accounts may be more important to people than a full airing of their experience. Cresswell assumes talk about experience involves some sort of authentic dialogue rather than impression management.

Cresswell seems to have more profound types of experience in mind, say the trauma from being a refugee or the victim of racism. As he says, ‘the experience of racism … is embodied’ and has an important ‘experiential dimension’ (p. xx). Such experiences may be overwhelming and make one angry or traumatized, and such affect may be evident in one’s body in talking about it. But discursive analysis seems equipped to empirically capture such embodiment. For instance, in a study of a televised panel interview between Israelis and Palestinians, a Palestinian participant vociferously accuses her Israeli counterpart of being racist for defending the killing of children during the Second Intifada (Buttny and Ellis, 2007). In speaking of these horrendous events, her affect becomes evident in three respects: she avows feeling pain at the death of these children; she attributes this pain to other Palestinian mothers; and her affect becomes displayed bodily in her voice through rising pitch, emphatic intonation, loudness, and extended eye contact with her Israeli interlocutor (see excerpt 8, p. xx, for a detailed transcription of this). Embodiment studies – displayed through voice, gestures, eye contact, and the like – is currently a hot area of inquiry in discursive analysis (Goodwin, 2007; Streeck, 2003). Such studies of embodiment have developed sophisticated ways to observe and transcribe embodied movement and actions in conjunction with the verbal level.

One of the most interesting parts of Cresswell’s article is his way of rendering Linda’s accounts of her background and being raised in Chinese culture. But in his rendering of Linda’s accounts, the notion of ‘experience’ seems to be used in rather different ways. First of all, ‘we see Linda articulating an experience’ (p. xx). Here, ‘experience’ is used in a straightforward way; Linda had the experience of being raised in Chinese culture and now she is telling Jim about it. Experience functions as a resource that speakers can draw on to account, what we may call narrative experience. This is the experience that Labov’s (1972a) and Wooffitt’s (1992) subjects evoke in telling their stories.

There seems to be a second sense of experience that Cresswell uses – he describes Linda’s discourse thus: ‘this is an expression that accomplishes an experience’ (p. xx). ‘Experience’ here seems different; it points to the emergent qualities of recognition that arise through her speaking and social interaction. One may become more aware of one’s own experience in the course of discussing it with another.2 Putting an experience into words can help one to better understand one’s own experience. In addition, getting others’ responses to the narrative can allow one to discover something about one’s own experience. We may call this emergent experience. This sense of experience arises in the moment-by-moment contact of interacting with other(s).

Linda’s ‘articulating of an experience’ is told to the interviewer, Jim, and the co-interviewee, Paul. As we see in the excerpt, Jim’s initial query about her passing on ‘the Chinese way’ (turn 1) opens up a topic that gets addressed and interactionally unfolds through Linda’s accounts and Jim’s queries and acknowledgement tokens. As Linda comes to a competition point (turn 12), we have this exchange (p. xx):
Jim formulates the upshot of what Linda has said: ‘s’ kinda WHO you are.’ Cresswell conjectures (p. xx) that such self-talk or ethnic-identity talk may not be a social discourse very familiar to Linda, as it would be to a psychologist such as Jim. Nonetheless, Linda goes along, uses a modified repeat of his formulation, and then elaborates (turns 14–16). Cresswell parses this exchange as ‘a coordinated act of expression “that” brings Linda’s experience of self-as-Chinese into being and so approaches an experience that would otherwise be neglected’ (p. xx). So, here we can see the emergence of an experience that arises through the exchange.

As we have seen, Cresswell offers a methodology which draws on the key notions of experience and social discourse. How might we evaluate these as methods? Starting with experience, we have seen that there are different senses of the notion of experience in Cresswell’s article. Discursive analysis takes experience as a resource, as that upon which persons can draw for their narratives and accounts. As we have argued, experience can be protean or amorphous; it does not determine what to say about it. What we say about an experience can be conceived in terms of Grice’s (1975) maxims: how much or little one says, of truth, adequate evidence, or clarity as well as any conversational implicatures which may be inferred. What gets said about one’s experience derives not only from the intentions of the speaker but is also interactionally accomplished with one’s interlocutors. For instance, Jim’s queries of Linda in the interview, as well as the seeming minutia of his acknowledgement tokens, ‘uhm’ (turn 3), ‘ok’ (turn 5), and ‘uhm’ (turn 7), show his attentiveness and interest. What gets said about Linda’s experience is contingent on recipients’ activities.

Linda’s answers in this excerpt can also be heard as accounts, as justification or explanation for her child-raising practices. Jim’s initial query (turn 1) can be heard as evaluative in that he calls for an account. Linda’s response in sketching her childhood background and sense of identity attempts to make her child-rearing goals understandable. We can imagine a different kind of response to Jim’s initial query, one more of a propositional claim (e.g. Chinese culture is rich and sophisticated). Instead, Linda references her experience as a child that could lead one to recognize the value of carrying on the Chinese ways.

**Conclusion**

As often happens in the history of ideas, the question raised gets changed. Instead of the phenomenological interest in describing experience, the linguistic turn of discursive analysis limits inquiry to language use and embodied action because these are observable to analysts. They can be replayed and transcribed in ways that subjective experience cannot. Experience is a resource that people can draw on and talk about and formulate in various ways. As analysts the interest is in how people orient to their own or others’ experience as expressed, e.g., as authentic, doubtful, exaggerated, ironic, and so on. As analysts we are after how persons themselves show or treat their experiences.
First-hand lived experience is subjective and phenomenologically immediate, but harder to know as analysts, as third-person observers. Humanistic inquiries, such as autoethnography (Bochner, 1997), may be better suited for exploring such sorts of experience. The pragmatic test of a methodology comes in what it produces: has it led to some interesting or useful findings. Based on such criteria both discursive psychology (Potter, 2007) and ethnomethodology/conversation analysis (Drew and Heritage, 2006) have had impressive track records. Cresswell’s proposed approach is just in its infancy; let us see how this research program develops.

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**Notes**

1. Taking experience as interpreted by a social discourse allows Cresswell to avoid the following criticism: ‘immediate experience has often been denounced as a myth … All experience, on this view, involves interpretation, and it is thus senseless to suppose any unvarnished, direct acquaintance with the given’ (Heath, 2006: 515).

2. This reminds me of a comment made by the film director Ingmar Bergman that he becomes most aware of his self through conversing with others.

**References**


**Author biography**

Richard Buttny is a Professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University, New York. He received his PhD from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His books include: *Social Accountability in Communication* (SAGE, 1993) and *Talking Problems: Studies on Discursive Construction* (State University of New York Press, 2004). He has been a Fulbright Fellow in Malaysia and in India, and his current research interest is in environmental discourse.