

# Discourse: some considerations for the reflective practitioner<sup>1</sup>

Anne B. Ryan

This article will appear as a chapter in a book called *The Reflective Practitioner*, edited by Tony Walsh and forthcoming in 2011, published by MACE.

## Introduction

In this chapter, I use the term discourse in a very specific way. My usage concerns meaning repertoires, through which we filter our experiences. When people talk about something or when we act, we draw on or activate certain meaning-resources or discourses.<sup>2</sup> We often do so within dominant discourses, which characterise ways of talking, writing, thinking, behaving and theorising that prevail at certain times in certain arenas of life. How do these taken-for-granted ways of being define or position people in particular ways? How do they act to legitimise particular kinds of behaviour? What assumptions does a particular discourse contain about what is normal or desirable? Whose position is strengthened or weakened by what is focused upon or what is ignored within a particular discourse? What discourses are muted or unacknowledged? What discourses might one expect to find concerning a theme, but which are noticeable by their absence? Such questions are a necessary concern for the reflective practitioner.

I first encountered discourse in the sense considered in this chapter, in 1990, in a book called *Losing Out*, by Sue Lees (1987). I was bowled over by how strongly the concept resonated with my experience, and by Lees' analysis of how discourses *both reflect and create social reality*. At that time, I was a teacher in a co-educational second-level school. I was concerned that, although the school had all kinds of equal-opportunities policies in place, girls often were disadvantaged because they spent a lot of time coping with comments about their sexuality or sexual 'reputation'. And there was a widespread assumption among staff and students that it was natural or normal for girls to have to do this. People assumed that, although it was unfortunate, the task for girls was to learn to deal with it. Among those who didn't like it or who felt it was unfair, there was a feeling of powerlessness, and no books or manuals on equality had anything useful to offer. The only real option open to a girl accused of being a slut was to deny it. The truth or otherwise of the accusation had nothing to do with it; to call a girl a slut was to put her down, disempower her or 'keep her in her place' and to negate any other power or authority she might have. The same discourse could be employed to disempower a woman teacher. Boys and men teachers could be subject to discourses surrounding homosexuality (see Ryan, 1992, 1997).

It was extremely difficult to contest the notion that sexuality was at the heart of a girl's identity. Within the discourses circulating in the school at that time, there was no discourse that made active female sexuality okay. Nor was there a discourse that had as its central premise that it was unacceptable to reduce everything to sexuality, where girls and women were concerned.

Not a great deal has changed in the 23 years since Lees published her study. In modern societies, it is now widely acceptable to talk about sex, but the discourses that shape how we talk about it remain largely similar to the discourses identified by Lees. Discourses

still circulate, which have a central premise that sex and sexuality are at the heart of how a girl or woman can be judged.

I have used the concept of discourse in research on schooling, personal development education, feminist identity, marriage, economic growth, sustainability and balanced living and transformative learning (see Ryan 1997, 2001a,b, 2003, 2004). I have also drawn on discourse analysis in my teaching, and in my professional and personal lives I have tried to be an activist for discursive change. In this chapter, I want to set out some of the general principles of a discourse approach, and am guided by questions generated over several years by students, colleagues, people commissioning and funding research, and friends.

### **Specific usage of the term discourse**

In this chapter, then, I use the term ‘discourse’ as developed by Foucault (1979, 1980, 1991), and further developed by poststructuralist theorists, many of whom are cited throughout the text. This usage is distinct from how, in journalism and some other parts of everyday life, the term ‘discourse’ is often now used as a synonym for conversation, debate, talk or dialogue. Another usage of the term discourse – probably somewhere between the usage in this chapter and the more general usage -- is that of Mezirow (2003), who draws on the work of Habermas (1984). For Mezirow, discourse is a ‘critical-dialectical’ dialogue that involves assessing the beliefs, feelings and values of others, ‘to arrive at a tentative best judgement’ (Mezirow, 2003: 59).

Discourses, as treated in this chapter, are ‘socially organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done’ (Burman, 1994: 2). They form regimes of truth, which ‘present a distinct object of study, rather like Durkheimian social facts, except that they exist in a state of fluidity and are coextensive, as knowledge, with movements of power’ (Ransom, 1993: 131). This approach to discourse is useful for systematic enquiry into how we know the world, and how ways of knowing can serve to regulate us or to liberate us.

Discourse is implicated in how we understand ourselves as persons, in how we interpret what we see around us and what we experience, and in how we construct meaning about ourselves, our groups and the world at large. We are all inserted into a myriad of different discourses, some competing with and some complementing each other. Discourses provide positions within which we can locate ourselves. They also allow us to position other people and they allow other people to position us.

A discourse approach facilitates exploration in a systematic way of ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about human and social relations, from the intimate to the international. If we talk about sex, human rights, work, childcare, economics, or global warming, to name just a few themes, we activate and draw on discourses, in order to make sense of what is going on and to guide our actions. The meaning-resources and sense-making repertoires constitute the discourses.

Identifying discourses is a way of *describing* and *analysing* what happens in social and human relations. But discourses also *shape* social relations and have actual effects on practice and identity. Discourses are real, with real effects. They are not just a reflection of reality; they have an objective reality (Ransom, 1993: 131); they are concepts, but they are also more than concepts. The point of analysing discourse is not simply to expose a heretofore hidden meaning, but to question and disrupt ways of understanding that are taken as unchanging and unquestionable truth (cf Davies, 2004: 7).

Discourse analysis can support discourse activism and can give a rigorous theoretical underpinning to our projects for a better world. The rigour of discourse analysis is not intended to replace the activist's desire to contribute to human and planetary flourishing, but to enhance the passion that underpins that desire. In this way, we can strengthen our contribution.

### **Some practical distinctions: sites, themes and discourses**

It can be tempting to characterise everything as a discourse. This may arise from the popularisation of the term in recent years. But if we allow the term discourse to include everything in the social world, it lessens the usefulness of the concept as a tool for reflective practice. For rigour and systematic analysis, and to allow us to examine many different features of a phenomenon – all of which lend credibility and reliability to a study or a plan for creating change -- it is worth distinguishing between a number of terms such as sites, themes and discourses.

I am not trying to make rigid rules here about what terms are used (for instance, a site could be termed a field or an arena, even a problem or an issue; a theme might be thought of as a category; a discourse, as already outlined, could be called a meaning repertoire, an interpretive resource, a lens, a way of understanding or a filter for experience). The important thing is to be consistent in how one uses the terms in one's work. My purpose is to show the value of clarifying among different kinds of terms and of using them consistently in one's approach to analysis or writing.

For example, a work organisation or group could be thought of as a site, and within that site, one theme is usually the purpose of the organisation or group (other themes might be pay, working conditions, staff development). Another theme could be some kind of problem or issue confronting the organisation or the group. Surrounding any theme, one will find a number of discourses. In other words, when people talk, write or think about the theme, we activate different meaning frameworks. The discourses we activate depend on our differential experience, discursive exposure and political alignments (cf Alloway and Gilbert, 2004: 100). If we take the theme of the purpose of a work organisation, we may see in action discourses such as value for money, public service, social transformation, human development, shareholder profit, cost-effectiveness, competitiveness and so on (see for example Lange 2004). Sometimes these discourses stand in opposition to each other, so that participation in one makes participation in another untenable. And sometimes discourses nest together comfortably.

Within the site or arena of marriage, one finds many themes, such as love, children, childcare, housework, money, sex and so on. The discourses that arise concerning those themes include discourses of blame, responsibility, correct order, equity versus equality, less is more, lack of choice and normality (see Ryan, 2001b). Several different discourses can be in play concerning any one theme, such as housework or childcare (ibid). And of course, the site of marriage is nested within other sites, such as contemporary heterosexual relations, homosexual relations, and contemporary society.

One could also treat as a site a political or social action or movement, or attempts to create new social forms, as well as any struggle or resistance. For example, the make-poverty-history marches of 2006-7 were events (technically, sites) within the bigger site that is the global justice movement. And some sites are more abstract than others. We don't actually 'see' them even though we are aware of them, as with education, work, employment or the media.

Sometimes we miss certain sites completely because our eyes are not attuned to them. We can be positioned in such a way in a discursive field, that we take certain sites as the norm, for example, sites such as heterosexuality, whiteness or ability. They do not 'show up' for us. And the voices of those who do see the site may be muted within the overall discursive climate.

The same discourse – or variations on it -- can often be found in operation across different sites/arenas and themes. For instance, discourses concerning essential gender differences can occur across arenas as diverse as defence, peace-keeping, heterosexual relations, education, sexual activity, care and housework.

### **Describing a discourse**

Discourses are fluid and they shift and shape-change with the times and their geographical locations. Nevertheless, it is necessary in any discourse analysis to try to pin down what their premises are and how they take effect. One cannot decide if a discourse is enabling, or if it needs to be challenged or changed, if one cannot describe it adequately. Drawing loosely on the work of Foucault and taking into account the work of other commentators and my own research, I offer three groups of guidelines for practitioners engaging in discourse analysis or discourse activism

1. Ask what the central premise of the discourse is. The premise of a discourse can frame or underpin what is actually said or done, *even though the premise is not named or talked about*. Ways of making sense are not always obvious or transparent. The task of the discourse analyst is to expose the premises that go unstated, so that we can judge for ourselves whether they are good enough or acceptable for the kind of society we want to create and live in.
2. Examine how a discourse is deployed. Also examine the present-moment relations that affect how a discourse plays out in any particular situation, site, arena, or in relation to a particular theme. Discourse is not fixed, but constantly shifting

3. What conditions facilitate or militate against a discourse being widely circulated? How powerful, acknowledged or muted each one is will depend on the general discursive climate.

### **Discourse and power**

Power is mobilised when speakers or social actors activate consensus about what is the case (cf Cherryholmes, 1988: 180). A discourse or its premises may not be openly stated, but they can still come to hold the status of truth. The ways that we form meaning are central to any consideration of power, because meaning is implicated in shaping and regulating the conduct of human beings (cf Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003: 493). For instance, calling someone a slut is appealing to a 'truth' or premise about women and girls: that it is normal, natural or acceptable to judge them by their sexual activity. But this premise may never actually be articulated in the daily usage. Nevertheless, it can come to be regarded as truth or reality. People recognise the discourse, although they may not name it. They will either comply with, resist or seek to transform certain discourses.

Another illustration of different discourses and the power differentials among them arises in a discussion about bringing ashore gas from the Corrib Field, through a Shell pipeline, in Rossport, Co Mayo. Garavan (2009) shows how several local people draw on a group of discourses that differ fundamentally from those of Shell (and the government). Those opposing the pipeline draw on discourses of belonging, attachment, progress and time, which are entirely different from those of the pro-pipeline people. The discourses deployed by the advocates of the pipeline are more powerful in 'formal public decision-making' (ibid: 84). The local people can understand the Shell discourses, but the Shell people are unable or unwilling to use the local discourses to address the situation. The discourses of progress, time and money employed by Shell are modernist and rely on an exposition of 'the facts'. The Shell discourse of consultation is summarised in the term 'presentation', while the local people's discourse of consultation involves 'unravelling' the issues (ibid: 88).

Similar power differentials regarding discourses of consultation and participation have been noted at work in African development settings (George, 2010: 71-77). Bill Gates' foundation, AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa) has been seen as using a different discourse of participation from that of local people.

You come. You buy the land. You make a plan. You build a house. Now you ask me what colour do I want to paint the kitchen? This is not participation. (African Farmer, cited by Institute for Food and Development Policy, 2010)

Discourses are never innocent (Davies, 2004: 5) or neutral; they are saturated with meaning from the social world. Discourse analysis is a tool for seeing how power operates beyond its material and juridical aspects. Discursive power is often (although not always) subtle, because it is passed off as 'natural' or 'normal'. Discourses of naturalness or normality have the capacity to mask the power of what appears to be benign. An unacknowledged discourse can give authority to the statements of a person or

to the policy documents of an institution; it can make acceptable a joke at someone's expense, or give one person the power to demonstrate superiority over someone else.

For the reflective practitioner, working with discursive power is just as important as working with economic, legal and material power. The strategies, tactics and techniques of power must be examined from the point of view of discourse also. The more subtle or less overt forms of violence and discrimination against subaltern groups are often discursive, and are evident in jokes, conversation, or subtle practices, for example. Discursive power differs from material and juridical power, but it is just as real. When immigrants or gay people are on the receiving end of physical violence, they will not call for a discourse analyst before phoning the police, a doctor or a refuge. If they experience discrimination, they may take a legal challenge. Nevertheless, to recognise the injustice of the central premises of racist or homophobic discourses is to open one's eyes to how other kinds of power may be legitimised.

### **Discourse and ideology**

An ideology is

the elevation of a particular set of perceptions, assumptions, and analyses to a normative belief system. It provides a framework by which adherents respond to events and developments. An ideology also makes it difficult to see beyond the framework, however, so events reflecting other perspectives may seem nonsensical. Modern life is structured by numerous ideologies that interlock and support each other. (Spretnak, 1999: 12).

Foucault (1980) does not accept the term ideology. Nevertheless, many commentators believe that discourse is able to account especially well for the notion of *ideology as common sense* – the taken-for-granted – as developed in the work of Althusser (1971) and Gramsci (1971). It also has similarities with Gramsci's notion of hegemony, understood as subtlety and nuance. And it resonates with Garfinkel's (1967) conceptualisation of 'natural attitude'. Discursive power is like ideology as common sense: unacknowledged and accepted assumptions may be present, which affect, frame or underpin what is actually said or done.

The concept of discourse is, however, different from the Marxist notion of base and superstructure, where there exists an ideological superstructure, or a 'veil of ignorance' that has to be 'seen through' or displaced, in order to find the reality (the base) underneath.

### **Discourse and poststructuralism**

The names we give to the concept of discourse do not really matter (I have already mentioned some other options for names, such as filters for experience, meaning-repertoires, etc). The concept is a heuristic device. What does matter is the approach that informs the whole body of discourse theory within the critical poststructuralist tradition (see Davies, 2004). The body of thought that makes up critical poststructuralist theory is

itself a discourse that co-exists with other bodies of theory, which are also discourses. This critical post-structuralist tradition is interested in how we make history and how it unfolds. It is concerned with ‘the movement from one configuration to another ... *the lines of flight that make new realities*’ (Davies, 2004: 7, original emphasis). The tradition strives to contribute to change and evolution; it is not satisfied with remaining simply an observer of the lines of flight of others (ibid).

### **A hybrid approach to discourse analysis**

There are two main strands in the way researchers and commentators approach discourse: the top-down Foucauldian strand, and the ‘bottom-up’ strand, which has much in common with conversational analysis and grounded theory (see for example Henwood and Pigeon, 1992, cited in Day, Gough and McFadden, 2003). The Foucault-influenced top-down approach emphasises the way that language plays a part in constituting identity and meaning, by the discourses (interpretive repertoires) that are available in a culture. Some commentators note that with this approach a researcher or commentator may from the outset of any analytic process impose theoretical, political or other judgements on data, and fail to take into account locally created meanings. This can have the effect of elevating the researcher / commentator to a position of all-knowing arbiter, which can have anti-democratic effects (cf Peace, 2003: 165,6). The bottom-up approach is limited by ‘its strict adherence to participants’ orientations and to the unattainable ideal that a researcher can conduct an objective analysis free from any ideological baggage’ (ibid: 164).

In practice, few contemporary researchers, commentators or practitioners confine themselves strictly to one strand or the other. Some may concentrate on how meaning is accomplished and others may concentrate on the effects of the dominance of certain meanings and the absence of other possible meanings. But it is impossible to say that these two strands have nothing to do with each other or to say to each other. They have overlapping interests. The critical poststructuralist theoretical tradition advocates holding multiple positions at once, and simultaneously keeping an awareness of the potential imbalances of power.

### ***Reading the discursive climate, as well as individual discourses***

As well as examining individual discourses, in discourse analysis we also need to step back and look at the broader conditions that allow one discourse to succeed another (or not). Certain conditions allow certain ways of understanding to be created and to come to the fore, and they keep other ways of understanding in the background. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) refer to the sum of these conditions as the discursive climate. They see the discursive climate as having similarities to the term ‘ideological field’, as proposed by Billig (1991, cited in Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003: 493)

The discursive climate, as well as individual discourses, is important in considerations of power, resistance and change. It affects the legitimacy of, or lends authority to certain types of discourses. Feminism provides an example of this. An historical moment came

in which the discursive climate was such that it was possible to think of women as a group, whose position in the social network lacked power. Earlier, that simply was not a recognized lens through which to view women.

A major theme in feminism is equality among women and men, in every area of life, including work. However, the overall discursive climate of modernity equates progress with economic growth and makes paid work a central feature of modern life (see Ryan, 2009). This climate made some feminist discourses more likely to 'catch on' or resonate positively than others. The discourse that has come to dominate understandings of equality is that equality involves women being equal to the traditional male model in the workforce, where paid work takes precedence over other aspects of life-work, including care (for self, others and the earth). In the modern workplace, many women take on traditional male work patterns, or prioritise their jobs over other aspects of their lives, just like men were usually expected to do.

The discursive climate of prioritising paid work has made it more likely that when people think of equality, this discourse of 'women being like men' would come to dominate. It has achieved the status of a 'totalising discourse' (cf de Cock, 1998) and has muted other discourses of work and equality, which promote the idea that men should spend less time in paid work, and participate more in unpaid and often economically invisible care work. More challenging and complex poststructuralist, postmodern and ecological discourses of work and equality (see Spretnak, 1999, Ryan, 2001, Standing, 2009), which do not 'fit' with the prioritisation of paid work, have resonated with much fewer people, because the discursive climate does not nurture them. Their central premises constitute fundamental challenges to modernist discourses of work. The challenges, if successful, would constitute genuine paradigm shifts. However, the discursive climate can be such that challenges to totalising discourses result in the challengers being positioned as incomprehensible or crazy.

### **Discourse activism**

One can name a discourse, identify its central premise, show how it is deployed, and what effects it has. Having identified discourses and related practices, one could stop there, theorising in a detached and relatively neutral way. (It is only *relatively* neutral, because what we choose to study or to make the focus of our activities is never entirely neutral.) Dominant discourses are not easily critiqued, transformed, challenged or negotiated. They tend to be taken as natural, normal or 'common sense'.

Ultimately, though, the point is to disrupt oppressive discourses. The discursive arena is itself a site of politics, where action can take place for value-informed change. Discourse activism is aimed at transforming cultural paradigms (Young, 1997: 99), and discourse activists see such transformation as essential in efforts to bring about social justice.

The concept of change is a very abstract one, which we use to make sense of how one way of knowing the world succeeds another. Because certain ideas are made, then they can be unmade, according to Foucault. He did not always show how people create new



discourses, but feminist, race and disability movements, among others, have at least partly achieved the creation of new ways of understanding the social world.

Examining discourses and understanding the discursive climate is an essential part of challenging oppressive ways of making sense of people or of the world. The reflective practitioner can investigate how certain discourses can be challenged or ousted by discourses more adequate for the project of human and planetary well being.

In any given situation, multiple discourses are likely to be activated, some of which are irreconcilable with each other, and this leads people to experience contradictions. Contradictory understandings and emotional responses can be an impetus for change. Contradiction, sympathetically treated, can also be the crack in the façade of dominant discourses. Contradictions are fertile ground for emerging new discourses of liberation. They are also a stimulus of creativity. In accepting and working with the experience of contradiction, we can learn to question and disrupt and create new discourses. Contradictions are a doorway to such change (Ryan, 2001a).

Counterhegemonic discourses offer possibilities for new ways of knowing, and new ways for humans to be (subject positions). They provide resources for identity, as well as resources for solidarity with others. Discursive activism is usually collective. Individuals can take significant actions, but in order to create effective new discourses and get them into circulation so that they can have an effect, people have to work collectively.

### **Discourse and history**

The dominant modern discourse about history is that it consists of inevitable 'change' or progress, where one element monotonously follows another, descending from the heavens as if pre-ordained (Bordo, 1993: 179), without any possibility that things might be different. Discourse analysis is one of the tools that help us to see the past as something much more complex than just a series of inevitable events in which humans played little or no part. Discourse plays a part in the evolution of social institutions and the emergence of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1979).

Discourse analysis shows us that influential concepts and ideas – for example, the idea of learning outcomes, the at-risk child, the war on terror – were not just lying around waiting to be discovered; they are ideas that human beings constructed and made real, in particular historical circumstances and conditions. Ideas develop from the imaginations and intellects of human beings, living at different historical periods.

In engaging in discursive-historical work, we can see that in the past there was usually more than one possible outcome, and that what has come to the fore has not necessarily been natural, or inevitable. We examine how one idea, and not another, comes to succeed (Ransom, 1993: 133). We ask what the circumstances are that allow a particular statement or belief 'to acquire the quality of self-evidence or coherence' (ibid: 132). What was the discursive climate that facilitated the emergence of certain ways of knowing, and made it more likely that other ways of knowing were muted or lost?

As Foucault puts it:

My problem is to substitute the analysis of *different types of transformation* for the abstract, general and monotonous form of “change” which so easily serves as our means of conceptualising succession. (Foucault, 1991: 55-6, cited in Ransom, 1993: 132-3, original emphasis)

History seen in terms of discourse also gives us the important idea that the way events happen is not inevitable – but that the way things turn out is always contested and full of other possibilities. At a very broad level, for example, the kind of discourses of reason and what is entailed in being a rational human being, which have emerged as dominant in modern times, have always been contested. Modern-day rationality is usually confined to a particular kind of thinking, detached from feeling and imagination. And this kind of rationality has become somewhat of a hallmark of modern humanity.

But in the past, fundamental challenges to modernist forms of rationality came from the Romantic movement, the Arts and Crafts movement, the cosmological and spiritual quests in schools of painting, the counter-modern modernists, Gandhi’s constructive programme and the counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s (Spretnak, 1999: 135). The Romantics believed that only someone with acutely attentive and receptive sensibilities was capable of deep thought (ibid: 136).

Many of these movements did not have great lasting influence. But they do live on in small pockets and traces and may come to the fore again. Some countercultural efforts did succeed, such as the landmark work of Erasmus, Copernicus and Galileo (Hogan, 2003: 218). Ideas for social justice or for other ways of knowing, which people struggled to have accepted, have also often failed to win the day, and have been lost in the official histories, although they often survive in songs and stories. But if we are engaged in a struggle to challenge injustice and create a better world, which is part of the job of the reflective practitioner, it is useful to know that we are part of a significant and substantial lineage (Spretnak, 1999: 136).

Discourse analysis is one way to achieve a more complex sense of the past, that is, a sense that the past is something that contained different possibilities. And when we see the past in this way, we can see the future as one that contains different possibilities also. This is in contrast to the dominant modernist discourse of the future, whose central premise is that change consists of more of what we have now, only speeded up or in more concentrated form.

### **What a discourse approach cannot do**

If we look at all the discourses present in a situation, we can get a three-dimensional view (Middleton, 1998: 24) of how people make sense of a site, whether concrete or abstract. We can see a great deal of what is going on there; it is like doing theory in action (ibid). And what is going on is not just related to what people say, but to what they do and how they behave (actual practices) and sites of practice.

But discursive relations do not constitute the entirety of all possible social and political relations (see Cain, 1993: 79). The person – as speaker, actor, thinker, feeling being, theorist or change agent -- is largely absent from discourse analysis. This has benefits and disadvantages. The chief benefit is that, in analysing a discourse, one need not refer to the psychology of the individuals who draw on it or activate it. So one can discuss the premises of a discourse, how it operates, the effects it has, and how it can be challenged if it is oppressive. At the same time, one can avoid blaming those who use the discourse. But the downside is that discourse theory does not address all the complexities of how an individual experiences reality, what one might call the emotional realities of human life (Ramson, 1993: 133).

We cannot see what is happening in terms of peoples' internal responses to the content of a discourse, or to their positioning in a nexus of contradictory discourses. Everyone has a unique relationship to discourse, because each person has a unique history: emotional, physical, psychological, spiritual, cultural and so on. These histories create desire and anxiety, which are also filters for our experiences, as discourse is. Our unique histories help us to 'act creatively on experience and transform it' (Hollway, 2006: 16).

Pure discourse analysis can also lead us to ignore our psychological or emotional investments in certain discourses; we may make these investments and form attachments to certain discourses because there is some kind of payoff for us. They may, for example, position us powerfully or promise us liberation (Alloway and Gilbert, 2004). Equally, discourse analysis alone cannot explain how and why people 'let go' of old discourses in order to move into uncertain futures (cf Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1998: xvii).

We make decisions in terms of what we find persuasive – if we are exposed to other discourses that we find persuasive, we may change our behaviour. But of course we also have to take into account emotional responses. Behaviour is not just a matter of rational persuasion. It is also about the fulfilment of desire. The drive to create change is inextricable from human desire. Discourse theory alone does not explain why a person chooses to resist an oppressive discourse. Hollway (2006) posits that one can have an emotional response to an oppressive discourse and a desire for a more humane discourse. She uses the case of the Robertson couple to illustrate this thesis (ibid: 115). In the 1950s in Britain, they initiated a then-revolutionary campaign for more humane treatment of children in hospital.

The human person (the subject, or the self) is psychosocial and the entirety of human subjectivity must be taken into account in any analyses or moves for change. Subjectivity is the subjective sense of oneself, including ideas, beliefs and emotions. The self is far more than positions in discourse; it also has important emotional, imaginative, creative, unconscious and other internal dimensions. It can be construed as a dynamic three-way process among discourse, emotional responses and relations in the present moment (Ryan, 2001). 'Discursive changes that accompany adult politicisation or actions for change are at the same time psychodynamic shifts or movements' (Ryan, 2001: 57). Discourses play an important role here, in that they provide resources and content for

identity, but discourse theory does not give an adequate account of emotions, imagination, desire or anxiety.

Discourses pre-exist individuals and enable the symbolisation of what is introjected, influencing the meaning that is achieved. But that meaning is also achieved through the *creative imagination that characterises the internal world*. (Hollway, 2006: 129, emphasis added)

The reflective practitioner has to be able to go further than discourse explanations or activism, which concentrate largely on the social or external aspects of human life. We need to examine life history, along with issues such as the experience of embodiment. These stress the importance for the person of specific experiences and relationships, such as those involved in being a child, or being parented, or parenting (Henriques et al, 1998: xv, cf Fleming, 2008). Experiences of place and nature also need to be taken into account (cf Spretnak, 1999). Imagination, empathy and identification with others are epistemological resources that drive change (cf Ransom, 1993: 134ff) and they also have ontological roots: the body and mind are related in important ways.

Emotions, imagination, desire and anxiety have an undoubted discursive element to them. Imagination, for example, is constrained by the discursive resources available. And the ways that we understand personal feelings are also conditioned by discourse. But there is much more to these processes than discourse. If we were to make only a discourse-oriented reading of them, we would be guilty of understanding the person as *determined* by discourse. The internal world of the individual is not confined to discursive content, although it consists partly of discursive content. We cannot ignore human creativity.

## **Conclusion**

Once one has learned how discourses work – and they are present in all arenas of human life – it is impossible not to be aware of them, and equally impossible to ignore their importance. There are limits to what discourse analysis can offer, but discourse remains a crucial element of power relations, and discourse analysis and activism remain very useful tools for the reflective practitioner. They help us to combine a deep analysis of the realities of our time with a moral and political commitment to resisting injustice and ecological degradation, while at the same time promoting justice and ecological security

Discourse can be used in research, teaching, learning and activism. The job of the reflective practitioner is to look at the everyday, the things that are familiar in our worlds, and to ask if they are adequate for the projects of equality, enablement and justice that are dear to our hearts. Discourse analysis is a tool for this kind of work. It helps us to build our capacities for reflexivity, as well as for participation in progressive social change, in collective efforts with others.

## **References**

- Alloway, Nola and Gilbert, Pam (2004) 'Shifting discourses about gender in higher education enrolments: retrieving marginalised voices'. In *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 17 (1): 99-112.
- Althusser Louis (1971) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books.
- Billig, Michael (1991) *Ideology and Opinions: Studies in Rhetorical Psychology*. London: Sage
- Bordo, Susan (1993) 'Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body', in Caroline Ramazanoglu (ed) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Burman, Erica (1994) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Burman, Erica and Parker, Ian (1993) *Discourse Analytic Research*. London: Routledge.
- Cain, Maureen (1993) 'Foucault, feminism and feeling: what Foucault can and cannot contribute to feminist epistemology', in Caroline Ramazanoglu (ed) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Cherryholmes, Cleo H. (1988) *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Day, Katy, Gough, Brendan and McFadden, Majella (2003) 'Women Who Drink and Fight: A Discourse Analysis of Working-class Women's Talk', in *Feminism and Psychology* 13 (2): 141-158.
- Davies, Bronwen (2004) 'Introduction: poststructuralist lines of flight in Australia', in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 17 (1): 3-9.
- De Cock, Christian (1998) 'Organisational Change and Discourse: Hegemony, Resistance and Reconstitution', in *Management* 1(1): 1-22.
- Fleming, Ted (2008) 'Picking Wild Orchids and Windflowers: Attachment Theory and Adult Education', in Connolly, Bríd, Fleming, Ted, McCormack, David and Ryan, Anne (eds) *Radical Learning for Liberation 2*. Maynooth: MACE
- Foucault, Michel (1979) *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. London: Allen Lane.
- Foucault, Michel (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, trans. C. Gordon. Brighton: Harvester.
- Foucault, Michel (1991) 'Politics and the study of discourse', in G Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Garavan, Mark (2009) 'Civil society and political argument: how to make sense when no-one is listening', in Deiric Ó Broin and Peadar Kirby (eds) *Power, Dissent and Democracy: Civil society and the state in Ireland*. Dublin: A. & A. Farmar.
- George, Susan (2011) *Whose Crisis, Whose Future? Towards a Greener, Fairer, Richer World*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Gramsci Antonio (1971) *Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Habermas, Jurgen (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action: Vol 1, Reason and Rationalization in Society* (T McCarthy trans). Boston: Beacon Press.

- Henriques, Julian, Hollway, Wendy, Urwin, Cathy, Venn, Couze and Walkerdine, Valerie (1998, first published 1984) *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Subjectivity and Regulation*. London and New York: Routledge
- Henwood, K.I. and Pigeon, N.F. (1992) 'Qualitative Research and Psychological Theorising', in *British Journal of Psychology* 83: 97-111.
- Hogan, Pádraig (2003) 'Teaching and Learning as a Way of Life', in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37(2): 207-226
- Institute for Food and Development Policy, 2010.  
<http://www.foodfirst.org/en/publications/factsheets>. Accessed Feb 15th, 2011
- Hollway, Wendy (2006) *The Capacity to Care: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Lange, Elizabeth A. (2004) 'Transformative and Restorative Learning: A Vital Dialectic for Sustainable Societies', in *Adult Education Quarterly* 54(2): 121-139
- Lees, Sue (1987) *Losing Out: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls*. London: Hutchinson.
- Mezirow, Jack (2003) 'Transformative Learning as Discourse', in *Journal of Transformative Education* 1(1): 58-63.
- Middleton, Sue (1998) *Disciplining Sexuality: Foucault, Life Histories and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Peace, Paul (2003) 'Balancing Power: The Discursive Maintenance of Gender Inequality by Wo/Men at University', in *Feminism and Psychology* 13(2): 159-180.
- Potter, Jonathan, and Wetherell, Margaret (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Ransom, Janet (1993) 'Feminism, discourse and difference: the limits of discursive analysis for feminism', in Caroline Ramazanoglu (ed) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Reynolds, Jill and Wetherell, Margaret (2003) 'The Discursive Climate of Singleness: The Consequences for Women's Negotiation of a Single Identity', in *Feminism and Psychology* 13(4): 489-510.
- Ryan, Anne B (1992) *Gender difference and discourse in school social relations*. Unpublished MA thesis, St Patrick's College, Maynooth.
- Ryan, Anne B. (1997) 'Gender discourses in school social relations', in Anne Byrne and Madeleine Leonard (eds) *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
- Ryan, Anne B. (2001a) *Feminist Ways of Knowing: towards theorising the person for radical adult education*. Leicester: NIACE
- Ryan, Anne B. (2001b). *How was it for you? Learning from couples' experiences of the first years of marriage*. Dublin: ACCORD, Dept. of Social and Family Affairs.
- Ryan, Anne B (2003) 'Contemporary discourses of working, earning and spending: acceptance, critique and the bigger picture', in Steve Coleman and Colin Coulter (eds) *The End of Irish History? Critical Approaches to the Celtic Tiger*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ryan, Anne B with McCormack, David and Ryan, Mary B. (2004), *Facilitating transformative learning: A report on research into the experiences of tutors on the NUI Maynooth Foundation in Counselling Skills course* Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth.

- Ryan, Anne B (2009) *Enough is Plenty: Public and Private Policies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.  
Hants: OBooks
- Spretnak, Charlene (1999) *The Resurgence of the Real*. New York: Routledge.
- Standing, Guy (2009) *Work after Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship*.  
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Young, Stacey (1997) *Changing the World: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist  
Movement*. London and New York: Routledge.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rose Malone for comments on an early draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Discourses are not the only resources we activate to create meaning, as I outline towards the end of this chapter. But they are the chief focus of this chapter.