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Critical Realism in Discourse Analysis

A Presentation of a Systematic Method of Analysis Using Women’s Talk of Motherhood, Childcare and Female Employment as an Example

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ABSTRACT. In critical realism, language is understood as constructing our social realities. However, these constructions are theorized as being shaped by the possibilities and constraints inherent in the material world. For critical realists, material practices are given an ontological status that is independent of, but in relation with, discursive practices. The advantage in taking a critical realist, rather than relativist, approach is that analysis can include relationships between people’s material conditions and discursive practices. Despite calls to develop a critical realist discourse analysis there has been little empirical critical realist work, possibly because few have addressed the critique that critical realists have no systematic method of distinguishing between discursive and non-discursive. In this article we outline a three-stage procedure that enables a systematic critical realist discourse analysis using women’s talk of motherhood, childcare and female employment as an example.

KEY WORDS: childcare, critical realism, discourse, female employment, motherhood, social constructionism

Despite some calls for a critical realist approach (e.g. Cromby & Nightingale, 1999, 2002), discursive approaches in psychology have tended to take a relativist epistemology (e.g. Edwards, 1997), in which truth is understood as ‘always contingent or relative to some discursive and cultural frame of reference’ (Wetherell, 2001, p. 393). In taking a relativist standpoint, researchers have positioned the non-discursive as subordinate to the discursive in one of
two ways. The non-discursive is positioned as material practices that are produced by discourse practices and are thereby secondary to discursive practices. Alternatively, it is argued that the non-discursive can only be conceived or experienced in any meaningful way when transformed into, and examined as, discourse (e.g. Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995; Riley, 2002). Discourse thus becomes the only valid unit of analysis, creating the context in which discursive psychology has become an approach that aims to identify, describe and trace the effects of discursive features. In prioritizing discourse in this way, researchers have failed to address three key issues. First, they have failed to fully theorize why people use certain constructions and not others (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2000). Second, by focusing exclusively upon discursive mediation, analysts have marginalized any experiences we may have that are out of the realm of language, for example aspects of embodiment such as dance (Burr, 1999). Third, while social constructionist discursive work has sought to identify the impact of discursive practices on material practices (e.g. Riley, 2002), how material practices may then impact on the discursive has been not just under-theorized, but effectively ignored (Willig, 1999). We argue that a critical realist approach, which has an analytic focus that includes both the discursive and the non-discursive, is one way to address the concerns described above. Using data from a study of Dutch and English mothers’ talk about mothering, childcare and employment, we use this paper to outline a method for doing a systematic critical realist discourse analysis.

The Critical Realist Approach

In critical realism, language is understood as constructing our social realities. However, these constructions are theorized as being constrained by the possibilities and limitations inherent in the material world. Critical realism is an epistemology that has challenged the reification of discourse as the primary unit of analysis within social constructionist psychology. For critical realists, material practices are not reducible to discourse, or without meaning unless interpreted discursively; rather, material practices are given an ontological status that is independent of, but in relation with, discursive practices. Furthermore, material practices are understood as accommodating, although not determining, the discourses that arise within these material conditions, because social conditions are understood as offering a range of possible ways-of-being which are then appropriated by the individual (Willig, 1999). Thus, critical realism combines constructionist and realist positions to argue that while meaning is made in interaction, non-discursive elements also impact on that meaning. For example, Bhaskar (1989) argued for an epistemological position that combined both the role of human agency in constituting the social world and an understanding that people’s actions will be influenced by personal and societal mechanisms that are independent of our thoughts or
impressions. ‘Social practices are concept-dependent; but, contrary to the hermeneutical tradition in social science, they are not exhausted by their conceptual aspect. They always have a material dimension’ (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 4). By positing a complex, non-linear relationship between the ‘real’ or non-discursive (i.e. material structures that exist independently of our understanding of them) and the mediated or discursive (i.e. discursive resources and practices that are available to make sense of human experience) dimensions of human existence, critical realism constitutes an alternative both to naïve versions of realism and to totalizing versions of relativism.

Critical realism has tended to be a minority position within discursive psychology. However, those who have taken up this standpoint have worked to examine what might constitute non-discursive elements that form personal and societal constraints upon people’s actions and understandings. For example, Cromby and Nightingale (1999) refer to embodied factors, such as missing limbs, the physical nature of objects in the world (such as the wetness of water), and the power of institutions (e.g. the ability of governments and multinational corporations to control access to resources). Parker (1992) lists the following material constraints upon discourse: direct physical coercion, the material organization of space, and the habitual and physical orientation of the individual to discourse of different kinds. Willig (1999) also highlights the non-discursive, arguing that phenomena that can be observed and experienced can be generated by underlying, relatively enduring structures that may be biochemical, economic or social.

Critical realists thus argue that there is a material dimension to our lives that is, at least, partially non-discursive. Applying a critical realist approach to an analysis of women’s talk on motherhood, childcare and female employment would thus require researchers to examine factors that include embodiment, physical spaces and institutional structures. Such factors could include a parent or child’s health, access to amenities, or current government policy towards childcare provision. From a critical realist perspective, these factors are treated as having extra-discursive ontology and understood as producing a context in which certain discursive constructions are more easily enabled or disenabled than are alternative constructions.

There are three advantages in taking a critical realist, rather than relativist, approach: first, critical realism enables an analysis that can consider why people draw upon certain discourses, by proposing that the extra-discursive provides the context from which the use of certain discourses is more or less easily enabled; second, critical realism can explore the impact of material practices on discursive practices; and, third, this approach does not only map the ways in which participants use discourse in order to construct particular versions of reality, but it also positions their talk within the materiality that they also have to negotiate. We consider this contextualizing of participants’ talk as an ethical stance, in the sense that analysing participants’ talk without considering their material existence does not always do justice to the
participants’ lived experience. For example, considering a mother’s justification to return to work because of financial reasons as purely rhetorical (e.g. Himmelweit & Sigala, 2003) may be deemed inappropriate to a participant who is struggling to feed her family.

Critiques of Critical Realism

There have been two main criticisms directed against the critical realist approach. First, there is the argument that what is presented and, therefore, talked about as extra-discursive can in fact be analysed from a relativist perspective, that is, it can be conceptualized as a discursive accomplishment (e.g. Edwards et al., 1995). From this perspective, material practices can always be reduced to discursive practices. Second, it is argued that critical realists have no systematic method of distinguishing between discursive and non-discursive, and so the constructing of factors as one and not the other comes down to individual choice, a choice driven by the researcher’s political standpoint. We discuss these criticisms below and then present a framework for how they might be addressed (e.g. Potter, Edwards, & Ashmore, 1999).

The relativist critique against an ontological reality is strongly articulated by Edwards and his colleagues in ‘Death and Furniture’ (1995). In this seminal paper the authors argue that what realists have understood to be extra-discursive can in fact be rhetorically shown to be discursive. Edwards et al. describe and challenge two realist arguments: first, that there is a ‘reality that cannot be denied’ (as shown in the act of hitting a table to prove its existence and that this existence is distinct from the processes of representation); second, the ‘reality that should not be denied’, such as the Holocaust (both quotes from p. 26). The authors argue that the first realist argument can be shown to work rhetorically in the sense that it cannot move out of a semiotic system or the range of human perception: ‘What we have, on closer examination, is a demonstration not so much of out-there reality, but rather the workings of consensual common sense’ (p. 30) so that it ‘is not that texts are more real, more singularly described than the rest of the world; but rather, that the rest of the world is like text. It all has to be represented and interpreted’ (p. 32). Edwards et al. then challenge the second realist argument that there is ‘reality that should not be denied’ (p. 26). This argument focuses primarily on the moral and political nature of taking a relativist epistemology, arguing, for example, that it is immoral and dangerous to reduce such things as murder and rape to a text, particularly a text that does not automatically take a stand against such acts. Edwards et al. reject this second realist position by arguing that it is the relativists who can more easily claim the moral high ground. The authors argue, for example, that relativist thinking enables the examination of the fact construction of an argument showing, for example, the fallacy of Holocaust denial. On the other hand, they argue, realism can easily be used to
rhetorically resist emancipatory social change, as seen in the rhetoric of being ‘realistic’ and recognizing you cannot implement change.

Treating reality as a text to be examined is a form of argument that is evident in the childcare literature, in which relativist arguments have challenged work that situated some factors as ‘real’ or non-discursive. For example, Himmelweit and Sigala (2003) critiqued researchers such as Fleetwood (2003), who argued that justifying the use of childcare in terms of needing to increase the family income should be treated as extra-discursive. Instead, Himmelweit and Sigala (2003) argued that ‘financial reasons’ can be understood as an account that works to inoculate a working mother from blame by constructing her return to work as an action outside of herself.

Whilst it cannot be denied that all talk and text can usefully be analysed in terms of their action orientation and ideological functions, we would argue that additional insights can be gained by adopting a critical realist perspective that allows us to address questions about the relationship between our physical and social environments, what we do and say about them and how we live within them. Critical realism posits that there is a relationship between deep material and social structures that are not object-like and concrete and that are, therefore, not directly accessible to the researcher. They can only be known through the phenomena that they generate, that is to say, their presence can only be deduced from the processes and experiences which they have made possible. The relationship between these structures and the phenomena they generate is by no means direct, linear or causal; rather, structures engender generative mechanisms that interact in a dynamic and dialectical way with each other and that hold many more potentialities than could ever be realized at any one time. This means that our attempts to identify and understand deep structures will remain just that—attempts. However, acknowledging that our knowledge of ‘reality’ will always be limited is not the same as saying that there is no such thing as ‘reality’. Bhaskar (1975) warns against the tendency to reduce questions of ontology to questions of epistemology, that is to say, of analysing statements of ‘being’ in terms of ‘our knowledge about being’ (p. 13; cf. Pujol, 1999).

For Cromby and Nightingale (1999), a grounded social constructionism is one in which ‘the material world and our own embodied natures … bestow structure, limits and potentials on the social constructions that our analyses identify’ (p. 9). In this paper we draw on Cromby and Nightingale’s edited book (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999) to argue that, in relation to childcare, we do not challenge the utility of examining the action orientation of mothers’ talk. However, we do find problematic an analysis that does not contextualize women’s talk in relation to the extra-discursive factors that may structure their experience. For example, we argue that having a parent who lives locally and enjoys caring for his or her grandchild, combined with a lack of formal childcare facilities where the parent lives or works, would increase the likelihood of a parent using informal childcare should s/he be in paid employment.
These extra-discursive features (a local grandparent, a lack of alternative childcare facilities) are thus important factors in determining a mother’s actions, and will structure the accounts she mobilizes to explain her actions. We do not argue that extra-discursive features will determine what account the mother might use, as there will always be more than one way to explain an action (whether it be ‘informal care is best’ or ‘I don’t have the facilities I would prefer to use’). Instead we position the extra-discursive as features that enable or disenable the ease of particular accounts that the speaker will able to both use and have accepted by those with whom she is communicating. For an analyst then, examining the extra-discursive may help with interpreting why one account is used and not another.

The second criticism of critical realism is that researchers working within this framework do not have any validity criteria when they decide what to consider to be ‘real’, that is to say, what may count as a deep structure capable of exercising constraints upon discourse. Critical realists are often criticized for not having a systematic method of distinguishing between the discursive and non-discursive, and so the positioning of factors as one and not the other comes down to individual choice, a choice driven by the researcher’s political standpoint (Potter et al., 1999). In attempting to address this critique, we suggest that a systematic critical realist approach would focus on three factors: namely, embodiment, institutions and materiality. These factors have been theoretically identified in Bhaskar’s (1989), Cromby and Nightingale’s (1999) and Willig’s (1999) writings on critical realism and we suggest that they can therefore be used as analytics in generating a systematic approach to examining potential extra-discursive factors. Thus, we suggest that the first step to a systematic critical realist discourse analysis is to examine how embodiment, materiality and institutional power are manifest in the literature of the topic of concern. For example, in relation to embodiment, research on childcare suggests that the fewer children women have, the more likely it is that they are working (Foster, Jackson, Thomas, Hunter, & Bennett, 1995). In relation to materiality, research suggests that a lack of childcare facilities reduces the likelihood that women will return to work (Witherspoon & Prior, 1991); and in relation to institutions, government policy that makes childcare a personal not a social issue leads to a high-cost formal childcare system (Daniel & Ivatts, 1998).

In examining governmental policy and other institutional power we take the position that whilst policies and psychological theory can be theorized as social constructions, the institutions that shape and form them, and the economic interests and necessities which uphold these institutions, hold extra-discursive power. We conceptualize institutional power in two ways. First, power is something an individual or group can possess by having access to resources (e.g. the power to enforce law and regulations upon people). Second, drawing from Foucault, power is also understood as bound up with knowledge, and is conceptualized as the ability to position particular understandings as
real or legitimate. In this paper both forms of power were identified during our literature review. For example, a government policy on childcare may affect a mother’s household income if she returns to work, thus determining actual resources. The same policy may also be examined as having been produced through psychological discourses of attachment.

**Developing a Systematic Approach to Empirical Critical Realism**

We argue that an effective critical realist discourse analysis is produced through a multi-level analysis that draws upon discursive practice (e.g. Edwards, 1997), Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g. Willig, 2001) and an examination of embodied, material and institutional practices that may be considered to have extra-discursive ontology.

Discursive practice examines the action orientation of talk, the discursive resources speakers use in social interaction, and what this achieves in terms of exchanging interpersonal objectives. Discursive practice draws heavily from conversation analysis and aims to identify the internal working of talk focusing on the interactional practices that warrant the particular version being produced. This perspective identifies, for example, the use and functions of hesitations, extreme case formulations and stake inoculation (Potter, 1997). Foucauldian discourse analysis examines the implications for possible ways-of-being that are structured by culture and the local availability of dominant discourses (Willig, 2001).

Supporting Wetherell (1998), who drew on a metaphor of textiles to argue for the need to examine both the threads that make a cloth and the cloth itself, we argue that multi-level discursive analysis can be considered to have two analytical advantages: ‘First, it enables an emphasis on the highly occasioned and situated nature of normative conceptions that organize such accounts. Second, these discursive practices can then be positioned within a genealogical context’ (Riley, 2002, p. 447). In this paper we extend the multi-level discursive approach that draws on discourse practice and Foucauldian discourse analysis to include a third level, that of the extra-discursive. Our third level of analysis takes the critical realist standpoint described at the beginning of this paper. We argue that while we may choose from an array of discourses when accounting for ourselves, it is not an infinite array. Rather, the ways we account for ourselves are accommodated by personal, psychological and social mechanisms that include embodiment, institutions and materiality. From a critical realist discourse analytic standpoint, the ways in which people can understand themselves are structured both by the available discourses in their social milieu and the material conditions in which they find themselves and which offer a range of possible ways-of-being. Discursive and material conditions thus form and constrain the social constructions that structure the way we understand ourselves.
Our work is, therefore, closely related to critical discourse analysis (CDA) (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 1996); however, whilst CDA tends to focus upon the ways in which the availability and localized uses of certain discursive constructions maintain and legitimate existing power relations within institutions and institutional practices, either directly or through incorporation, our work is primarily concerned with understanding why individual speakers may draw on certain discourses rather than others, and the role of the extra-discursive in this. Thus, our focus is on individual, localized uses of discursive resources, that is to say, discourse practice; however, our analysis of what motivates the deployment of particular discursive resources at particular points in time moves beyond the immediate discursive context and the action orientations it facilitates, and attempts to ground such deployments within material (as well as discursive) contexts. Our approach is one that thus draws together, rather than polarizes, understandings of discourses both as sets of statements that construct objects and as accounts that are drawn upon in situ.

As Potter, Wetherell, Gill and Edwards (1990) argue:

… the former position is a useful backdrop to the analysis of repertoires … the latter is particularly useful for making sense of the implementation of repertoires in practices and the arrange of interpretative procedures that are on hand to accomplish this. To set them up as alternatives would result in a dangerously stunted enterprise (p. 207; cf. Parker, 1990)

Three stages were employed to identify potential extra-discursive factors that may structure our participants’ talk. In stage one a literature review was conducted to identify, as inclusively as possible, any elements of embodiment, institutions and materiality that may impact on women’s experience and talk of motherhood, childcare and female employment. The literature included academic texts, government policy documents and other texts on the topic (including media texts and informal discussions with mothers). In a similar process to identifying key themes in discourse analysis, the most common recurring elements of embodiment, institutions and materiality in this literature review were identified. These elements were considered to be extra-discursive factors in our participants’ lives. In relation to childcare, the key extra-discursive factors identified included the age of the mother, the number of children and the family’s living space, the availability of local childcare facilities, and government policy regarding employment and childcare.

Four key factors regarding government policy were identified: first, economic workforce requirements (e.g. the requirement of women to work during the Second World War and to stop when it ended); second, dominant psychological theory (e.g. that of John Bowlby [1971, 1979], whose theories of maternal deprivation and attachment were highly influential in constructing non-maternal full-time childcare as problematic and in reinforcing traditional gender roles); third, the availability of particular political frameworks (e.g. feminism); and, fourth, societal structures (e.g. the UK’s ‘horizontal’ class-based
social divisions, in comparison to the Netherlands’ ‘vertical’ or ‘pillarized’ structuring of social status, which produced different policy measures regarding social welfare and health). The impact of these factors is that in both Britain and the Netherlands, governments often position women as having a right to work, but also situate women as the primary caretakers of their children, either in terms of caring for the children directly or in being responsible for organizing alternative forms of childcare. However, in Britain women are often constructed as having a duty as well as a right to work, although using childcare, which varies in quality, is treated as a private parental responsibility. In the Netherlands, there is less pressure for women to work: childcare is an employers’ responsibility, and is generally of high quality although not necessarily of lower cost than in Britain (Daniel & Ivatts, 1998; Jacobs, Frinking, Keuzenkamp, & Willemsen, 2000; Moss, 1991; Tavecchio, 2002). In addition, our own research on available facilities suggested that British mothers have access to more organized activities, such as toddlers groups and mother and baby swimming sessions, than do Dutch mothers. (For a detailed examination of government childcare policy, see Sims-Schouten, 2004.)

The second stage of our critical realist discourse analysis involved designing a way of assessing the extra-discursive features in our participants’ local context. In our example, we conducted research on the availability of childcare facilities where our participants lived and worked and produced a fact sheet for each participant based on researcher observation (e.g. the size of the participant’s home) and participants completing questionnaires that requested information on their age, income, type of job, number of children and local childcare facilities.

Exploring embodiment, materiality and institutional power systematically therefore required: a thorough literature review; an examination of government policy and the genealogy of knowledge that enabled these policies; and a study of the participants’ social and physical environment. Thus, we were able to identify key factors likely to have an extra-discursive impact and measure how these factors were manifest for our individual participants.

The third stage in our critical realist discourse analysis was to examine the participants’ talk in terms of orientation towards the factors identified as potentially extra-discursive. As noted above, participants’ talk was examined using discourse analysis that drew on two levels of analysis based on discursive practice and Foucauldian discourse analysis. A third level was then introduced to produce the critical realist level of analysis. If participants oriented towards an embodied, material and institutional factor that had been identified as having the potential to be extra-discursive in the context of motherhood, childcare and employment, then this talk was analysed in terms of the extra-discursive conditions that may make this account available to the participant. We define orientation as when a participant explicitly or implicitly makes relevant a category or issue. For example, utterances such as ‘I cannot afford to stay at home’ were examined in relation to discursive practices (drawing on both discursive practice and Foucauldian discourse analysis) and in relation to the extra-discursive
factors that may have enabled such an account to be drawn upon. Thus, rather than arguing that the utterance ‘I cannot afford to stay at home’ is a convenient construction that serves to justify a mother’s decision to go out to work (e.g. Himmelweif & Sigala, 2003), our analysis allowed for the possibility that a lack of income also constitutes an extra-discursive reality which the participant orients to when she makes this statement.

Our critical realist discourse analysis was thus systematic in two ways. First, it outlined a systematic method for identifying potential extra-discursive features through a literature review of the topic, an assessment of participants’ material and social conditions, and an examination of government policy. Second, by only incorporating extra-discursive features into the analysis when the participants oriented to them, our approach provided a systematic method of addressing the concerns of researchers (e.g. Schegloff, 1997) who have argued that the analysis of participants’ talk should include only aspects to which the participants themselves orient. In developing this approach, we have been able to make a distinction between extra-discursive features and the discursive constructions they enable or disable and to show that it is possible to do a systematic critical realist discourse analysis. Our analysis thus allows us to develop knowledge of participants’ material and social locations and to use this knowledge to make sense of participants’ choice of discourse and its strategic deployment.

Details of the Study

As part of a larger study on the experience of contemporary motherhood, forty married mothers with at least one child who was 2 years old or younger were interviewed using in-depth semi-structured interviews. There were 20 participants who were Dutch and 20 who were English. The participants came from two similar sized rural towns, which were approximately 15 miles away from urban areas. The participants had access to a similar number of childcare facilities: in both towns there were two nurseries and around 20 childminders. The difference between the two locations was that the Dutch nurseries took children from as early as 4 weeks old, whilst the earliest age at which children in the English town were catered for was 3 months old. A semi-structured interview that focused on issues likely to be of concern for contemporary mothers was devised from previous research (Sims-Schouten, 2000), a literature review and informal chats by one of the authors (WSS) with mothers met at mother and toddler groups.

All the extracts were transcribed in a detailed manner using notation developed for this study which drew on Edwards (1997), Jefferson (1985) and ten Have (1999) (see Appendix for transcription notations). The Dutch interview extracts were translated into the English language. In order to stay as close to the data as possible, translations from Dutch to English were not translated...
into grammatical Dutch. This meant that if in the original Dutch language something was said incorrectly, this was translated to ‘incorrect’ English (e.g. ‘het is een, nou ja soms ga ik’ would be ‘it’s a, well yeah sometimes I go’).

In situations where words were difficult to translate (e.g. the Dutch word ‘hoor’, see ten Have, 1999), the words were described and difficulties were explained between brackets at the end of the sentence. Two people who had spent considerable time in both the Netherlands and the UK, and who were unrelated to the study, also checked the translations.

The translated transcription notation follows ten Have (1999), who argued that detailed transcription notations should only be applied to the original data. This argument is based on the premise that adding symbols and transcription conventions to translated transcriptions produces fictitious or ‘fake’ data, given that the participants never made these utterances. Therefore, in the extracts presented below, transcription notation is applied to the Dutch speech but is not reproduced in the English translation. However, both the Dutch transcription and English translation are presented for the reader to gain a sense of the participant’s speech.

The transcripts of the interviews were coded for recurring themes, and the three-level analysis outlined above (discourse practice, Foucauldian discourse analysis, critical realist discourse analysis) was performed on extracts that represented these themes. Themes included the ideology of the ‘good mother’, ‘dilemmas of childcare’ and what was called ‘female employment versus good mothering’, which articulated competing requirements of female employment and being a good mother. In this paper we present extracts that act as examples of the different forms of material conditions that participants oriented to when talking about their childcare choices.

Combining Realist and Constructionist Notions: Examples of Analysis

The Availability of Informal Childcare: An Analysis of Discourse and Materiality

The following example comes from a 34-year-old Dutch nursing assistant who worked on a part-time basis (with irregular hours) and who used informal care. She had one child, a boy aged 2 years old, and her husband was a commercial director. The extract comes after the mother was asked if she had ever considered using formal childcare:

**Extract 1**

1 W: Heb je oo↑ it >overwogen om< betaalde ↑opvang te gebruiken?  
2 W: Have you ever considered using paid childcare?  
3 P: J↑a.;.hh in eerste in↓stantie was het de beddoeling,  
4 P: Yeah,.hh in the first place it was the intention,  
5 P: dat hij ge↓woon naar betaalde opvang g↑ing,.h ehm,
3 P: that he would just go into paid care., h erm,
4 P: maar omdat mijn schoonouders altijd alle kleinkind↓ere:n,
5 P: opvangen ↑hadden ze zo iets van eh, nou dan zijn we zeker=
6 P: voor hem niet goed ge↑noeg, “dus eh° (1.0) J↑a >we zijn op een gegeven=

The mother in extract 1 indicates that formal care was her first consideration when thinking and deciding about childcare (see lines 2, 3). This is an unusual decision as research suggests that informal childcare is usually the preferred option in childcare arrangements, because it is perceived as closest to maternal care (e.g. Moss, 1991). Informal care is also the most commonly used form of childcare in the Netherlands (Merens, 2000). It is not clear why the mother in extract 1 favours formal care, although later on in the interview this participant identifies specific benefits of her local play-group in relation to this group being attended by children from multi-cultural backgrounds. In the present extract there is also a suggestion that the participant had doubts as to whether informal care would work out, given that the emphasis on ‘heel’ and rising intonation in ‘g↑oed’ (really well) position as unexpected her account that informal care was very satisfactory (line 8).

In the above extract the participant’s story, in which her parents-in-law took offence when she considered using formal childcare (lines 4, 6), triggers the decision to use the informal childcare they offered (line 7). A question that springs to mind is, how ‘real’ is this pressure that the parents-in-law put on this family? In other words, will there be any repercussions, will the relationship turn sour, if it is decided that formal care is the way forward? This mother does not make that clear. Yet we believe this could be an extra-discursive reality that has made its way into discourse (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). As such, the presence and availability of the parents can be considered as an extra-discursive material factor that the participant chooses to orient to via a discourse of moral obligation or duty.

In extract 1 the mother constructs a dilemma between formal care and pressure to use informal care. She then describes a solution to the ‘problem’, namely in the decision to cancel the formal childcare arrangements they had made. The emphasis on the fact that informal care ‘went really well’ (line 8) not only indicates that this came as a surprise, it also works to show that this
mother has a reason to consider informal care. The latter implies that she would not have bowed under the pressure if it had not worked out, and works to position her within a dominant ideology identified in the wider study (Sims-Schouten, 2004) of the ‘good mother’ who is first and foremost concerned with her child’s needs.

Extract 1 shows that it is a benefit to have an insight into the participant’s personal background, as it shows there is more to an utterance than simply drawing on an ‘available construction’. For example, from the introduction of this extract it appears that this participant is in fact using informal care, and this could be a reflection of the fact that informal care is the most popular form of care in the Netherlands and Britain. However, this could also be a result of family pressure, as this mother discusses. Although approached as an extra-discursive reality, it could be argued that this in itself is a convenient construction, because it puts the blame outside of the mother should anything go wrong with her informal care arrangements. In other words, the fact that a particular discursive construction orients to an extra-discursive reality does not mean that it loses its action orientation within the context of the conversation within which it is deployed.

*Maintaining Employment Opportunities: An Analysis of Discourse and Institutional Power*

Both the British and Dutch participants argued that a woman would lose her job if she took a long maternity leave. We examine this argument in terms of its rhetorical strategy and in relation to the fact that, unlike countries such as Finland, the Netherlands and the UK do not have a legal system that allows women to take significant maternity leave and then be able to return to their previous employment.

The extract below comes from an interview with a Dutch participant, a 27-year-old bank clerk, who had a son of 7 months. This mother worked 20 hours per week, and used informal care (her own mother). Her husband was a computer technician. In this extract the mother is explaining why she works.

*Extract 2*

1 W: Kun je wat meer zeggen over waarom je hebt besloten om weer te gaan werk?
2 P: het is gewoon dat ik m’n eigen daar prettig bij voel
3 W: °hm°
4 P: dat ik denk van JA, gewoon even, lekker iets anders
5 P: en.h, JA ook wel omdat ik natuurlijk ook best (1.0)
6 P: vrij veel ehh, geleeerd heb daar voor, dat ik ook denk,
In extract 2 the participant first justifies why she works by focusing on her own stake and interest (Potter, 1997): ‘it’s just that I like it that way’ (line 2). This ‘stake orientation’ is also apparent in the restrictive meaning of the word ‘just’ (gewoon, line 2) (see Lee, 1987). By arguing that her childcare decision is a personal choice and one that she is happy with, this mother’s account works to do two things. First, it bolsters against any doubt or disagreement, as the decision is constructed as a personal preference. Second, the account can be interpreted as ‘buying time’, which is evident in the restrictive use of ‘just’ (Lee, 1987). This works to present her preference for employment as a given, a fact that needs no explanation.

Overall, the mother in the above extract gives three reasons for returning to work: first, that work represents a change from the normal day-to-day routine (line 4); second, that she has got a degree (line 6); and, third, that staying at home for a long period of time may make it harder for her to return to employment (line 11). This three-part list completer (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999; Jefferson, 1990) works to support female employment from three separate angles, giving her a strong case to speak out in favour of work, and providing a strong warrant for vivid factual accuracy (see Speer & Potter, 2000).

The reference to staying at home for a certain amount of time works to portray full-time motherhood as detrimental for future career prospects. Thus, this participant takes full-time motherhood as a negative point of reference in relation to normative, and what can be considered androcentric, linear career structures (Riley, 2002). We note that at present neither the UK nor the Netherlands has a system such as the Finnish Home Care Allowance system, which enables women to stay at home for three years and then return to their previous employment. Thus, for the participant above, the threat of losing career opportunities after motherhood is a real one, and can therefore be considered as an example of institutional power.

Formal Childcare Facilities: An Analysis of Discourse and Materiality

The extract below is an example of an analysis that included materiality in terms of physical space available to the participant and the number of children
the participant had. The extract comes from an interview with a 44-year-old British mother, a former secretary, with one son aged 2 years old. The participant was not in paid employment and her husband was a computer programmer. The extract comes after a question on what form of childcare this mother would consider.

Extract 3

1 W: Talking about daycare.hh what form of childcare would you consider if any↑
2 P: A nursery, I I think, because (1.0) the::, the reasons for my,
3 P: considering childcare, (2.0) are, are driven by:: (1.0)
4 P: >the fact that I think he might<, gain from being with, with other children,
5 P: :=errmm (1.0) doing things with other children, (1.0) perhaps in::,
6 P: :=in a location that, that I can’t provide at home
7 W: Right. Does the age of the child, er matter?
8 P: I (1.0) my, my opinion is, that, errmm.hh, until they are, (1.0) th↓ree
9 P: (1.0) they, >they’re really still ba↓bies<, I I know that at, at two, they,
10 P: :=they’re talking and they, they are reasonably articulate,.hh but they’re=
11 P: :=still very little and, I I think they’re still quite vulnerable (1.0) psy-

In extract 3 the participant articulates a dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) between the social benefits from formal childcare in relation to engaging with other children and the disadvantage of using childcare for small children who are considered vulnerable. Describing the benefits of childcare (lines 2–6), this mother uses a three-part structure to characterize how her son might benefit from: first, ‘being with, with other children’ (line 4); second, ‘doing things with other children’ (line 5); and, third, being in a different ‘location’ that she cannot provide at home (line 6). The mother does not define any specific nurturing or caring qualities of nursery staff in order to support her argument. Rather, she focuses on what her child will gain from being with other children and in a different location, thereby describing benefits of childcare in terms of what she cannot offer.

In general it could be argued that this mother uses a category-bound activity (Sacks, 1966/1992) in which mixing with other children in a different location from home is defined as an activity that takes place in childcare (nursery), and makes it beneficial. Moreover, she treats this as a lived or common-sense ideology (see Billig et al., 1988). This is evident from the fact that she has no personal experience of using childcare. Yet in her three-part structure she treats these benefits as given. As such she could be drawing on constructions coming from the media and popular psychology. For example, the Daycare Trust (2001) argues in one of their publicly available brochures: ‘Daycare promotes children’s development’ (p. 3) (compare with line 4: ‘he might<, gain’).
There are two extra-discursive factors that may be considered in relation to this participant’s talk on the advantages of formal childcare. First, it makes sense to argue that childcare provides a social environment with other children, advantageous when the participant has only one child. Second, the additional amenities described as part of formal childcare can be indirectly related to the fact that this family is living in a small house with no garden.

In the second half of the dilemma (lines 8–11), the mother claims ownership of the view (‘my opinion is’ line 7) when she argues that children below 3 years old are dependent. The participant uses a sandwich structure in which statements on the vulnerability of infants in childcare, ‘>they’re really still ba↓bies<’ (line 9) ‘they’re still quite vulnerable’ (line 11), occur on either side of an alternative account (that these children are able to gain from formal childcare, ‘they are rea↓sonably articulate’ (line 10). The sandwich structure allows the incorporation of alternative accounts while simultaneously producing a foreclosure to the legitimacy of this alternative (Riley, 2003), working in this case to reject the advantages of childcare for these young children.

The participant in extract 3 appears to be drawing on an intellectual ideology, which can be traced back to Bowlby (1971, 1979), when she refers to the psychological vulnerability of the young child (line 10). This intellectual ideology is used both as a way of strengthening her argument and as a form of what Sacks (1966/1992) calls subversion (i.e. the way talk and other social actions are designed with regard to how they will be received and responded to). Thus, this mother’s talk is claiming psychological knowledge by referring to a child’s psychological vulnerability, and uses this general and unspecified term as a rhetorical design to bolster against disagreement.

Financial Imperatives and Prerogatives

As described in the introduction to this paper, financial reasons for returning to work can be analysed both as a construction that works interactively, such as constructing responsibility for returning to work away from the mother (e.g. Himmelweit & Sigala, 2003), and as an account that orients towards an extra-discursive reality. Extract 4 below is an example of a financial account and comes from an interview with a British participant, a 30-year-old mother of two sons, aged 2 and 4 years old. This mother was an office worker and the husband a factory worker. They were using informal care. In this extract the participant is explaining why she had returned to paid employment.

Extract 4

1  W: Could you say a bit more about your main reasons for returning to w↓ork↑
2  P: >I went back to w↓ork<, erm: (1.0) mainly,
3  P: because I had to, because I couldn’t afford to be at h↓ome
4  W: r↓igh:t
The participant pauses (1.0) before describing the main reason for her return to paid employment, which she positions as financial. This length of pause (line 2) is long, suggesting an area of sensitivity (Burman, 1996). We read this pause as evidence of the participant constructing her lack of personal agency and control over this decision as problematic. The mother describes going back to work as something that is beyond her control: ‘I had to’ and ‘I couldn’t afford to be at home’ (line 3). Himmelweit and Sigala (2003) argue that this issue of ‘affordable’ and ‘not being able to afford to’ could be considered as constraints upon mothers’ choice to work or stay at home, constraints that are both external (e.g. partner’s contribution) and internal (e.g. life-style and standard of living). This mother’s account could be examined in relation to the extra-discursive factor of the family’s relatively low income (between £15,000 and £20,000), which may have shaped her account of her decision. This is not to say that ‘having to work’ cannot be a ‘real’ necessity for women with a larger salary. For example, some of the participants who were on a considerably larger income than the mother in extract 4 also suggested that they could not afford to stay at home because it would mean giving up their significantly larger homes and regular holidays.

In lines 7–9 the participant draws on an alternative account to explain her return to paid employment. In this account she draws on a discourse of modern marriage and femininity in constructing herself as a woman who is neither housebound nor dependent upon her husband. This discourse is normalized by the generalization ‘most women’ (line 11). As such she shows that the financial side of work both benefits the family, as she supports and cares for her family this way, and gives her a form of independence that she does not get from motherhood. Thus, this mother uses a financial discourse to support both traditional and modern feminist constructions of motherhood (caring versus individuality and autonomy) and to draw upon contradictory positions in which she is someone who had no choice in returning to work (due to financial considerations) and someone who had agency in this decision (it was her decision due to her identifying as a modern woman). There is also a third account (lines 8–9) in which the participant alludes to, and rejects, the possibility that her decision to return to work was because her husband could not or would not meet the family’s financial needs (‘my husband, will, pay for ev’rything, you know’). Provision is often an important factor in the production
of masculinity (Riley, 2003), and in this extract the participant works to reject any notion that her husband failed to fulfil this aspect of male identity. Thus, her account supports modern gender roles of women and traditional gender roles for men and shows the complex discursive negotiation required around claims to financial imperatives to work, negotiation that may be particularly intense for women who are talking from the lived experience of a low family income.

Discussion

In this paper we have drawn upon Bhaskar (1989), Nightingale and Cromby (1999) and Willig (1999) to outline the theoretical arguments for developing a critical realist approach within the broad approach of discursive or rhetorical psychology. Critical realism argues that there are factors that may be considered extra-discursive in the sense that, whilst they interact with discourse, they are not reducible to it. Critical realism thus ‘recognizes both the conceptual and the material components of social reality … social structures have conceptual aspects—although they are not reducible to them’ (Pujol & Montenegro, 1999, p. 85). From this perspective, then, language does not solely and independently constitute our world. Rather, constructions and understandings of the world are formed and shaped by extra-discursive factors.

Critical realism has been advocated in terms of allowing analysts to theorize why people draw upon one discourse and not another, because it allows the analyst to examine the conditions that give rise to the constructions upon which people draw (Willig, 1999). For example, we have explained how material aspects such as not having a garden could result in participants making sense of the advantages of childcare in terms of providing outside play space. By locating people in their material world, critical realism addresses the relationship between discourse and materiality, and is a position that we feel can allow a more ethical analysis in the sense that we do justice to the lived experience of our participants’ lives by situating participants’ sense-making in the materiality that they have to negotiate and manage. For example, by including maternity leave policies in the analysis, we can examine the difficult negotiations many mothers have in managing androcentric working practices. Similarly, Willig (2004) also identifies ethical concerns with the use of discursive psychology in health psychology research, arguing that to analyse accounts of suffering purely in terms of action orientation and discursive stake is ethically problematic. (See Gill, 1995, Potter, 1998, and Speer, 2005, for further discussion on politics, ethics and epistemology in discursive psychology.)

Despite a call for the use of critical realism in discursive psychology (e.g. Nightingale & Cromby, 1999), critical realist work has tended to be theoretical (e.g. Willig, 1999, 2000). Attempts at empirical work have been negated by the criticism that there is no systematic method to distinguish between the
real and the constructed, and hence no method to identify factors that may be considered extra-discursive. In this paper we have addressed this critique by describing one method and demonstrating how it may be used in analysis.

We started by identifying three factors in the theoretical work on critical realism that had the potential to be extra-discursive, namely embodiment, materiality and institutional power. We then suggested that a systematic critical realist approach to a topic, in this case women’s talk on motherhood, childcare and female employment, would involve three stages. In the first stage we examined the three factors of embodiment, materiality and institutional power in the literature (academic, government and media) on our topic. This stage works to provide a list of the potential extra-discursive factors relevant to our topic (e.g. the number of children a couple had). In the second stage, we identified how these extra-discursive factors were manifest in our participants’ lives (e.g. through observation, questionnaires and research into local amenities). In the third stage we conducted a multi-level discourse analysis that paid attention to: the action orientation of participants’ talk; the ways-of-being produced through locally used discourses; and the orientation of participants’ talk to any embodied, material or institutional factors identified in stages one and two of the critical realist discourse analysis. We presented extracts that included analysis of materiality in relation to: the availability of informal childcare facilities; physical space and the number of children a mother has; the impact of institutional policy such as maternity leave; and the role of a family’s income. For example, in extract 3, a discursive practice analysis allowed the identification of a three-part list that enabled the benefits of formal childcare to be worked up; a more Foucauldian discourse analysis identified a construction of childcare as beneficial in terms of development of social skills and related the use of this account in talk to current childcare, media and psychological literature; and, finally, why the participant’s decision to draw on the socialization argument in relation to childcare was also examined in relation to her material conditions of only having one child.

In this study materiality and institutional power were identified in participants’ talk as having the power to be extra-discursive factors in their lives. Our third factor, embodiment, was not identified. For example, participants did not discuss their childcare decisions in relation to their child’s health. One participant did make a highly oblique reference to the impact of post-natal depression (for a discussion on the ontological nature of depression see Cromby, 2004), but this was not clear enough to be worked up as an example. We interpret the lack of embodiment examples to be an aspect of the idiosyncrasies of this study, in that they were not factors raised by this particular set of participants at the particular time of interview.

The method outlined in this paper represents a unique attempt to produce a systematic empirical critical realist discourse analysis. Drawing on the metaphor of a researcher having methods the way a person may have tools in a tool box, we do not present this critical realist discourse analysis as the only
way to do discursive work. Instead, we present our analysis as ‘simply another version of the debate, a version that makes possible other forms of social theory and social research’ (Pujol & Montenegro, 1999, p. 89).

Notes

1. Conversation analyst ethnographic work has engaged with material practices when looking at the organization of human conduct in situ. Heath (2004), for example, describes several studies that ‘have explored ways in which objects are found, handled, manipulated, examined, referenced, discussed and how the talk is embedded in, and constituted through occasioned features of the material environment’ (p. 279). This body of work is not, however, social constructionist, nor does it examine the materiality that may impact on discourses used that is not being physically engaged with at that moment (e.g. the knowledge that one’s house has a garden).

2. Schegloff (1997) argues that issues of power do not need to be identified through Foucauldian analyses but can and should only be identified if participants themselves orient to it in their talk—otherwise analysts are understood as imposing their own ideologies. However, Billig (1999) and Wetherell (1998) have argued that techniques used in conversation analysis are not ideologically neutral and that there are other methods of evaluating research than participants’ orientation.

References


**Appendix**

**Transcription Notations**

- ° ° Encloses speech that is quieter than the surrounding talk
- (1.0) Pause length in seconds
- - hyphen Word broken off
- ↑ Rising intonation
- ↓ Lowering intonation

**CAPITAL LETTERS** Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
- Underline Stress/emphasis
- > < Encloses speeded-up talk
- .hhh In-breath
- () Encloses words the transcriber is unsure about. Empty brackets enclose talk that is not hearable
- [] Overlapping speech
- [ ] Onset of overlapping speech
- { } Clarification, referring to tone or gesture, e.g {laughs}
- :::: Extended sound
- = Marks the immediate ‘latching’ of successive talk, whether of one or more speakers, with no interval

Pauses of less than one second were coded with the use of a comma. This was undertaken for two reasons. First, measuring pauses shorter than one second is not a very reliable and can be ‘overdone’ (ten Have, 1999, p. 84). Second, while some research contexts can gain from measuring pauses of less than one second (e.g. Kitzinger & Frith’s [2001] research on refusals), we took the position that the current research was not such a context. In the extracts participants are referred to as ‘P’, for reasons of confidentiality. This does not mean that they are interchangeable (see also Billig, 1999; ten Have, 1999).

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