The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability

Mark Rapley

This page intentionally left blank

The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability is usually thought of as a form of internal, individual affliction, little different from diabetes, paralysis or chronic illness. This study, the first book-length application of discursive psychology to intellectual disability, shows that what we usually understand to be an individual problem is actually an interactional, or social, product. Through a range of case studies, which draw upon ethnomethodological and conversation analytic scholarship, the book shows how persons categorised as 'intellectually disabled' are produced, as such, in and through their moment-by-moment interaction with care staff and other professionals. Mark Rapley extends and reformulates current work in disability studies and offers a reconceptualisation of intellectual disability as both a professionally ascribed diagnostic category and an accomplished – and contested – social identity. Importantly, the book is grounded in data drawn from naturally occurring, rather than professionally orchestrated, social interaction.

MARK RAPLEY is Associate Professor of Psychology at Murdoch University. His work applies discursive psychology to questions of power, in particular the interactional and rhetorical production of persons with intellectual disabilities, the 'mentally ill' and Aboriginal Australians. His most recent books are *Quality of Life Research: A Critical Introduction* (2003) and, with Susan Hansen and Alec McHoul, *Beyond Help: A Consumer's Guide to Psychology* (2003).

The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability

Mark Rapley

Murdoch University
Western Australia

To my late friend and colleague
Hanneke Houtkoop

Understanding is like night. Interpretation is like day.
(Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood, 1975: 193)

Contents

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the intellectual generosity and support of a number of people. In particular, I owe an immense debt to Charles Antaki, Hanneke Houtkoop and Alec McHoul. As will also become evident, my thinking has also been much influenced by Martha Augoustinos, Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margie Wetherell. I thank them for their generosity; as always, errors, omissions, misreadings and other howlers remain mine.

This book draws together and consolidates work from a project that has spanned the last ten years. As such, versions of some of the material in this book have previously appeared in journal article format: specifically, chapter 3 draws upon Rapley and Antaki (1996), A conversation analysis of the 'acquiescence' of people with learning disabilities, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 6: 207–27. Chapter 4 extends Rapley, Kiernan and Antaki (1998), Invisible to themselves or negotiating identity? The interactional management of 'being intellectually disabled', *Disability and Society,* 13, 5: 807–27. Chapter 6 draws upon and extends McHoul and Rapley (2002), 'Should we make a start then?': a strange case of a (delayed) client-initiated psychological assessment, *Research on Language and Social Interaction,* 35, 1: 73–91. I am grateful to the respective publishers for their permission to re-use this work.

I should also like to record my thanks to Patrick Kiernan and Erica Usher for their invaluable contributions to my work; to Sarah Caro at Cambridge University Press for her forbearance and to Susan Beer for her tireless and painstaking work on the typescript.

Finally, I would like to thank Susan Hansen for her support, encouragement and endurance.

A note on the cover illustration

The cover picture is an image of Justin, a young man with Down's Syndrome, taken as part of a photography project directed by Mona Neumann and the Down Syndrome Association of Western Australia. Aside from simply being a beautiful image, the picture underscores the analytic point of this book. Unless one *already knows* that the man in the picture has Down's Syndrome, the cover is, simply, a beautiful image. Intellectual disability is not just there to be found, rather intellectual disability – and all that goes with that identity ascription – has to be actively constructed as defining Justin's being-in-the-world.

See www.museums.wa.gov.au/exhibitions/downs/

A note on transcription notation

The transcription conventions used here were derived from those developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

(.) (. .) (. . .)	Pauses of approximately, a fifth of a second, half a second and one second.
(2 secs)	A roughly timed period of no speech.
.hh	A dot before an 'h' denotes speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the in-breath.
Hh	An 'h' denotes an out-breath. The more h's, the longer the out-breath.
hehh hahh	Laughter syllables with some attempt to capture 'colour'.
Go(hh)d(h)	This denotes 'laughter' within words.
((slurps))	A description enclosed in double brackets indicates a non-speech sound.
cu-	A dash denotes a sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound.
lo:ng	Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding letter or sound.
(guess)	Material within brackets represents the transcriber's guess at an unclear part of the tape.
?	A question mark denotes a rising intonation. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
=	The 'equals' sign denotes utterances that run on.
↑↓	Arrows indicate rising or falling intonational shift. They are placed before the onset of such a shift. Double arrows indicate very marked shifts.
under	Underlining indicates emphasis.
CAPITALS	Capital letters indicate a section of speech that is noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
°soft°	Degree signs indicate that speech is noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.

> fast <	'Greater than' and 'less than' signs indicate that the talk they encompass
<slow>	was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk; the reverse for 'slow' talk.
he	⌈llo
	⌊hello
	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech denote the start of overlapping talk.
[ˆt]	dental 'click'.
→	Side arrow indicates point of interest in the extract.
[. . .]	Material omitted from Extract.

Introduction

> The aim of a critical history of psychology would be to make visible the relations, profoundly ambiguous in their implications, between the ethics of subjectivity, the truths of psychology and the exercise of power.
>
> (Rose, 1999a: np)

> An ancient Chinese proverb says, 'Wisdom begins by calling things by their right name.' During this period of flux and transition, there may be an opportunity to get the name right for people with mental retardation.
>
> (Schroeder, Gerry, Gertz and Velasquez, 2002: 5)

It is, by now, something of a commonplace to refer to things-in-the-world – be they ideas, objects or categories of persons – as 'socially constructed'. Such a commonplace, indeed, that the very idea of 'the social construction of *x*' (whatever *x* may be), along with the entire project of what is usually described as 'social constructionist' (or often it appears, interchangeably, if inaccurately cf. Jacobson, 2001) 'post-modern' scholarship, has been famously parodied (Sokal, 1996) and held up to ridicule as a mere 'intellectual imposture' (see Sokal and Bricmont, 1999). This book seeks to retrieve something of the utility of the notion of social construction, by way of a detailed examination of professionalised (and essentialised) understandings of persons described as 'intellectually disabled', and the analysis of social interactions between members of the helping professions and 'intellectually disabled' persons, wherein professional estimation and management of their (in)capacities and (in)capabilities occurs.[1] It is important at this point to be clear that the brand of social constructionism on offer here, discursive psychology, is a very particular one, with roots in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. It is quite unlike other kinds of social constructionism (narrative enquiry, grounded theory, interpersonal phenomenological analysis and so on), with quite specific theoretical and analytic differences from these approaches. Chapter 1 offers a detailed account of my reading of

---

[1] 'Mental retardation' in US terminology, 'learning disability' in the UK.

discursive psychology, but for comprehensive, canonical, accounts of the area see Edwards and Potter (1992); Potter (1996); and Edwards (1997).

As such I hope to show how what has come to be a taken-for-granted social, administrative/bureaucratic and professionalised category of personhood can, rather, be understood not as some fixed object in an unchanging social world (or one of the 'static features of a pre-defined macro-sociological landscape' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992)), but instead as a status of being-in-the-world which is actively negotiated – if not always from positions of equality.[2] That is, unlike Schroeder *et al.* (2002) whose optimism about current circumstances presenting 'an opportunity to get the name right for people with mental retardation' presupposes the 'condition' and suggests that all we need to do is name it correctly, here I try to show how that 'condition' (whatever it is called) is, interactionally, brought into being. Indeed the establishment, maintenance and exploitation of power asymmetry in interaction – and the upshot of this accomplishment for the respective social identities of the parties to the interaction in question, is the central focus of this book.[3] For it is in this arena – that of social interaction, or more precisely, of talk-in-interaction – that social identities ('intellectually disabled person'; 'clinical psychologist'; (in)competent adult; member/non-member, for example) and their concomitant duties, rights, opportunities and obligations, are constructed and cemented *as such* (Antaki, Condor and Levine, 1996; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998b; Edwards, 1997; Sacks, 1992). This book then, after Rose (1999a) seeks 'to make visible the relations, profoundly ambiguous in their implications, between the ethics of subjectivity, the truths of psychology and the exercise of power'.

However, rather than explore the negotiation of the identity of people described as intellectually disabled in and via the analysis of actual interaction, much of the debate – particularly in the psychological and sociological literatures – over the social competence of people with intellectual disabilities is based on staff- or researcher-rated standardised measures and, though more rarely, on coded observational ratings or interview-based examinations.[4] Very few reports in the literature present

---

[2] Not to mention a formally identifiable 'mental disorder' as specified by the American Psychiatric Association's (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition).

[3] See Hester and Francis (2002) and Mehan and Wood (1975) for a helpful analysis of the difficulties inherent in the *a priori* assumption of the influence of *structural* asymmetries in and for interaction.

[4] While it may appear to presume that which I attempt to analyse, I have not found an æsthetically acceptable way to indicate the provisional status of the construct 'person with an intellectual disability' without littering the text with quotation marks. As such, I ask that the reader keeps the presence of scare quotes around concepts such as 'intellectual disability' in mind.

data which demonstrate the moment-by-moment prosecution of *naturally occurring* social interaction.[5] The disability studies literature, with even fewer exceptions, appears often to be based on the views of theorists and/or 'experts by experience' (although see, for example, the work of Taylor (2000); Ferguson *et al.* (1992); Goode (1983; 1994) and Goodley (1997) for notable examples to the contrary). In contrast, in this book, I attempt to build on a small body of work that has attended to ethnomethodological strictures and examine naturally occurring interaction between people with an intellectual disability and their care staff and other professional interlocutors. In the studies reported here video- and audio-taped data, collected in people's homes during interactions with psychologists, nursing and social care staff, were transcribed and analysed with a particular focus on the joint negotiation of competence, and the social identity afforded to the 'impaired' party, by virtue of interactional exigencies and interactional management. To anticipate my conclusions a little, perhaps, the practices of care staff and professional assessors – in circumstances ranging from formal quality of life assessment to defrosting chickens; from structured interviewing to taking out the rubbish – demonstrably serve actively to *constrain* and to *constitute* (or, even, socially construct) the competence of people with intellectual disabilities.[6] It is also noticeable that, by the demonstrably interactionally produced underestimation of the capacities of the people with whom they work, staff may also (inadvertently) sustain their dependence and incompetence.

In order to examine this, social, construction of identity (as competent member – or otherwise) I draw upon a range of theoretical and methodological approaches which can, rather loosely, be gathered together under the rubric of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 2002).[7] Discursive psychology is, at least from the perspective I adopt, as much an analytic 'mentality' as it is a set of techniques or exclusive theoretical commitments: my position is outlined in more detail in chapter 1 but, for present purposes, may be described briefly as employing the

---

[5] But see Goode (1994) for an elegant demonstration of the power of ethnographic analysis in his beautiful study of 'the world of the deaf-blind' and (1983) for a respecification of the methods by which competence may be discovered.

[6] The notion of 'competence' is slippery. Briefly my usage of the term is ethnomethodological, with 'competence' being seen as a worked-up, intersubjective, accomplishment, as opposed to an internal, psychologised, attribute of individual persons. I explicate my use of the term in more detail in chapter 2.

[7] The expression 'competent member' may be read as synonymous with membership in the category of 'morally accountable *human* agent' (Weinberg, 1997, my emphasis). Much of this book is concerned with the analysis of the practices whereby negotiation of candidate membership of this category is managed, and the practices whereby the denial of such membership is accomplished.

tools of ethnomethodology/conversation analysis (EM/CA) to develop an analytic purchase on the topic of minds (and their capacities), the world, and the relation between them, most usually approached in contemporary psychology and sociology (and, largely untheorised, in disability studies) from a Cartesian or cognitivist perspective. In rejecting cognitivism, discursive psychology is thus in company with those working from both an ethnomethodological and a Wittgensteinian/'ordinary language philosophy' position – Button *et al.* (1995); Button and Sharrock (1993); Coulter (1979; 1999); and Leudar and Thomas (2000) for example – although clearly differences and tensions exist between workers in these traditions.[8] Likewise, discursive psychology is deeply suspicious of classical, structural, accounts of persons, their capacities and their conduct.

Informed by the work of Nikolas Rose (1985; 1996) and other workers in the Foucauldian tradition on the development of the 'psy-complex', and the discursive psychological work of Edwards and Potter (1992); Wetherell and Potter (1992); Potter (1996; 1998); and Edwards (1997), such an ethnomethodologically grounded approach lends itself to (i) the adoption of an historical perspective on the construction of intellectual disability as 'otherness' by the psy-complex (ii) the examination of the interplay between social identities and professionalised knowledge and practices (iii) the analysis of the interactional production of psychologised constructions of intellectual disability in and through the enactment of professional practices and (iv) the presentation of a more respectful account of the interaction competence of persons categorised as intellectually disabled. The book is divided into two parts; an introduction to, and overview of, discursive psychology and critique of the general theoretical literature(s); followed by detailed case studies of psychological assessment practices and day-to-day interactions between care staff and people with an intellectual disability. The opening chapter offers a theoretical and methodological context for the book. Through a discussion of recent work in discursive psychology, the contingent and contested nature of social categories of persons, identities and the 'self' is discussed. The approach of conversation analysis, membership categorisation analysis and discursive psychology to the analysis of talk and texts is described. The chapter outlines the case for extending the application of discursive psychology to the study of intellectual disability. Much of the material discussed here may be familiar to readers in social psychology, but this sort of thinking appears yet to receive little attention in the intellectual disability and broader disability studies literatures. As such the

---

[8] See Potter (1996, esp. pp. 219–27) for a detailed discussion of these tensions.

patience of readers who have followed the debate in social psychology is requested.

Chapter 2 discusses 'intellectual disability' as diagnostic, social and moral category. The development of psychologised understandings of individual subjectivity and the production of 'intellectual disability' as social identity is elaborated and the discursive construction of intellectual disability as a diagnostic identity – for example in the American Association on Mental Retardation (1992; 2002) classificatory nosology – is examined. The relevance and feasibility of the discursive psychological approach is discussed in the light of existing work on language and communication in people with intellectual disabilities, and an examination of the local and rhetorical production of social and personal identities – such as 'disabled person' – in both talk-in-interaction and in official texts is illustrated. The chapter also offers a critical review of recent work in disability studies which critiques both dominant social science research practices and the professionalised knowledges of disability they produce. Difficulties with the structuralist understandings of disability in this work, particularly in the 'social model' (Oliver, 1987), are outlined. Discussion of 'intellectual disability' – or rather its absence – is located within these wider theoretical debates over the nature of disability, and dissenting voices presenting work on intellectual disability from a social constructionist perspective (e.g. Taylor, 1998; Goode, 1996) are discussed.

In the second part of the book, I turn to a series of case studies which examine both the application of psychological technologies ('interviews', 'testing', 'assessment') and the mundane management of everyday life in supported accommodation for adults described as intellectually disabled. In each of these case studies the matter in hand is the interactional production of incompetence.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the professional literatures which construct persons described as intellectually disabled as irretrievably interactionally incompetent. A large psychological literature is concerned to demonstrate that, by virtue of a dispositional tendency to 'response biases' in general, and 'acquiescence bias' in particular, people with an intellectual disability are incompetent to report on their own subjectivity. This chapter firstly examines the professional disenfranchisement of people with intellectual disability in the literature. Secondly, again drawing on conversation analytic studies, the chapter examines 'acquiescence bias' as a local and contingent product of professional psychological practices.

Chapter 4 examines the ascription of moral disreputability/ accountability to persons diagnosed as 'intellectually disabled' by the

construction of attention to 'doing being ordinary' (Sacks, 1992) as 'passing' or 'denial of disability' in the psychological, sociological and ethnographic literatures. The chapter then draws on conversation analytic methods to explicate the interactional management of 'normality' and 'intellectual disability' as contested social identities in professional encounters between psychologists, researchers and 'persons with an intellectual disability'. Attention is also paid to the ascription of disreputability via the professionally constructed 'demonstration' of intellectually disabled persons' accountable ignorance of their social status in these encounters.

Chapter 5 begins the turning of the tables, by close attention to the mundane management of everyday interaction in supported housing. Here we see clear instances of supposedly interactionally incompetent persons not only deftly managing their care staff interlocutors, but also demonstrating mastery of a range of normative cultural practices that should, according to conventional psychological wisdom, be well beyond their grasp. The flip side of this analysis is, once again, the (identity) management work that staff set out to accomplish: via sustained interactional practices that produce persons as equivalent in social and moral status to dogs and infants, it becomes clear that supported housing represents a site of contested agency. Through a close inspection of mundane interaction it also becomes clear that the resistance of people with an intellectual disability to infantilisation and control is both subtle and, even where ineffective, exquisitely attentive both to normative rules of conversational sequencing and such matters as cultural rules for the use of kinship misidentifications as insults.

In a single case analysis, chapter 6 offers a deviant case. Here we see another example of the turning of the tables and again, it is the wit, artfulness and cultural sophistication of the supposedly intellectually disabled interlocutor that is the focus of attention. In what amounts to a naturally occurring breach experiment, we see an empirical confirmation of Sacks's (1992) conjecture about the existence of omni-relevant devices for conversation, in and through the careful management by a man described as 'having' a 'moderate' intellectual disability of a testing encounter (in both senses of the term) with a psychologist. This chapter then offers an empirical recapitulation of the theoretical discussion of identity and identity management as situated interactional accomplishment in chapter 1.

Finally, in chapter 7, I offer some limited and tentative conclusions. This final chapter offers a synthesis of the preceding case studies and discussion. The chapter draws together analysis of the professionalised psy-complex discourse of individualised, accountable, incompetence in

a respecification of the construction of the social identity 'intellectually disabled person'. The social consequences of the current hegemony of professional discourses of otherness for people 'with' intellectual disability are discussed; alternative ways of knowing 'intellectual disability' are offered and some thoughts about the reconstruction of psy-complex practices and ways of theorising disability are offered.

1   A discursive psychological approach

> The conduct of persons becomes remarkable and intelligible when, as it were, displayed upon a psychological screen, reality becomes ordered according to a psychological taxonomy, abilities, personalities, attitudes and the like become central to the deliberations and calculations of social authorities and psychological theorists alike.
>
> <div align="right">(Rose, 1999a: np)</div>

> Reality enters into human practices by way of the categories and descriptions that are part of those practices.
>
> <div align="right">(Potter, 1996: 98)</div>

Introduction

Intellectual disability is constructed in both 'official' discourses and everyday commonsense as an irretrievable 'disorder' of competence afflicting individual subjects, requiring professional diagnosis, treatment and management. This book deconstructs and critiques the social construction of intellectual disability through a detailed analysis of (i) a range of 'official' texts and (ii) the enactment of professional psychological practices. Primarily based in analysis of the talk-in-interaction of psychologists and people described as intellectually disabled, the book offers a contrasting view of these 'incompetent' social identities as *the product of* technological professional practices and knowledges.[1] A secondary focus of the book is on the interplay and reproduction (intertextuality) of discourses of difference, deviance and incompetence in human/social policy rhetoric and

---

[1] The great majority of the interactions analysed in this book are between people described as intellectually disabled and psychologists, researchers or care staff: that is, people occupying positions of power relative to their disabled interlocutors. While part of the purpose of the book is to demonstrate (rather than to assume) that power asymmetry, the absence of interactions between people with intellectual disabilities and their disabled peers could be seen as an omission. However, if what we see shows people with impairments being competent, making sense of interactions, and dealing successfully with others' presumptions and expectations, in the face of asymmetric power, then the case has been made. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

in the (re)production of knowledge about intellectual disability in the psychological professions.

I argue throughout that the operation of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977) is visible at multiple levels of analysis and that, although either discounted in the professional psychological literature (or, in the instance of such self-serving professional constructions as 'dual diagnosis', pathologised) so too is *resistance* to the exercise of professional power from persons described as 'intellectually disabled'. That is, in this book I adopt a discursive psychological approach. This chapter outlines my reading of discursive psychology.

Discursive psychology

Discursive psychology has, over the last ten to fifteen years, matured into a substantial alternative approach to mainstream psychology: it is a programme which seeks to reconfigure psychology as a 'post-cognitivist' discipline (Potter, 2000). The project is, perhaps, best described as a theoretical and methodological *inversion* of contemporarily dominant forms of psychological thought. Edwards and Potter (2002: 12) describe discursive psychology (DP) as:

The application of discourse analytic principles to psychological topics. In psychology's dominant 'cognitivist' paradigm, individuals build mental representations of the world on the basis of innate mental structures and perceptual experience and talk on that basis. The categories and content of discourse are considered to be a reflection, refracted through various kinds of error and distortion, of how the world is perceived to be. In contrast, DP *begins with* discourse (talk and text), both theoretically and empirically. Discourse is approached, not as the outcome of mental states and cognitive processes, but as a domain of action in its own right . . . Both 'reality' and 'mind' are constructed by people, conceptually, in language, in the course of their performance of practical tasks.

What this, canonical, version of discursive psychology seeks to do, then, is to call into question the very taken-for-grantedness of the way in which we go about (as either academics or as 'lay people') talking and writing about ourselves as psychological subjects.[2] Discursive psychology thus asks us to suspend our habitual understandings of ourselves and other persons as correctly describable in what professional psychology (and

---

[2] The version of discursive psychology with which I work is sometimes, disparagingly, referred to as 'Loughborough Relativism' (cf. McLennan, 2001. See Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter (1995)) as distinct from other variants, often associated with the work of Ian Parker (e.g. Parker, 1990; 1992; Parker and Burman, 1993) and colleagues which adopt 'critical realism'.

everyday 'lay' or 'folk psychology') tells us are neutral, objective and scientifically derived terms. Rather, discursive psychology points to an alternative view of talk and text as *actively constitutive* of those very 'truths' that constitute our mundane vocabulary of the 'mental' (McHoul and Rapley, 2003). As such, a discursive psychological view draws on the ethnomethodological work of Harvey Sacks (1992) and Harold Garfinkel (1967), studies in the sociology of scientific knowledge (for example, Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984) and employs the analytic tools of both conceptual (cf. Coulter, 1979; 1990; Wittgenstein, 1958) and conversation analysis, to explicate the manner in which 'reality', 'society', 'culture' and the nature of persons in the world is constructed in and through talk and texts. While acknowledging the importance of post-structuralist perspectives on the so-called 'turn to language' in social psychology, key figures in discursive psychology differ perhaps most clearly in the level of their emphasis on, and explicit use of, the work of Foucault, Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe and other writers in this tradition. As Wetherell (1998: 388) points out: 'it has become commonplace in social psychology in recent years to distinguish between two or more styles of discourse analysis . . . typically boundary lines are drawn between styles of work which affiliate with ethnomethodological and conversation analytic traditions and analyses which follow post-structuralist lines.' With Wetherell, I take the view not only that 'a stance which reads one in terms of the other continues to provide the most productive basis for discourse work in social psychology' (1998: 388), but also that EM/CA-informed analyses can, as Schegloff (1998) concedes, show the operation, in operation, of a range of otherwise 'grand theoretical' constructs such as power/knowledge.

What all workers in the 'Loughborough' variant of discursive psychology would accept, however, is that there is, from the discursive psychological perspective, no 'reality' to 'mind', or 'culture' or 'society' or 'persons' that is independent of descriptions of them. Discursive psychological social constructionism is, thus, *epistemic* rather than *ontological*. As Edwards (1997: 48) suggests: 'if texts constructively describe their objects, then so do the texts that say so . . . Mind and reality are treated analytically as discourse's topics and business, the stuff the talk is about, and the analytic task is to examine how participants *descriptively* construct them . . . culture should not be treated merely as a causal variable. But the same principle is extended to not treating "mind" as a dependent one.' Discursive psychological work thus also draws explicitly and extensively on the work of Wittgenstein, particularly in relation to the issue of what it is that we can, sensibly, talk of ('this running against the walls of our cage', Wittgenstein, 1926), and – crucially – for both 'mainstream

psychology' (and its everyday variant) refuses to privilege the claims to scientificity of cognitivist, professional, psychological discourse.[3] That is discursive psychology accepts the proposition that:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis [e.g. the hypothesis that *this* is the correct way to go on in following a rule] takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life. (Wittgenstein, 1969: 105)

In this respect then, what Wittgenstein describes as a 'system' may be read as analogous to (a) 'discourse', or the notion of an 'interpretative repertoire' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), in that a system of thought provides the element within which persuasion of the veridicality or otherwise of a set of propositions may be made. Where discursive psychology offers its most radical challenge to how we have conventionally come to think ourselves (and such objects in the world as 'people with an intellectual disability') is in its insistence, *contra* the usual proclivity in psychology (and everyday commonsense) not to deliberate upon fundamental systemic propositions, that these be subject to scrutiny and analysis. As Flathman (2000) points out, Wittgenstein (1969: 88) noted the possibility that 'all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated' and that such unformulated propositions, by virtue of no longer being disputed 'for unthinkable ages', belong to the 'scaffolding of our thoughts' (1969: 212). It is here that my variant of discursive psychology diverges somewhat from the canonical Edwards and Potter form, in that I believe it is essential that we *foreground* the historic adventitiousness (Sacks, 1992; McHoul and Rapley, 2001) of our contemporary psychological 'truths', make explicit the historical construction of the 'scaffolding of our thought' and contextualise any analysis of contemporary forms of life with an appreciation of their provenance. As such what I attempt in this book is an examination of how it has come to be that there exist in the world such sayable things as 'persons with an intellectual disability' in all the solidity and taken-for-grantedness with which the term is nowadays invested – to present, in Foucault's and Rose's terms, a critical history of the present – and also to lay out how it is that people, in talk and texts, become fixed-as-such in and through interactions with those

---

[3] See Edwards (1997) for a detailed analysis of the shortcomings of 'scientific' cognitive psychology and Potter (1996) for a rigorous overview of the discursive psychological project *tout court*.

authorised to name them as such.[4] In this respect then, in company with Wetherell, I take the view that Foucauldian scholarship, particularly that of Nikolas Rose on the development of governmentality, offers a *deepening* of discursive psychological analysis rather than a *necessarily* competing account of the way that things stand with being human, as is assumed by proponents of 'Bolton Realism' and, further, avoids fruitless debates about whether conceptual analysis should or should not point out to users of the language whether their usages are grammatical (cf. Coulter, 1999; McHoul and Rapley, 2003) by virtue of a demonstration of the very social and historical contingency of what it is and is not possible to say.[5]

That is to say, it is perhaps as (if not more) unsettling to habitual forms of thought to *show* them to be, simply, habitual, un-deliberated, conventions than it is to *tell* it thus. It is, further, by the incorporation of Foucauldian thinking into ethnomethodologically informed discursive psychological analyses, possible to show the doing of power/knowledge (and, in principle, any other such putative social-structural phenomenon such as 'racism', 'class', 'gender', and so on) as and where it is a members matter, in and through the detailed examination of interactional practices, rather than taking such social scientific things to be, and to have been, for unthinkable ages, simply givens.[6] Accordingly, a brief detour into Rose's account of the development of psychology as a profession and as a discipline is in order prior to a return to a more detailed explication of key precepts of a discursive psychological approach.

Nikolas Rose and the history of psychology

Rose's work offers a critical analysis of the manner in which a series of propositions about what it means to be human at all are now absolutely sedimented into 'western' discourse. That is he shows how ideas of a personal, individualised subjectivity, of the 'ghost in the machine' (Ryle, 1949), a department of internal affairs, have come to be the

---

[4] Rose points out that: 'legitimacy is claimed by our contemporary "engineers of the human soul" on the basis that they can deal truthfully with the real problems of human existence in the light of a knowledge of the individuals who make it up' (Rose, 1999b: xxii).

[5] Little work in the Bolton realist tradition seems to offer much in the way of, for example, the analysis of the conditions of possibility of contemporary psychological thought, preferring instead to enumerate 'discourses', as if train spotting were actually a form of transport analysis.

[6] See the extensive debates on the compatibility (or otherwise) of conversation analysis, (critical) discourse analysis, and post-structuralist thought between Margaret Wetherell and Emmanuel Schegloff, and between Emmanuel Schegloff and Mick Billig in *Discourse and Society* (Billig, 1999a; b; Schegloff, 1997; 1999a; b; Wetherell, 1998). Yates, Taylor, and Wetherell (2001) and Wetherell (2002) offer a helpful overview of this debate.