



The  
University  
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# How we communicate with and about children

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'50 years of Education at York: Academic conference:  
Linking research to practice in Education'

University of York

2 July 2013



## Five Questions for research and practice

- How do we speak with children?
- How do we speak of children [to others]?
- How do we write of children?
- How do we listen to children?
- How do we listen to ourselves [when working with children]?

(Billington, 2006, p.8)



# PART ONE

## Critical Educational Psychology



# Educational Psychology - becoming critical

- human relationships
- specific 'social' nature of human being
- too often – the gaze has been on the 'other'
- too often – denial of the 'I'
- critical research and practice -  
research *with* not *on*

# Working with children

- the child
- psychologist
- the context (social, cultural)



# The resurgence of qualitative psychology

- reflexivity
- meaning
- specificity
  
- qualitative psychology as scientific (Harre, 2004)



# Science

- basis of authority
- nature of science
- critiques of science & psychology  
e.g. Kuhn, 1962, Rose, 1989, Costa and Shimp,  
2011, Packer, 2011



## The 'limits of science:....'

'...I am sceptical of science's presumption of objectivity and definitiveness. I have a difficult time seeing scientific results, especially in neurobiology, as anything but provisional approximations, to be enjoyed for a while and discarded as soon as better accounts become available...[this] does not imply diminished enthusiasm for the attempt to improve provisional approximations.'

Damasio, 1994, p. xviii





# Science and experience

‘the rationality of science breaks down as it approaches the personal experience of human being...’

(Adams and Miller, 2008, p. 380).

## When working with children

‘there is an abyss between [our] knowledge and [their] experience that cannot be bridged scientifically...’

(Damasio 2000 p.308)



# Method

‘Logical positivism elevated discussions about the scientific method above empirical science itself...’

(Costa and Shimp, 2011, p.26)

## Research and practice

‘even the most universally accepted principles are no more than that – subject to social acceptance, agreement, validation, and embodied in a context of accepted knowledge and procedure.’

(Edwards and Mercer, 1987, p.21)

# Knowledge and procedure in Educational Psychology

- rank, measurement and category
- deficit
- psychopathology

(Billington 1996)



# Theory and critique

- the 'evidence-base' of practice
- the schism between knowledge and experience
- the relationship between government and science



## Dilemmas in research and practice

- dilemmas in changing times
  - clients' rights to have views heard
  - participation in decision-making
  - representation in practice and research
- epistemological contests
  - language, knowledge, power (Foucault, Lacan)

## Three critical (scientific) distinctions

- between a diagnosis and a young person
- between a knowledge of young people generally and our interpretations of the young person before us
- between any descriptions of the young person we construct and the descriptions the young person might potentially construct for themselves  
(Billington, 2006, p.158)





## Critical (relational) psychology

- promotes a scientific interest in the 'process of the clinical encounter'  
(Katz and Alegria, 2009, p.1238)
- i.e. the dyad



## PART TWO

# 20<sup>th</sup>. Century 'turn to language': Discourse analysis

- social constructionism
- discourse studies
- narrative

## Beyond linguistics...

Language in its concrete living totality...precisely those aspects in the life of the word that linguistics makes abstract are, for our purposes, of primary importance.'

(Bakhtin, 1984, p.181)

## Word meaning

Word meaning has been lost in the ocean of all other aspects of consciousness...contemporary psychology has...no specific ideas regarding word meaning.'

(Vygotsky, 1986, p.5)

# Educational psychologists and language

- how do we account for our own use of language?
- to what extent can our words convey the 'real' of another?



# Discourse Analysis

a) 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'

b) social and cultural resources that people can draw upon to warrant or explain their activities and the activities of others

(Nightingale, D. and Cromby, J., eds. 1999)



# 'Doing Discourse'

- listen
- speak
- read
- write
  
- reflect
- record
- transcribe
- analyze



# Psychoanalysis - Linguistics

Condensation

Metaphor

The compression of several meanings within one symbol

Displacement

Metonymy

The mobility of a single meaning across a variety of different symbols





## SIGNIFIERS (i.e. words)



metonymic (horizontal)  
axis of language along  
which individual signifieds  
can be displaced into  
different signifiers



## SIGNIFIEDS (i.e. meanings)

metaphoric (vertical)  
axis of language inside  
which several  
signifieds can be  
considered

(Billington,  
2000, p.48)

## Expert Voices

‘Marked impairments in the use of multiple, non-verbal behaviours such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures and gestures to regulate social interaction...

failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level...

a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievements...

lack of social or emotional reciprocity.’

(DSM IV, 1994)



## Donna

‘The more I became aware of the world around me, the more I became afraid... I was frightened. ... My world was full of imaginary friends. They were far more magical, reliable, predictable and real than other children. ... Other people did not understand the symbolism I used. ... Trish cuddled me. ... I was terrified. It seemed tears were welling up from a part of me long buried and forgotten. ... I always paid for closeness with fear.’

(Donna Williams, 1992) (see also Billington, M<sup>c</sup>Nally and M<sup>c</sup>Nally, 2000)

## ‘Statements’ (SEN)

- ‘Mary is a pupil of low average abilities whose attainments in the basic skills are roughly commensurate with her abilities.’
- ‘Mary is a young person who has cognitive abilities within the expected range. Her attainments in the basic skills, literacy and numeracy are roughly commensurate with her abilities.’

(Billington, 2000, p.56)

## (Scientific) questions

- what can actually be ‘known’ of the pathologized?
- do the accounts written by the professionals contain that ‘knowledge’?
- are the professionals invisible?
- if not, what proportion of the accounts can be regarded as the professional and what proportion can be regarded as the pathologized?

(Billington, 2000, p.60)



# PART THREE

## The 'turn to language': Narrative research and practice



## Narrative (philosophy)

‘The chief characteristic of the specifically human life...is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story...’

(Arendt, 1958, p.72)



## Narrative (philosophy)

‘...Narrative *matters*. Whether as story or history or a mixture of both (for example testimony), the power of narrativity makes a crucial difference to our lives...’

(Kearney, 2002, p.14)





## Narrative (psychology)

‘Insofar as we account for our own actions and for the human events that occur around us principally in terms of narrative, story, drama, it is conceivable that our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us.’

(Bruner, 1987, p.94)

‘...people attempt to make sense of their lives by narrativizing their experiences; people tell stories, both to others and to themselves, not merely through their words but also through their actions.’

(Billington, 2000, p. 37)



- stories are complex
- stories are not neutral
- preferred stories



## Narrative in research and practice

‘There are some people who are endeavouring to situate their own knowledge, but who are finding it difficult to do so because of the dominant and disqualifying stories or knowledges that others can have about them and their relationships.’

(White, 1989)



## Narrative brain (neuroscience)

‘the primordial narratives of consciousness...a narrative or story in the sense of creating a non-languaged map...’

(Damasio 2000 p.184)

## Cognitive / emotional brain (neuroscience)

‘our senses are not built to give us an accurate picture of the external world...our brains blend [the] sensory stew together with emotion to create a seamless ongoing story of experience that makes sense...’

(Linden 2007 p. 83)



## Scientific 'omissions' - emotion

'cognitive science is really a science of only part of the mind...it leaves emotion out. And minds without emotion are not really minds at all...'

(LeDoux 1999 p. 25)



## Narrative brain

‘the narrative constructing function of the left cortex cannot be switched off, even during sleep...the left cortex predisposes us to create narratives from fragments of perception and memory...’

(Linden 2007 pp. 229-230)





## Narrative brain

‘the left cerebral hemisphere of humans is prone to fabricating verbal narratives that do not necessarily accord with the truth...’

(Damasio 2000 p.187)

‘memories are imperfect reconstructions of experience...’

(Le Doux 1999 p.210)



## Narrative brain

- ‘our brains have become particularly adapted to creating coherent, gap-free stories...propensity for narrative...’
- ‘the creation of coherent narratives in the brain is not limited to manipulation of low-level perception...but extends to higher perceptual and cognitive levels...’

(Linden, 2007, p. 225)

## The social constructionist brain

‘perceiving is not therefore something that the brain does passively. Rather the brain is an active participant in constructing what we see. Through its participation, it instils meaning into the many signals that it receives and thus gains knowledge about the world...multiple interpretations’

(Zeki 2009 p. 63)

## Narrative (Nurture Groups, Billington, 2012)

- to facilitate the collection of formative data relating to the evaluation of Nurture Groups (NGs)
- to encourage staff to develop more sophisticated analyses relating to children's thoughts and feelings
- to link to aspects of social and emotional well-being that are compatible with the aims of the NGs and provide insights that could aid any therapeutic process
- to provide an evidence base which is theoretical and empirical (White and Epston, 1990, Morgan, 2000, Billington, 2000, 2006)



# Narrative data recording

- longitudinal; hypothesis formation; both research and practice
- systematic e.g. dating/recording – verbatim / reflections
- data
  - inter-personal e.g. notebook; tape recording
  - intra-personal e.g. notebook; diary/video diary

## Whose narrative?

- James - 'friends...'  
(Billington, 2000, p.108)
- 'For me the people I liked were their things...Communication via objects was safe...'  
(Williams, 1992, p.5)



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