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**The Language of Interests:**  
**The Contribution of Discursive Psychology**

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# The Language of Interests: The Contribution of Discursive Psychology

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we outline the contribution of the field of Discursive Psychology (DP) for the understanding of interests in organization studies. We discuss the limitations of viewing interests and motives as cognitive states, essential drivers of action and explanatory variables. Following DP, we propose to view interests and motives as a key component of meaningful social practice, making interests and motives a topic for analysis rather than resource for explanation. DP offers a distinct approach to analyzing the accounts that people make about their interests in a particular state of affairs, their stake in a particular situation, or their motive in pursuing a particular course of action. To illustrate our argument, we analyze two data extracts from a qualitative study of a U.K. public-private partnership. By illustrating the way in which interests are dealt with in different interactional situations, we seek to contribute by outlining a more sophisticated and insightful way of understanding interests within organization studies.

## **Keywords**

Discourse, Discursive Psychology, Interest, Motive, Organization Theory, Stake

“Human interests are central to almost all theories of organization.”

(DiMaggio, 1988: 4)

## **Introduction**

The field of organization studies is founded on the principle that human action is not entirely random but is based on the pursuit of some form of goal that *motivates* action (Weber, 1947: 109, 122). As such, actors are said to have some *stake* or *interest* in a particular course of action. However, according to Bourdieu, assuming that action is straightforwardly driven by ‘interests’ is “very dangerous” because it suggests “a utilitarianism that is the degree zero of sociology” (Bourdieu, 1993: 76). Bourdieu’s warning suggests that while we clearly cannot ‘do away’ with the concept of interests, we must be careful about using the category in a simplistic way to explain social action. The aim of this paper is to examine how interests, motive and stake have been conceptualised in the organization studies field to date and demonstrate the value of an alternative perspective inspired by the field of Discursive Psychology (hereafter DP).

Drawing on DP, we argue that interests and motives should be viewed as a topic for analysis rather than resource for explanation. This involves taking seriously the interactional work that is accomplished by accounts that people make about their interests in a particular state of affairs, their stake in a particular situation, or their motive in pursuing a particular course of action (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 246-9). DP examines what methods people employ to deal with actual (or potential) attributions of sectional interest, political bias, personal gain, protecting your ‘turf’, and so on. To illustrate our argument, we draw on two extracts – a semi-structured interview and a non-participant observation – from a qualitative study of change in a U.K. public-private partnership organization. Our analysis contributes by showing how DP illuminates how people deal with issues of interest and motive as practical problems and concerns (Potter & Hepburn, 2008: 15).

The paper is structured as follows. First we review the ways in which interests have been conceptualized in the organization studies literature to date, focusing in particular on the relationship between language and interests within discourse studies. Next we outline the key principles of the DP perspective. The following two sections present the

analysis of the two empirical extracts. We conclude by outlining the implications of the DP approach for future research in organization studies.

### **Interests in Organization Studies**

The classical school of economic theory is based on the assumption of ‘rational economic man’ – the idea that, in ideal conditions of free markets, people are motivated by the rational pursuit of economic gain (Griesinger, 1990). Of course, both organization theory and economics have since come a long way by developing more sophisticated theories for understanding human behaviour (Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006). The human relations school of thought pioneered a radical shift away from ‘rational economic man’ by highlighting the role of social factors in human motivation, such as the need for a sense of belonging, companionship, recognition, social status and esteem – most famously ‘demonstrated’ in the classic Hawthorne studies (Sykes, 1965). However, both these fields share a common assumption about the relationship between interests and action. Interests - whether economic or social - are assumed to be stable, pre-existing and pre-defined drivers of action located *within* the individual (eg. “He was acting to protect his career interests”) or institution (eg. “The firm was acting to protect their monopoly position”).

The so-called ‘linguistic’ and ‘postmodern’ turns (Deetz, 2003) have been valuable in rejecting the correspondence model of language, which views discourse (talk and text) as a straightforward reflection of underlying meanings, thoughts, feelings, or attitudes – a ‘mirror’ on reality (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Marshak et al 2000). However, many writers, even *within* the discourse analysis tradition, still continue to appeal to interests as a kind of ‘explanatory variable’ for explaining why people use discourse the way they do. Grant and Hardy (2004: 7) argue that the key task of discourse research is to explain “how actors engaged in the negotiation of a discourse deploy rhetorical devices as they try to construct and bring to bear meanings that are in line with their views and interests”. By viewing interests as the *driving power* behind the discursive construction of reality, interests are presented as an external force that *lies outside* the boundary of discourse analysis. For example, Maguire and Hardy (2006: 10) focus on how actors use discourses “to fix understandings, shape interpretations, and justify practices in ways that are

commensurate with their interests”. Discursive change is also viewed as driven by particular sets of interests. Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004) argue that “agents ... work towards discursive change that privileges their interests and goals” (p. 637). The authors draw on the concept of the ‘institutional entrepreneur’ by examining how actors “work to affect the discourses that constitute the institutions or mechanisms of compliance in a particular field in a self-interested way” (p.648). Munir and Phillips (2005) also examine the role of texts in the practices through which “institutional entrepreneurs ... act strategically to embody their interests in the resulting institutions” (p. 1665) by constructing “discourses that suit their particular interests” (p. 1667). Putnam et al. (2005) put forward a more emancipatory agenda by seeking to “investigate the role of discourse in voicing the interests of the powerless” (p. 13), yet one which still views interests as something that is simply *expressed* in discourse. Interests are hereby understood as the *causal driver* behind how discourse is used. Discourse is said to be driven by a set of inherent interests residing in the “inner world [...] from which discourse springs” (Marshak et al, 2000: 245).

### **Interests in Critical Discourse Analysis**

The work of Norman Fairclough has sparked a significant body of work within the organization studies community under the umbrella of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA). Fairclough’s work seeks to analyze not only talk and text, per se, but also “the social forces and interests that shape it” (Fairclough, 1992: 239). Fairclough places interests firmly in the realm of the “nondiscursive” (ibid: 48). This is a key distinction between the discourse analysis conducted by DP and Fairclough, for whom interests are viewed as a *fixed property* of social groups, that are variously expressed, furthered or contested in discourse. For instance, Van Dijk (1995: 18), a key proponent of CDA, explicitly refers to “interests” as one of the many “properties” of social groups.

According to Fairhurst (2007: 110), both CDA and DP “each brings different questions to the table”. For CDA, interests remain firmly outside of language in the realm of non-discursive “social practice” (Fairclough, 1992: 86). One of the main preoccupations of CDA is to uncover the social and political interests that shape our contemporary societies. In contrast, for DP, interests are not a fixed, essential set of

'forces' that shape how discourse is used. Language is not simply a neutral medium through which actors "express or signal" (van Dijk, 1995: 18) their interests. Rather, for DP language is the primary medium through which "interests" are accounted for, constructed and managed.

Organizational scholars inspired by CDA have tended to present interests as entities that *drive* the use of discourse. Vaara and Monin (2009) employ CDA analysis in their study of mergers and acquisitions and focus on how "discursive constructions were linked with organizational action and the interests of particular actors" (p. 6). In Leitch and Davenport's (2005, 2007) study of the discourse of biotechnology in New Zealand, the authors draw on CDA to analyze the "different ideological positions and/or sets of interests associated with the various discourse participants" (Leitch and Davenport, 2007: 46). They interpret their interview data in terms of the underlying *motives* and *interests* they express, for example, by interpreting resistance as "politically motivated" (Leitch and Davenport, 2005: 905) and driven by "financial interests" (p. 904). Similar themes appear in the use of CDA to study gender. Mumby and Clair (1997: 182) define organizations as "sites of struggle where different groups compete to shape the social reality of organizations in ways that serve their own interests" (see also Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004: xv).

Organizational studies inspired by CDA tend to view discourse as a vessel through which "particular interests and voices are reproduced and others silenced" (Vaara & Tienari, 2008: 991). Interests are treated as separate from (and impermeable to) the influence of discursive construction. The process of critical enquiry suddenly *ceases* at the boundary where interests are implied as an explanatory force: a process of "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985) that we aim to rectify. We now turn to an overview of the DP perspective.

### **The Discursive Psychology Perspective**

DP has been described by Billig (1996) as "one of the major trends in contemporary social psychology" (p. 20). DP represents a radical critique of the kinds of analytical categories that are used in social psychology, but are also fundamental to many approaches in organization studies: including attitudes, emotions, memories and interests

– the latter being the focus of this paper. While Edwards and Potter (1992) first coined the term “discursive psychology”, it was the earlier influential book by Potter and Wetherell (1987) that laid the foundations of DP as a distinct programme of research (Wiggins and Potter, 2008). Potter and Wetherell (1987) developed the concept of ‘interpretative repertoires’ (IRs), inspired by the earlier work of Gilbert and Mulkey (1984), to describe the “clusters of terms organized around a central metaphor, often used with grammatical regularity [that are] flexibly drawn on to perform different actions” (Wiggins and Potter, 2008: 74). An ‘interpretative repertoire’ is “the common sense which organizes accountability and serves as a backcloth for the realization of locally managed positions in actual interaction” (Wetherell, 1998: 400-1). While more recent work in DP has tended to prefer naturalistic data as compared to the interviews heavily relied upon by Potter and Wetherell (1987), DP retains its focus on how people use discourse to construct versions of the world and their relationship to it (Wiggins and Potter, 2008). In this paper, we draw mainly on the more recent literature in DP that tends not to use the IR label, for reasons outlined in Wiggins and Potter (2008: 75-76)<sup>1</sup>.

DPs definition of discourse is distinct to (but not incompatible with) the Foucauldian notion of Discourse (with a capital ‘D’, following Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). DP focuses on actual instances of talk and text, as opposed to the Foucauldian notion of “general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time ... functioning as a powerful ordering force” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000: 1126-7), while recognizing the interplay between the two levels of analysis. Indeed, many of the substantive topics and issues studied by DP, such as racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and gender inequality (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987), have included Foucauldian categories and modes of argument. Potter and Hepburn (2008: 3) argue that whilst DP does have a more narrow understanding of d/Discourse compared to Foucault, this should not mean “that it might not draw on some of Foucault’s insights about institutions, practice and the nature of subjectivity”.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wiggins and Potter (2008: 75-76), the ambiguity around how an Interpretative Repertoire is identified and how data segments are allocated to these repertoires is one of the main reasons why much of the more recent work in DP has moved away from that term. In addition, methodological concerns about interview-based data (see also Potter & Hepburn, 2005) have led many to prefer naturalistic data sources. Notwithstanding, as Wiggins and Potter (2008: 75) themselves point out, it is important not to overstate the differences between the IR concept and later work in DP: both share similar grounding in social constructionist thought and a similar approach to studying the social actions performed by discourse.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) argue that Foucauldian analysts need to take “the close-range level of discourse seriously” (p. 1144) by “being more attentive to the local social context of language use in organizations” (p. 1145). DP offers precisely this approach. DP helps us to avoid the ‘trap’ associated with “a too grandiose and too muscular view on discourse” (p. 1145). We therefore follow Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) in defining *Discourse* as the “standardized ways of referring to/constituting a certain kind of phenomenon” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000: 1134), whilst *discourse* refers to how a certain ‘thing’ is talked about in actual conversations. According to Fairhurst (2007: 115), a key benefit of DP is that it “signals the interplay between discourse as language in use and Discourse as a system of thought”. We therefore follow Symon (2005: 1647) in exploring how Discourses are drawn on to legitimate particular actions, accounts or arguments.

DP is founded on three core principles (see Potter & Hepburn, 2008: 277; Wiggins & Potter, 2008: 77-78). First, discourse is constructed and *constructive*. It is constructed through the assembly of linguistic building blocks, namely words. It is *constructive* in the sense that which words are chosen, and how they are assembled, brings about a particular version of the world. To describe people out of paid work as “victims of the recession” rather than “benefit scroungers”, for instance, makes a difference *to the world*. Second, discourse is action-oriented. Discourse is seen as *the* primary means through which we accomplish social actions, such as blaming, excusing, justifying, inviting, complimenting, and so on. Third, discourse is situated. It is situated both in terms of the local sequential organization of talk (i.e. what was said immediately before), but also situated in a particular institutional setting (i.e. a school classroom, a job interview etc.) and rhetorical framework (i.e. how it counters actual or potential counter-arguments).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper we cannot engage with some of the broader debates around the social or discursive construction of reality: one might refer here for example to the Schegloff-Wetherell debate (eg Wetherell, 1998) and the Searle-Derrida debate (eg Searle, 1977). Obviously, Derrida and Wetherell in turn occupy different points on the constructionist-poststructuralist continuum: whilst Wetherell (1998: 402-4) expressed lines of convergence with poststructuralist arguments, she also emphasized the differences. For our purposes, one particular example is useful in order to illustrate the differences. For Searle, mountains are different from ‘points-in-a-game’: “Points are not ‘out there’ in the way that planets, men, balls, and lines are out there” (Searle, 1995: 68), but “Mount Everest exists independently of how or whether I or anyone else ever represented it or anything else” (Searle, 1995: 153). Searle basically argues for the weaker point that *social* reality is constructed and contested. However, Wetherell and Potter (1992: 65) argue for a

We agree with Schegloff's (1999: 444) methodological demand to start with Conversational Analysis (CA), before we move on and (potentially) discuss the data as an instance of wider social practices, such as gender inequality. According to Wetherell (1998: 394, 403), DP goes beyond some more narrow approaches to CA in its appreciation of Discourse, or the "forms of institutionalized intelligibility", *if* actors orient to these as relevant topics. What DP draws from CA, making it differ from the Foucauldian perspective, is its sensitivity to "the highly occasioned and situated nature of subject positions and the importance of accountability rather than 'discourse' per se in fuelling the take up of positions in talk" (ibid.: 394).

In the field of organization studies, a small number of authors have used DP to analyze some key topics, including technological change (Symon and Clegg, 2005; Symon, 2008), leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Larsson & Lundholm, 2008), resistance (Symon, 2005) and identity (Symon, 2005; Sheep, 2006). Our focus here is on the contribution of DP to the study of interests. According to Potter and Hepburn (2005: 295), "one of the basic claims of discursive psychology is that in their interaction people orient to issues of stake and interest". What interest a person has in a situation, what stake they have in a particular idea, or what motivates their action is viewed as a *topic of analysis in itself*, rather than a simple *expression* of a pre-existing entity (eg Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 295-7; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). The point of DP is not to deny that actors have interests or motives. The target of DP's critique is the assumption that interests are an 'inner cognitive driver' that explain actions. DP focuses on how participants themselves "treat reports and descriptions *as if* they come from groups and

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stronger constructionist position: they argue that when a plane crashes into a mountain you will probably die regardless of any discourses, but whether it was an act of God, an act of terrorism or a result of mechanical failure is an outcome of the discourses we use to make sense of it (also Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995). The plane crash actually *becomes* a different event in these different discourses: "material reality is no less discursive for being able to get in the way of planes" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992: 65). For the present paper, ours is an anti-cognitivist, anti-realist (Potter, 1997: 146) and constructionist (Edwards, 1996; Potter, 1996: 103-4) position in the sense that we resist, for example, attempts to derive interests from 'biological circumstances' or 'rational economic self-interest'. Instead, we ask 'how do people account for these interests?', rather than accept them as empirical fact. The concept of 'interest' points to a weakness in Searle's (1995) position in that the decision whether to classify interests as either something language-independent, 'out there' (as in *pre-linguistic interest* in biological survival) or something that has a place in a social order ('it was in our interest that the game was postponed') is itself one that can only be made as part of a discourse. In this context, "a recognition of the constructed and contingent nature of researchers' own versions of the world" (Potter, 1997: 146) becomes crucial and shows why we think DP is more reflexive than Searle's realist position.

individuals with interests, desires, ambitions and stake in some versions of what the world is like. Interests are a participants' concern, and that is how they can enter analysis" (Potter, 1996: 110).

The contribution of DP lies in its sophisticated understanding of how people deal with each other in terms of their "desires, motives, institutional allegiances, and so on" (Potter, Edwards & Wetherell, 1993: 392). For example, Antaki and Horowitz (2000) analyze how accounts can be discredited and discounted by referring to the other person's *personal stake and agenda* (eg. as biased, with a vested interest etc). Stake attributions need to be carefully managed because appearing to be 'interested' is seldom advantageous. In contrast, appearing to have 'no stake' or being 'disinterested' is often an interactionally desirable position (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 242). For instance, accounts of paranormal experiences attend carefully to the potential that the 'ghost encounter' could be dismissed as fabricated because the person had a prior obsession with ghosts, or wanted media attention for instance. By avowing themselves as prior 'skeptics', or as 'ordinary folk' with no conceivable 'axe to grind', interests are downplayed to bolster the credibility of the story (Wooffitt, 1992; Lamont, 2007). However, in some cases, confessing to stake makes sense in a particular interaction to preempt a potential accusation of stake. For instance, a manager might say to his or her team: "You all know my bonus is resting on this, but we really need to meet this target".

In order to illustrate our argument about the theoretical insights that can be gained from using DP to study interests, this paper analyzes two extracts from an empirical study. The discussion of methodology that follows is necessary to understand how the extracts were chosen. Hence, we focus on the process of analyzing interest-talk rather than the methodology of the study per se. The practical question guiding our efforts in this analysis is: how do we distinguish between "interest-talk" and other talk not about "interests"?

## **Methodology**

### *Research Site*

The study was conducted between October 2005 and February 2006 in a UK public-private partnership organization called Back2Work (all names are pseudonyms). Back2Work delivered employment services in areas of high unemployment across the United Kingdom contracted from the UK government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The study focused on the implementation of a new information system called Quality Framework (QF) that was designed to improve the quality of data held in both paper and electronic form, as audited by the DWP. Ours is therefore an institutional setting and “unlike the utterly unmotivated looking of ‘basic’ CA, we do have our eyes open to the institutional work that the talk is likely to be carrying out” (Antaki, Barnes, and Leudar, 2007: 166). To what extent the “methodological imperative shapes questions” (Hak, 1999: 444) is an important question directed at CA with its exclusivity rights for taped data.

### *Data Collection*

The study combined non-participant observation with semi-structured interviewing and the collection of written records (eg. emails, documents). Audio-recorded data were selectively transcribed, choosing only those extracts selected for the analysis: a common approach in studies conducting detailed CA transcription on large volumes of data. In what follows, we focus on the process of identifying and analyzing interest-talk rather than the analysis of the findings of the study itself.

### *Data Analysis*

This paper analyzes extracts from two fieldwork visits. The first fieldwork visit involved a (tape-recorded) semi-structured interview followed by a series of (not tape-recorded) in-situ observations in South Wales. The second fieldwork visit involved a (tape-recorded) observation of a training event in the Midlands. The two extracts were chosen for analysis because they illustrate something of theoretical importance about how interests (regarding the self and others) are handled in organizational interactions. How, though, did we distinguish between “interest-talk” and other talk that is not about

interests? Our research subjects did not explicitly use the terms stake, interest or motive in their talk. Deciding that data is about “interests” was not as straightforward as categories such as ‘emotion’, where participants might talk explicitly about being ‘angry’ or ‘upset’, for instance. Interests are not often talked about explicitly precisely because they are usually a sensitive matter (Potter, 1996). In fact, Potter (1996: 148) argues that “stake management is probably best done implicitly rather than explicitly”. The empirical extracts analyzed by Potter (1996) also do not refer to interests or stake explicitly (eg. P. 125 Salman Rushdie example). The decision to interpret the two extracts as examples of “interest talk” was therefore the choice of the authors of this paper, informed by our own theoretical lens.

Our approach therefore follows the reflexive tradition insofar as we are aware of our own role in the process of analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). In fact, the DP analysis we employ here can also be applied to how researchers might try to construct a ‘dis-interested’ stance (Potter & Hepburn, 2008: 3). Our position here is one of “stake confession” (Potter, 1996: 130): we wish to display our own ‘stake’ in viewing our data as examples of ‘interest-talk’. We therefore agree with Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2007) argument that data analysis depends on the “paradigmatic, political, theoretical, methodological, and social predispositions” of the researcher (p. 1270).

DP takes a particular epistemological stance towards the status of empirical data. Empirical materials such as research interviews are treated as “interactional objects” (Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 281) as opposed to “windows” on the reality lying behind the use of language. This “mirror-image” assumption lies behind both positivistic views of language as a source of facts about the world, and so-called ‘emotionalist’ approaches that view language as reflective of inner emotional experience (ibid: 284). Silverman (1999: 416) and Gergen (1992: 208-9) refer to the latter as ‘romanticist’ accounts. In the case of interviews, questions such as “what are [participants] told that the interview will be *about*, what it will be *for*, and what the *task* of the interviewee will be?” (Potter and Hepburn, 2005: 290) have profound implications for how the interview can be analyzed. As such, “utterances are necessarily context-dependant” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000: 202) and therefore should not be seen as “unambiguous entry points to the understanding of actions, ideas or events” (ibid).

In our analysis, we reflect on how the participants of our study seemed to orient towards the presence of the researchers, and their presumed 'interests'. For example, in Extract 1 below, Bob explicitly describes the researchers as "evaluators" of the project and orients his talk accordingly. Moreover, the two researchers adopted an informal and friendly style - demonstrated in the friendly 'banter' and humour in the transcriptions below - rather than sticking rigidly to a pre-defined set of questions: this also had implications for the interaction and hence the 'data' we generated. Even the so-called 'naturalistic' data (such as Extract 2) we gathered was influenced by the presence of the researchers, with consequences for the interaction that unfolded.

We have selected the two extracts to illustrate how stake/interest/motive can be handled by organizational actors. Our aim is not to find "invariant laws relevant to the operations of discourse" (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001: 760): other situations will of course be different. Our aim is rather to illustrate how the analytical tools of DP can be fruitfully applied to organization studies. This requires close analysis of the fine details of the interaction (Potter & Hepburn, 2010). In what follows we apply the 'Jeffersonian' transcription style commonly used within Conversational Analysis (CA). Details of the transcription notation can be found in Hutchby & Wooffitt (2008: Ch.3). We agree with Potter and Hepburn's (2005) argument that data "should be transcribed to a level that allows interactional features to be appreciated even if interactional features are not the topic of the study" (p. 291). However, our analysis does not follow the principles of CA wholesale. While DP may draw on many of the concepts and notational styles of CA, it is distinct from CA because it foregrounds the process of social construction through language-use (Potter & Hepburn, 2008) and hence has the potential to incorporate analysis of its wider social consequences (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002: 105-6), such as issues of power and inequality (see eg. Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

#### **Extract 1: The Attribution of (Self-)Interest**

During a fieldwork visit to a South Wales office, the researchers interviewed two employees who were closely involved in the Quality Framework project. Desmond worked as an IT trainer and Guy was involved in 'trouble-shooting' and resolving

problems with the recent implementation. The interview was held in the staff kitchen because there were no rooms or offices free when the researchers arrived.

During the interview, the researchers asked the two interviewees about the implementation process. Guy began by detailing all the problems with the new system, blaming the fact that the system was not adequately tested and piloted, then summed up the implications in the following way:

Guy: Well, potentially every zone that started (1.5) their quality isn't there now is it? (1.0) And there's a bonus, for each time we get the quality right.

(2.0)

Researcher 1: >Oh< right [ok

Desmond: [Quality is- quality is key to our, to our business now in terms of auditing and stuff. (0.5) Erm:: (0.5) And I thin-, I personally I think <something like this>, because quality is so important, we have to- we had to cross every 't' and dot every 'i' before we roll it out to the business.

Guy and Desmond present their complaints and concerns as *motivated by the needs of the business*, namely meeting the quality requirements of the audit, upon which the company gains a bonus payment from their contractor. In so doing, they present their stake in the situation as one of *concerned and committed employee*, as opposed to, say, resistant employees attempting to avoid change. This 'presentation of self' is of course not surprising, particularly given the presence of the researchers and their tape-recorder. Few of us would be likely to present ourselves as *unconcerned and uncommitted employees* during a research interview. As such, our data is typical of the types of 'identity work' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 621) and 'moral storytelling' (Harre, 1979/93: 162) undertaken in interview situations. Nevertheless, our analysis here will focus on how Guy and Desmond present their stake, interests and motives. Guy and Desmond are, potentially, "caught in a dilemma of stake or interest: how to produce accounts which attend to interests without being undermined as interested" (Edwards & Potter, 1992: 158). They present themselves as *interested* only (or primarily) in meeting the quality requirements necessary for the business to survive.

The interviewees invoke a Discourse of Quality (“quality is key”) and Discourse of Audit (“in terms of auditing and stuff”), referring to the audit requirements of their main contractor, the DWP. These Discourses were in fact a recurring and persistent theme running throughout the wider data-set, which is not drawn on in this paper. Our data needs to be understood against a backdrop of a relatively new set of Discourses that have become increasingly institutionalized across the public and private sectors in the U.K. and beyond (Clarke & Newman, 1997: 93-94, 118-120). The rise of New Public Management in particular has generated a new set of Discourses associated with the desire for greater transparency, accountability, evidence-based policy and target-driven practices in the public sector (the context of this study). In this study, the organization was under pressure to generate good ‘quality’ (i.e. reliable) data on the impact of their activities (eg. how many jobseekers found work), to create the evidence-based policy to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of the scheme. What is important is not only the fact that this broader context of Discourses of Quality and Audit are *invoked* in this extract, but what they *achieve* for the management of stake in this context. The interviewees present their *motive* for criticizing the new IT system as one of *concern* for the quality audit requirements of the contractor, and, by implication, the financial interests of their employers. Hence, we can focus on “what actors make salient as they build context from within the interaction”, revealing how “text and con-text are recursively related” (Fairhurst, 2009: 1612).

About half an hour into the interview, a senior manager called Bob (who was later formally interviewed as part of the study) popped into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

((door opens, Bob enters))

Guy: Bob? ↑Sorry. (pointing to researchers) These are the two ladies from the Uni who’re doing the study.

Bob: Ah:, on the IT [isn’t it? (reaches out to shake hands with researchers)

Researcher 2: [Hi]

Researcher 1: [Hi, nice to meet you=

Bob: [= How do you do? (shaking hands)] How do you do? So you’re going to come and er (0.5) run the ruler over us, ↑is it?

Researcher 1: Oh ye(h)ah. Oh yeah. (laughs)

((laughter))

Bob: Ok, so what are you going to be looking at?

Researcher 1: We're looking at the Quality Framework system. Because (0.5) because it's just being rolled out, it's a good opportunity to see what actually happens on the ground when it's actually implemented. See if it actually improves things.

Bob: (speaking to Guy) Are we going to spend a couple of hours on that later, aren't we?

Guy: Yeah, you've seen the email?

Bob: I have, but I will say, and in openness as well, I think we're the only ones having any problem, (1.0) by and large. (1.5) I don't mean in terms of some of the dates=

Guy: =Yeah.

Bob: But in terms of attitude and what have you which I- so we need to look at that.

Guy: Yeah.

Bob: It's going to WORK because it's, er, something that I've asked for, something that I've backed and it's going to work. So I'm not saying that for yourselves here (looking at researchers), because you're evaluators and you'll have to evaluate it, but from our point of view I want it to deliver what it's intended to do, [so

Researcher 1: [oh yeah, yeah.

Bob appears to deal with issues of stake in three ways here. First, he calls into question the interests and motives that Guy and Desmond constructed earlier. He claims that the 'problems' with the new IT system have not been experienced elsewhere, implying that Guy and Desmond might be "making up" or "exaggerating" their complaints, perhaps because of their negative 'attitude'. Contesting a particular 'version of events' challenges not only the 'facts of the situation' but also the motives, agendas and allegiances of those involved. The two employees framed themselves as *interested* in the quality implications of the new system and *motivated* by the needs of the business to meet quality audit targets. In contrast, Bob implicitly frames them as *interested* in

criticizing the new system for personal reasons, perhaps because they had an ‘axe to grind’ or a resistant ‘attitude’.

Second, Bob handles his awareness of the presence of the researchers by suggesting his statement was not produced simply because researchers were present (“I’m not saying that for yourselves here”). Bob attributes a particular stake to the researchers, by implying that they are *interested* in evaluating the project, and a particular stake to himself, implying that he is genuinely concerned about the project rather than just ‘feigning’ concern to look *interested* for the sake of the researchers present.

Third and finally, Bob accounts for *his own interests* in the situation using a form of “stake confession” (Potter, 1996: 129-31), where “interests that are counter to what might be expected in making a claim may be invoked” (Potter & Hepburn, 2008: 15). Bob is explicit about his own political and career *stake* in the situation, as the business sponsor of the project (“it’s something that I’ve asked for, something that I’ve backed”). The audience here is also crucial: Bob demonstrably oriented towards the presence of the researchers (who knew he was the project sponsor) by *displaying an account of his stake in the situation*. He chooses to *display* his awareness that his reputation and career prospects are “on the line”, that he has a “vested interest” in making the project succeed. Stake confession such as this may seem to be a form of ‘giving in’ or admitting ‘bias’, providing ‘ammunition’ for critics. Yet, as Potter (1996: 130) points out, “in some kinds of interactions issues of stake may be so salient that inoculating against them may be difficult and ignoring them unlikely to be effective”. Confessing stake can thereby act to show others that you are aware of your own *potential bias*, but still hold a *personal conviction* in a particular idea or decision. By handling the confession of interest in this way, the speaker can appear more reasoned, reasonable and balanced. However, there is also the pre-text of power and authority underlying this interaction, by virtue of Bob’s position of seniority within the organizational hierarchy. We interpret this as invoking a Discourse of Authority: the “system of thought” (Fairhurst, 2007: 115) that enables certain actors to think and act in a particular way as a result of hierarchical power relations. These power relations open up certain subject positions and ways of acting in certain situations: – not everyone can legitimately say the words “It’s going to WORK”, for example.

### **Extract 2: The Attribution of (Other-) Interest**

During a visit to a Midlands office, the researchers observed a training session run by Shirley (from the training department) and Becky (from the IT department) to introduce the staff to the new quality system. At the start of the session, Shirley began by introducing the main idea behind the quality system and explaining what it meant for the staff at the Midlands office:

Shirley: When it comes to audit time:: we know as a business don't we that we're running around (.5) dotting I's crossing Ts. Some of us work on Saturdays. YOU guys:: (2.0) I know, when it comes to audit time, it's manic, >↑isn't it<? Because you're having to check everything. We know that as a business and we know as a business that we've made errors. Ok? We're over five years old now:: and unfortunately as a business we've also lost ↑money because our audit has not been a hundred percent. But the Quality Framework has been introduced to try and >eliminate< all of that. (...) It's a continual audit process, so that when you ↑know audit comes up, we're not manically running around, we're not sitting in on a Saturday filing away all ou- all our paperwork. It's an ongoing erm audit process, ↑ok? (2.0) You guys, I'm pretty confident, are going to buy into this tod::ay (1.0) because it's going to make your job a little bit >easier< ok?

In this extract, Shirley appears to attribute two distinct, almost contradictory, interests to her audience. First, she appeals to their interests in improving their jobs, by suggesting that the new system would make their jobs “a little bit easier”, reducing the amount of time they had to spend checking paperwork when the audit occurs. Second, she appeals to their interests in the future of the firm, by suggesting that the new system will protect the financial interests of the business (“we've lost money...”) and, perhaps by implication, their future employment. There is simultaneously an invocation of a Discourse of Audit (Clarke & Newman, 1997: 118-9), which exerts power effects over the people in the room: if it is not done 100% correctly, then there will be consequences. There is also

invocation of a Discourse of Profit concerning “lost money” which also coercively constrains their room of maneuver and, in effect, legitimates the change. We are concerned here not only in highlighting the power effects of these Discourses, but also highlighting what they achieve for the handling of stake, motive and interest.

Edwards and Potter (1992: 105) ask the question of how the “out-there-ness” of a version is constructed: “how precisely is a report constructed to avoid it seeming like an artful construction designed to further the speaker’s interests?” (ibid. p.105). In our extract, Shirley’s account justifies the need for change by externalizing it: appealing to an external situation that is outside of anyone’s control. Look in particular at the sequence of statements beginning with “We know as a business”. These statements handle stake by presenting what needs to be done as following from contextual constraints “out there” that are outside the control of both the speaker herself and the management decisions she is responsible for implementing. This presents change as simply a rational response to the “ways things are”, rather than a scheme designed to further any particular interests. Appealing to ‘out-there-ness’ (Potter, 1996: Ch.6) is thus one important way of presenting oneself as having *no* stake in a particular situation or course of action.

However, less than an hour into the training session, it becomes clear that Shirley was not entirely successful in defining the interests of her audience. As the audience started to discuss their new responsibility for checking the data quality of all the paperwork generated by the business, staff member Catherine summed it up as follows:

Catherine:     ↑Technically it’s creating more work for us guys (1.0) °isn’t it°  
(3.0)

Shirley:        °But it’s all about quality isn’t it and getting it right first >time<° (2.0)

Isabelle:       I think it would be better once we actually do it rather than see and  
[think about it

((cough))

Shirley:        [There’s bound to be resilience, isn’t there an- and y’know this is not a  
Shirley and Becky thing we’re just here delivering this. Thi- this is not  
the first time this has come up, ’cause you’re <sitting there and thinking>  
actually, I’m doing more than:: (0.5) than the consultants are doing (0.5)  
I’m doing more, more paperwork. But it’s all to do with an ongoing

>audit< isn't it. So that when audit time comes up, you guys- (0.5)  
hopefully you guys, aren't the ones sitting in doing all the (0.5) y'know  
all the paperwork.

Catherine's statement can be seen as summarizing a number of utterances made by the audience immediately prior to the text transcribed here (which were not transcribed due to space constraints). In this sense, it can be read as a 'formulation', "a public display of agreed intersubjectivity" (Antaki et al., 2007: 168), but a *partial* intersubjectivity, namely the audience's, which is counter-posed against that of the trainers earlier.. This partial formulation is reacted to by an assertion of distance and independence ["this is not a Shirley and Becky thing"], thereby attending to their "dilemma of stake" (Edwards & Potter, 1992: 158). This extract resembles the distancing and assertion of independence observed by Potter and Puchta (2007: 108-110) in marketing focus groups.

Catherine's formulation both *resists* and *reverses* the attribution of self-interest made by Shirley at the start of the training session [it will "make your jobs... easier"] by suggesting the new system will actually *increase* their workload. The change is 're-framed' as *against* (as opposed to *furthering*) their self-interest. Shirley then attempts to repair the situation by (a) explicitly recognizing the 'resistance' she is facing ["there's bound to be resilience"], (b) distancing herself and Becky from the changes they are suggesting ["this is not a Shirley and Becky thing"], (c) displaying empathy with the audience's concerns ["you're sitting there and you're thinking..."] and (d) re-iterating her original 'formulation' of the situation, which presented the change as furthering the interests of the audience ["you guys aren't the ones sitting in doing all ... the paperwork"]. The interests of the trainers and the audience are again reconstructed: the former are positioned as having *no interests* in the change (i.e. 'this is nothing to do with us'), the latter are positioned as having a *positive vested interests* in the change (i.e. 'this will benefit you'). The two Discourses of Quality and Audit appear again: "it's all about quality isn't it" and "it's all to do with an ongoing audit". The coercive nature of these Discourses is again acknowledged (Clarke & Newman, 1997: 88-93), in the context of dealing with practical matters of accounting for interests.

## Discussion

The data extracts we have analyzed show how interests are constructed and negotiated at a micro-level in mundane workplace conversations. In the transcript of the conversation between a member of staff and his manager (see Extract 1), the manager seemed to try to discount the criticisms of his subordinates by describing them as motivated by a resistant attitude, while also confessing his own stake in the situation, possibly to avoid being disregarded as 'biased'. Similarly, in the transcript of the training session (see Extract 2), the trainer attempted (although ultimately failed) to convince her audience that their interests were aligned with the proposed change. In Extract 1, the interviewees and their boss disagreed about what motivated the interviewee's criticisms of the change project. Both parties attempted to defend their own definition of the situation by presenting the other side as an 'interested' party. Similarly, in Extract 2, the trainer and her audience disagreed on whether the proposed change was in the audience's interests. What was "in the best interests" of the audience was not a fixed entity that was brought to the interaction, but rather a constitutive part of the negotiation itself.

This paper builds on the work of Symon (2008), who also draws on work within DP to study technological change. Symon's study helps to illuminate some of the kinds of practical actions that can be accomplished by attributions of interest. In fact, DP's central philosophy is that discourse is a form of *social action* (Potter, 1996: 105; Wiggins & Potter, 2008: 77). For instance, interest-talk enables the actors in Symon's (2008) study to justify why the new technology should be supported or rejected (eg. "The users have political interests, but the IT department does not", p. 92). Similarly, Symon and Clegg (2005) show how creating a new 'interest group' of 'users' to conduct "user testing" involved mobilizing others around a common definition of "who we are" and "what we want". Interest-talk is therefore central to "getting the job done", such as getting a new technology tested or implemented. Using DP to explore interest-talk is *not* a peripheral task for organization studies, leading the analyst to getting "bogged down" in the "petty detail" of workplace interactions. On the contrary, as Symon's

work also shows, interest-talk is fundamental to the process of *organizing concerted action*.

Our proposal is that the process of ‘interest negotiation’ is crucial to the functioning of organizations, as members go about their daily activities of inspiring action, avoiding blame, motivating staff, implementing change, resisting change, winning political battles and so on. Interest-talk thus performs an important role in the actual *work* of organizational actors: part of ‘doing their job’. In Extract 1, this involved the work of managing the implementation of a new way of working. In Extract 2, this involved the work of selling an idea and conforming to institutional pressures for change. DP does not view discourse as a purely individual phenomenon: it is intimately linked to the performance of wider roles, identities and institutions. The kind of detailed study of talk in institutional settings does not simply ‘reside within’ these broader structures, like an ant colony lives within a tank (Potter & Hepburn, 2010). What DP enables us to understand is the central role of interest-talk in the reproduction (or otherwise) of institutional structures. In fact, a single well crafted account of ‘vested interests’ or a ‘conflict of interest’, for example, can undermine the legitimacy of an entire institution. The recent financial crisis is a case in point. Interest-talk has been employed to *question* the legitimacy of certain institutions, such as credit reference agencies and regulators, on account of their ‘vested interest’ in the banks they were supposed to oversee. Interest-talk was also employed by other institutions, such as banks, to *defend* their legitimacy by claiming to have acted ‘in the interests of shareholders’, for instance.

To sum up, our analysis has revealed the shortcomings of viewing interests as a fixed and essential driver of action. Our analysis shows how the interests that motivated the actions of those involved – whether it was the employee being interviewed in Extract 1, or the staff being trained in Extract 2 – were subject to *ongoing attributions, negotiations and re-constructions within workplace interaction*. DP enables us to understand these processes of “stake management” (Potter, 1996: 148), which the reified notion of interests employed in the existing literature (reviewed earlier) has tended to overlook.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Our argument in this paper is that using the interest category as a fall-back to explain social action creates more problems than it solves. Indeed, social historians like Tilly (2006) warn against using the analytically unproductive category of ‘interests’ to explain the historical movement of social norms and ideals. DP, we suggest, provides the theoretical framework necessary for investigating how interest, motive and stake are dealt with by actors in social settings. DP does not attempt “to understand what people say in terms of its interestedness; it is an attempt to take the issue of interestedness for participants as a topic” (Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 295).

#### *Discourse as a Practical Action and System of Thought*

DP is primarily suited to help the analyst to appreciate the *flexibility* and *variability* of language-use (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 99, 108; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000: 205). Indeed, our analysis showed how the attributed motives of workers can shift fairly dramatically in the moment-by-moment unfolding of workplace conversations. Yet we have also highlighted the invocation of four broader Discourses in our extracts: Quality, Audit, Profit and Authority. Stake management and interest attributions occurs in the context of the *recurring habitual* and *coercive* backdrop provided by these Discourses, but always as “co-created, contestable, and locally achieved” (Fairhurst, 2009: 1607). What DP enables us to reveal is how participants work within and around these Discourses in a *flexible and creative way* to accomplish their practical actions. Hence, micro-discourse tends to vary both *across* and *within* interactional settings (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). For example, in Extract 2 the “change champion” deviated from the officially sanctioned Quality discourse to appeal to the recipients’ *self-interest*, in her (albeit unsuccessful) attempt to accomplish a smooth implementation of the change: one could argue that she combines the habitual and coercive with the locally flexible.

#### *Interests and Power*

DP is often accused of “neglecting the non-linguistic bases of power relations” (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004: 185) and ignoring the “constraints of wider power structures” (Speer, 1999: 472). However, its real value lies in examining the role of discourse in reproducing and challenging power relations, such as gender inequality (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter,

1987) and racial discrimination (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In our case, one protagonist asserted both his stake and authority base, whilst other protagonists asserted their independence by externalising responsibility and power “out there”. DP views power as (re-)produced through discourse, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of what Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008: 216) call the “container theory” of power, in which pre-existing power structures exert *causal force* over action.

We argue that DP contributes to a better understanding of the micro-mechanisms of the production and reproduction of power through *detailed analyses of the actual operation* of discourse. For instance, DP attends to how language is used to “draw attention away from concerns with the producer’s *stake* in the situation – what they might gain or lose – and their *accountability*, i.e. responsibility for it” (Potter, 1996: 150). In our case, one protagonist emphasized stake vis-à-vis their position as a sponsor of the project and their hierarchical status as a manager (Extract 1); another emphasized absence of stake due to external forces (Extract 2). Rather than assuming that power relations (hierarchical, coercive, normative etc) are important, we have shown how they are produced “in locally situated ways” (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008: 133). As such, power structures are not “pre-given” but rather “products of the local practices of participants” (Ten Have, 1999: 55). The relationship between discourse and power should therefore be conceived of as a complex one: those in power cannot assume that they do not need ‘effective’ discourse, including the careful management of actual or potential issues of stake, motive and interest.

The skill of managing issues of stake, motive and interest is, of course, not evenly distributed. The ability to inoculate against actual or potential attributions of stake (Potter, 1996: 125) is likely to be related to the linguistic and social capital held by the agent. We agree that once the micro groundwork has been laid, one can attempt and connect into ‘bigger issues’. This latter agenda has been pursued by Bourdieu (eg 1992) who, notwithstanding some major ontological differences with DP, does discuss specific discourse tactics, such as routinization (eg the phrase “because quality is so important” in our case) and neutralization (often found among teachers – Bourdieu, 1992: 109). If we had gathered more longitudinal material, we may have uncovered how certain statements and references (“quality is key”, “we’re the only ones having any problem ... in terms of

attitude”, “our audit [is] ... not a hundred percent”) are related to the mastery of certain linguistic repertoires, specialized knowledge and confidence in pronouncing these – what Bourdieu (1992: 109) calls “access to the legitimate instruments of expression”.

#### *Historical and Social Contexts of Interest-Talk*

Despite its focus on the micro-level of interaction, DP is not incompatible with a recognition that “in different groups and at different periods in history the predominant linguistic expression of motives has varied enormously” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000: 206). Detailed analysis of individual texts should be seen as a first step that should then be matched up with accounts of broader Interpretative Repertoires or cultural resources (Wetherell, 1998)<sup>3</sup>. Hence, DP recognises that discourse is “historically and socially specific” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002: 99). In our case, the particular invocation of the Discourses of Audit, Profit, Quality and Authority can clearly be linked to a particular stage in the development of Managerialism (Clarke & Newman, 1997): thirty years earlier, for example, professional themes might have featured more prominently in our data.

DP’s primary focus on the variability and flexibility of language-use also does *not* mean it views actors as inventing discourse “on the spot” for the first time in each speech act. Nor does DP assume that actors possess infinite freedom and sovereign agency in their choice of words. For centuries it was commonplace to speak of religious motives for business enterprise, for instance, whereas nowadays such a “vocabulary of motives” might seem bizarre (Mills, 1940: 910). Analyzing these shifts in *Discourses of interest*, in our view, constitutes an important future research programme that would extend our work here. Nonetheless, such variation is likely to escape our attention, in our view, unless we undertake the kind of micro analysis advocated by DP. As our analysis shows, the dilemma of stake can be managed in various ways to achieve different social actions: by invoking the Discourse of Authority, one protagonist acknowledged his stake to avoid the potential charge of being ‘biased’. By invoking the Discourses of Quality, Profit and

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<sup>3</sup> In our analysis we have not made the more general claim that the interest-talk we observed signalled more “habitual forms of argument” (Fairhurst, 2009: 10) indicative of an Interpretative Repertoire. This is not because this claim is incompatible with our approach but would simply require support from a broader study to demonstrate that the interest-talk we observed was indeed part of a habitual and recurring “backcloth” (Wetherell, 1998: 400).

Audit, in contrast, the trainers managed their stake in the opposing way: by distancing and asserting independence.

To conclude, we suggest that organization theory could benefit from drawing on DP's insights into how interests are presented, articulated and managed in social settings. However, further work is needed to realize the full contribution of DP to organization theory. DP deals with much more than just the interest category we have dealt with here. Categories such as 'attitudes' and 'emotions' (Edwards & Potter, 2005) are central to work within DP and are also key concepts in organization theory. Furthermore, while much of the work in DP uses empirical material from lowly institutionalized settings, a future research agenda for DP could be found in examining formal (highly) institutionalized settings (eg Antaki et al., 2007: 166): cross-fertilization can thus potentially work in both directions.

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