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Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Psychology: Essays in honour of Michael Billig
Edited by Charles Antaki and Susan Condor
East Sussex, Routledge, 2014

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This book is a collection of essays in honour of a scholar whose work many qualitative psychologists will be familiar with. The editors of the book describe him as ‘one of the most significant living figures in social psychology’ (p.iii). We might wish to add that he has made a significant contribution to qualitative inquiry in psychology. Michael Billig was a founding member (along with Jonathan Potter and Derek Edwards) of Loughborough’s Discourse and Rhetoric Group, which began in Billig’s office in 1987, and subsequently went on to make major methodological contributions to psychology, particularly regarding the application of discourse analysis to social psychology.

In the opening Chapter Susan Condor provides a brief but enlightening overview of Billig’s work. She traces his academic career from training as an experimental social psychologist under the supervision of Henri Tajfel, with whom he designed the classic minimal group experiments, to his later qualitative work, including analyses of fascist propaganda, his ethnographic study of young Conservatives and interviews with English families about the British Royal Family. Two themes identified as running throughout Billig’s work, as indicated in the title of the book, are a concern with rhetoric and ideology.

The contributors to the book are all leading academics who have worked with Billig at some point in their career. This could have risked resulting in a series of essays from very similar perspectives. Yet the editors have managed to include a good mix of authors including a communication theorist, discursive psychologists, critical psychologists and experimental social psychologists. The book’s foreword explains that each contributor highlights the importance of Billig’s work for a specific area and applies it to a particular social psychological problem. The authors demonstrate the relevance of Billig’s work to a wide range of topics including attitudes, prejudice, conspiracy theories, obedience and conformity, sexism and affect.

The first four essays focus on Billig’s work on rhetoric; Herbert W. Simons (Chapter 2) argues that Billig both anticipated and influenced the emerging ‘rhetorical turn’ in the US human sciences, Derek Edwards (Chapter 3) addresses the relationship between discursive psychology and Billig’s brand of ‘rhetorical psychology’, while John Shotter (Chapter 4) focuses on the rhetorical style of Billig’s own writing and how he enables us to see the taken for granted differently.

The next three chapters emphasise how Billig’s work challenges dominant approaches in the psychological study of attitudes, prejudice and conspiracy theories. In Chapter 5 J. Richard Eiser argues that Billig’s focus on the expression of attitudes through language brings into question the distinctions currently made in social psychology between attitudes and beliefs. In their chapters Cristian Tilega (Chapter 6) and Jovan Byford (Chapter 7) critique the individual differences approach to the study of prejudice and conspiracy theories respectively and draw on Billig’s work to conceptualise racist and conspiratorial discourse as “historically situated ideologies, worldviews and cultural traditions [that] produce and sustain particular patterns of thinking” (p. 91). Chapter 8 by Stephen Reicher draws inspiration from Billig’s theoretical ideas to re-consider two classic social psychological studies: the Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram’s obedience experiments.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 all, to some extent but in different ways, relate to Billig’s (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. Rosalind Gill applies Billig’s argument regarding how taken-for-granted

practices sustain nationalist ideologies to consider how 'banal sexism' operates in an ostensibly egalitarian and post-feminist era. Nikos Bozatis (Chapter 10) provides his own spin on Billig's banal nationalism thesis by focusing in particular on Greek nationalism to examine what he refers to as banal Occidentalism. Chapter 11 by Margaret Wetherell considers the relationship between nationalism and affect in the form of emotions stirred up during national days of commemoration. However, Wetherell primarily draws on his later work that reconceptualises Freudian repression as discursive practice and explores how this may open up new avenues for social research on affect.

The penultimate chapter by Christine Griffin (Chapter 12) focuses on one of Billig's books that academic audiences may be less familiar with. *Rock 'n' Roll Jews* (Billig, 2001) was written for a general audience and examines how the contribution of Jews to the history of rock and pop music has failed to receive recognition. Griffin suggests that the book reflects a number of themes that pervade Billig's academic work. The final chapter takes the form of a short afterword by Gustav Jahoda who, in 1973, acted as Billig's external examiner for his PhD in experimental social psychology. Jahoda's afterword provides a fitting celebration of Billig's work over the course of his career and in particular the appeal of Billig's work across disciplinary boundaries.

This book should not be seen as an introduction to Billig's contributions to social psychology; it is not designed to introduce his ideas to the student or academic who has yet to encounter his work. Indeed Chapter 5 largely draws on Billig's ideas only implicitly and assumes that the reader will make the connection. Neither is this book an attempt to translate Billig's work into a more accessible and digestible form – a kind of 'Billig for Dummies'. Billig's work needs no such translation. His work is arguably amongst some of the most accessible and humorous academic writing that you are likely to come across in psychology and Billig's most recent book is concerned precisely with critiquing the abstruse nature of much social scientific writing (Billig, 2013). Thankfully the authors manage to adopt his clear style of exposition with varying degrees of success. Each author does more than simply describe Billig's ideas and apply them to different areas. As the contributors themselves make clear, they argue with Billig, they mix his ideas with other theoretical insights; they put their own 'spin' on his work. The book continues conversations that Billig's work started, highlighting the continued relevance of some of his theoretical contributions and illustrating how his ideas might be usefully applied in new and different ways.

While not the subject of the book, methodological concerns run throughout the contributions. Simons (Chapter 2) praises Billig for his methodological eclecticism, while Edwards (Chapter 3) writes about Billig's influence on the development of discursive psychology, particularly his appreciation of the importance of rhetoric. Yet Billig's ambivalence towards 'method', his reluctance to align himself fully with a particular methodological paradigm and his view that psychology has a "somewhat unhealthy preoccupation with methodology" (Billig, 1976, p.2) are commented on throughout the book. Billig's rhetorical approach, which views thinking as 'two-sided' and argumentative, is a key theoretical insight that informs many contributions throughout the book; as is his dialectical approach of looking for opposing commonplace arguments and contradictions in common sense ('ideological dilemmas'). As Edwards puts it "[f]amously preferring 'scholarship' to 'method', this 'dialectical' strategy may be the closest thing Billig gets to having what might be called a method" (pg 38). Shotter similarly describes "Billig's method" as applying an "argumentative hermeneutic" (pg 48) in which he reverses what is typically taken for granted. The importance Billig places on taking a broad interdisciplinary perspective is also emphasised throughout the book. Reicher summarises Billig's approach to scholarship as: "know your subject deeply and broadly - and don't just limit yourself to the psychological literature" (p. 100). As part of this broad approach, there has often been a historical dimension to Billig's analyses. Shotter explains how Billig's brand of 'antiquarian psychology' looks to the writings of the past to disrupt present thinking and critique modern intellectual trends. Other themes in Billig's work that are highlighted by

several contributors include Billig's examination of the "daily deixis of little words" (Billig, 1995, p. 144) such as 'we' and 'the' that reference a category and may unobtrusively convey ideological meaning. Another is the importance Billig places on the interrogation of absences, examining what is not said or, as Billig might put it, what is textually repressed. While this book is not about methodology, it honours Billig's eclectic, interdisciplinary approach to scholarship in contrast to the methodolatry that pervades our discipline.

What I felt was missing, perhaps inevitably, was any contribution from the man whose work is the subject of the book. While only the most egotistical of academics would agree to contribute to a book in honour of oneself, I found myself on numerous occasions wondering what Billig would make of the authors' representations of his ideas. For example, when addressing Billig's reservations about Conversation Analysis (CA), Derek Edwards appears to suggest that these are based solely on a technical misunderstanding of a particular concept (the notion of a 'preference for agreement'). What Edwards glosses over, in my opinion, is Billig's broader concern about the tendency of CA (and discursive psychology's adaptation of it) to direct attention away from studying ideology by focusing exclusively on the details of interaction without linking these micro-analyses to broader social processes (Billig, 2006). Indeed Edwards appears to indirectly concede this point earlier in the chapter when he describes his own collaborative work with Jonathan Potter as having "moved steadily towards CA and away from interviews, *ideology* and repertoires" (p.31, emphasis added).

The book also focuses on some aspects of his work more than others; again perhaps inevitably given the unusual breadth of Billig's publications. Quite a few contributions relate to his work on nationalism, while there is very little discussion of his earlier experimental work and only two brief mentions of his excellent critical work on humour and ridicule. Nevertheless, this is in part made up for by dedicating several chapters to other areas of his work that have perhaps been generally overlooked, such as his work on conspiracy theories and his less-academic book *Rock 'n' Roll Jews*. As a fan of Billig, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to those who admire his work or anyone interested in an approach to social psychology that prioritises scholarship over disciplinary boundaries or methodological paradigms.

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