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The Generalizability of Discursive Research

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Abstract

In this paper I show how the accepted notion that discourse analytic findings must compromise generalizability in order to gain a detailed understanding of the area being investigated is not the case. Instead, I show how such findings can be considered generalizable to the extent that they can show how a particular discursive strategy will often bring about the same interactional results. This means that discourse analysts can, and arguably should, claim that a discursive strategy that they have identified will accomplish similar rhetorical effects in a variety of interactions. I use existing conversation analytic and discursive findings and examples from my own data where (i) an 'us and them' distinction is used to argue against immigration and asylum and (ii) where existing prejudice is used to justify further prejudice, to illustrate the generalizability of such findings. I conclude by discussing the extent to which generalizations are possible and the implications of being able to make claims generalizable for the discipline.

Key words: Discursive Psychology, Generalizability, Qualitative Methodology, Us and Them, Asylum Seekers

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1. Introduction

The Qualitative/Quantitative distinction is one of the most well rehearsed in Psychological and Social research (e.g. Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 2003; Flick, 2006; Punch, 2005). The accepted wisdom is that quantitative research offers reliable results from a representative sample of participants that the researchers can apply to a wider population – that is, they are generalizable (e.g. Popper, 1959). So, for example, Laythe, Finkel and Kirkpatrick (2001) applied the Right Wing Authoritarian attitude scale to 138 participants and concluded that people who are Right Wing Authoritarians are the most likely to hold prejudiced views. By contrast, qualitative researchers tend to accept that their findings cannot be generalized in this way; instead generalizability is sacrificed in favour of a more detailed understanding of the issue being researched (see, for example, Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001).

Discourse analysts have been critical of quantitative methods (e.g. Billig, 2002; Condor, 2006; Figgou and Condor, 2006) by claiming that these findings' lack of meaning makes their generalizability irrelevant and that the generalizable results are in fact *produced*, rather than identified, by the research (Billig, *et al.*, 1988; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Speer and Potter, 2000). Nevertheless, quantitative researchers continue working with the assumption that their work is generalizable, while discourse analysts continue their research agendas without making any such claims, as for example, Schofield shows that 'there is broad agreement that generalizability in the sense of producing laws that apply universally is not a useful standard or goal for qualitative research' (1993: 207, see also Stroh, 2000). In this paper, however, I am going to show that discourse analytic findings can, to an extent, be generalized.

2. Beginning to generalize.

It has been suggested that if language is analysed as a system, then this system can be seen as generalizable (Taylor, 2001). This is certainly true of the Conversation Analytic research that much discourse analysis is based on. For example Schegloff's work on the sequences of conversations is a convincing analysis of the consistent – and therefore generalizable – rules of conversation (Schegloff 1968, 1979, Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). So for example Schegloff refers to the 'distribution rule' (1968: 1076) of telephone conversations; that it, the answerer speaks first. He also shows that 'demonstrations of continued, coordinated hearership' 'such as "uh huh" and "mmhmm"' (1968: 1093) can be made while another speaker is talking without being taken as an interruption that speaker. Forty years on, these rules still hold firm, and have even been applied to Japanese conversations (see Mori, 2006). Atkinson (1984) has shown the patterns of speech that are successful in invoking applause in the setting of public speaking, showing for example that applause often follows after a speaker '*criticizes or insults the opposition, praises or boasts about his or her own position, or does both at once*' (1984: 377, emphasis in original). In their analysis of television news interviews Clayman and Heritage show how different types of interview questions invite different responses, while different types of question formulation are responded to as more or less confrontational. For example, negative questions, such as 'didn't you X' are shown to invite a yes response, and a question using the "How could you X" format is clearly 'confrontational' (2002: 221). Perhaps the best known example of a generalizable conversational strategy is that of the three-

part list (Jefferson, 1990) where lists are consistently seen to include three items to show that the list is complete, and that what is been described is normative.

While it can therefore be seen that specific sequential organisations, and certain types of question formulation can be seen to be generalizable, discourse analysts are concerned not just with sequential organisation, but also with the ‘action orientation’ of talk (e.g. Billig and MacMillan, 2005; Edwards and Potter, 1992). It is at this point that discursive research may appear difficult or impossible to generalize; even Taylor, who argues that it may be possible to generalize the *function* of talk, argues that to do so would require collecting a very large corpus of data on a subject which could require electronic sorting and potentially even some quantitative analysis (2001: 13). In the following analysis I am going to show how it is not necessary to collect an unmanageable data corpus, or to resort to quantitative analysis to show how discourse analytic findings can be generalizable. In the following section I will show how one rhetorical devise – the ‘us and them’ dichotomy – can be seen to occur in a number of contexts in the service of opposing asylum and immigration.

3. The Generalizability of the Us and Them Distinction

The ‘Us and Them’ distinction is a commonly used rhetorical strategy to make a native group and a group of incomers appear to be very different to the extent that they do not belong together. Furthermore it constructs the incoming group as distinctively *not us*, by working up the differences between two groups and importantly the ‘them’ group is positioned as not worthy of the ‘us’ groups’ sympathy

or help. The following extract comes from Verkuyten's study of how Dutch natives talk about ethnic minorities in the Netherlands.

Extract One¹ (Verkuyten, 2001: 263, listed as extract two)

1. 'Yeah, whether you're white, black, yellow, or purple, I don't give a damn.
2. As long as you're behaving just normally and running the home just normally,
3. your kids, and you don't have to do anything special, just keep clean and live
4. properly, and how you live is up to you, but just don't bother the
5. neighbours.'

Verkuyten states that this participant (like others in his study) 'make a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' whereby a description of the kind of things that 'we' would typically say or do is contrasted with what 'they' do. So the typical and common behaviour of the Dutch provides the norm in terms of which 'their' behaviour is evaluated and defined as abnormal' (2001: 263). We see that in the Dutch context, ethnic minorities are discursively separated from the 'natives' in a way that highlights the differences between the two groups, here in the service of justifying the exclusion of ethnic minorities from housing. In a study of Parliamentary discourse about immigration in France Van der Valk shows how the French natives – 'us' – are presented positively, while the immigrants – 'them' – are presented in negative terms. From these examples we can see that this 'us and them' dichotomy is used in justifying opposition to immigration. In the next section we begin to see how the same strategy is used in opposing asylum too.

¹ Please note that all data extracts are repeated from the original source and are transcribed according to the authors' own conventions. See the originals for these details and the full analyses.

The following extract is from Lynn and Lea's study of letters in newspapers referring to asylum seeking in the UK.

Extract Two (Lynn and Lea, 2003: 441, listed as extract eight)

The human rights issue crops up constantly in reference to asylum seekers, but what about the rights of us Britons?

(Daily Mail, 2 April 2001)

Here they show that 'us Britons' are referred to in explicit contrast to 'asylum seekers' to suggest that these asylum seekers are a 'threat to British people' (2003: 441) and in doing so the (human) rights of asylum seekers are criticised and their exclusion is justified. I have also found this 'us and them' strategy being used in my own research about asylum seeking in the UK. In the following extracts we see two different illustrations of the way in which the 'us and them' dichotomy is used to justify the exclusion of asylum seeking. These illustrations both utilise the same strategy, to the same end, but here in very different contexts. First we see a television presenter and then a member of the public employing the strategy.

Extract Three (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 172, listed as extract four)

1. Murnaghan: OK well let's just er pursue this issue of language er Oliver
2. Letwin in Westminster there would you er go along with er
3. Peter Hitchens and say that we really should be calling many
4. of the people who are trying to get into our country .and who
5. are coming into our country are, .hhh illegal (.) economic
6. migrants (.) they're not asylum seekers

(Asylum: Face the Nation. BBC1, 23 July, 2003)

Extract Four (Goodman, 2007: 41, section from extract eight)

1. This country cannot afford people with this mentality that the you can
2. have as many children as you like here & the state will pay for their
3. upkeep. Is it any wonder our pension funds are in such dire straights
4. when this kind of behaviour is going on all over the country with
5. illegal immigrants who have never paid a penny into the state coffers in
6. national insurance or income tax.

(Henry Piggot-Smythe, Prestbury, Cheshire 25/08/2005 at 11:14²)

While the question made by Murnaghan (extract three) does not directly justify the exclusion of asylum seekers (presented here as, at least, potential economic migrants) constructing these incomers as ‘not us’ positions them as people who do not need to be afforded the same rights and privileges as the British us; it is not surprising then that Letwin (the politician invited to speak in line three) goes on to make an argument that justifies policies that would restrict the right of asylum into the UK. Similarly the comments made by Piggot-Smythe (extract four) refers to ‘this country’ (line one) and ‘our pension funds’ (line three, my emphasis) in contrast to ‘people with this mentality’ (line one) and ‘illegal immigrants’ (line five). This constructs a British ‘us’ made up of people who contribute to the state, in opposition to the illegal immigrant ‘them’ who go to Britain to live off the hard work of the ‘us’.

² This internet debate took place on the Manchester Evening News website which can be viewed at the following address:
http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/c/171031_do_your_own_dirty_work.html

With this 'us and them' dichotomy being used to argue against the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers, it follows that people who support these people will work to undermine and challenge such a distinction. An example of such a challenge can be seen in the following example taken from the same debate as the previous extract.

Extract Five: (Goodman, 2007: 38, extract one)

1. Of course the councils are correct in refusing to act inhumanely. I don't
2. want to live in a country that separates kids from their mums, and
3. chucks them out of the country purely because we resent sharing our
4. riches. Those who would split this family should be ashamed.
5. You'd rather hurt kids than admit your politics can be flawed.
6. Disgusting.

(James, Eccles 24/08/2005 at 12:21)

Here we see a reclassifying of the us and them distinction so that instead of the us/them being British/incomer it becomes pro-family/anti-family; in this way the dichotomy is not based on nationality but on morality. This type of classification allows asylum seekers to be included in the 'us' which means that any differences between British people and asylum seekers are not worked up, but are nullified by the reference to the similarities between the two groups. Instead, it is opponents of asylum seeking who become 'them' (or 'those' line four).

What is interesting about this extract is that the 'us and them' distinction identified in the previous extracts *is* identifiable here ('our riches' lines three to four and 'them'

line three). Where this extract differs is that the contributor plays down the distinction in favour of a moral distinction in an attempt to rhetorically undermine this pervasive distinction. This suggests that James is attentive to the discursive strategy of distinguishing ‘us and them’ in the service opposing asylum and is explicitly organising his text both because of this, and to work against it. This shows that not only is the ‘us and them’ distinction generalizable to the extent that it is often used by opponents of asylum seekers to justify their exclusion, but that supporters of asylum are attentive to this and attempt to reclassify the dichotomy along different lines to construct a more inclusive approach to asylum seekers.

I have now demonstrated how it can be claimed that, in general, opponents of asylum seeking and immigration utilise an ‘us and them’ distinction in providing grounds for their exclusion. Leudar et al (2004) have shown us, however, that an ‘us and them’ distinction is not just used in opposing asylum and immigration. They show us how an ‘us and them’ distinction was used by the American President George Bush directly following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

Extract Six: (Leudar et al., 2004: 248, listed as extract five)

28 The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I’ve directed the
29 full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those
30 responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the
31 terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.

(Bush statement 11/9/01)

Here 'us' refers to the entire nation of America while 'them' are 'those who are behind these evil acts' (line 28) and 'those who harbour them' (line 31). While the 'us and them' distinction identified in the previous extracts refers to the natives and the incomers to the country in question and is used to justify the exclusion of, and harsh measures towards, asylum seekers and immigrants, the 'us and them' distinction as used by Bush is designed for a different purpose altogether. Here, Bush is beginning to make a case for taking action following the attacks on New York and in particular is preparing the rhetorical groundwork necessary for justifying the military action that would take place in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

At first glance such a seemingly different use of an 'us and them' distinction would appear to weaken the case for the generalizability of the strategy because a similar strategy is being used to very different ends. However, in both uses of the 'us and them' dichotomy very similar rhetorical ends are being accomplished. Both uses work to construct the 'us' group (be that as the 'native' population or the American nation/Victim of terrorism) and in both cases this distinction is used to justify the ends of the 'us' group at the expense of 'them'. This suggests that the usage of the 'us and them' strategy is consistently (generalizably) used to the detriment of those included in the 'them' category. What this tells us about the generalizability of discursive findings is that while these findings are generalizable, the analyst must be specific in to what extent this is so.

It would be a mistake, for example, to claim that the 'us and them' distinction is always used to oppose immigration when clearly it can be used for much more. A more reasonable claim would be that 'us and them' distinctions are used to justify

(negative) action against the 'them' group; when it is used in the asylum debate, for example, it will be used to 'other' asylum seekers and so provide the justification for their exclusion however when it is used in talk about terrorism it will be utilised for justifying (contentious) action against terrorists and those considered to be aiding them'. I have no doubt the use of an 'us and them' distinction in other areas of debate will be used to consolidate the 'us' group and to justify some negative action against the 'them' group.

I will now show that the generalizability of a discursive strategy is not limited to the 'us and them' distinction by showing how the strategy of justifying prejudice on the grounds of existing prejudice is another generalizable strategy.

4. The Generalizability of using existing Prejudice to Justify further Prejudice.

The previous section focused on the way in which one discursive strategy can be seen to be used in the opposition to asylum seeking. In this section I will show how a broader strategy can be seen to be used generally in seemingly different areas; namely opposing Lesbian/Gay parenting, opposing the rights of asylum seekers to in the UK and doing hostility towards immigrants in Greece. This strategy involves members drawing upon existing prejudice in the service of justifying further prejudice.

Clarke (2001, see also Clarke, Kitzinger and Potter, 2004) showed how Lesbian and Gay parents are made accountable for the homophobic bullying that their children may suffer. Furthermore, they show that this bullying may be used to argue against

the existence of such families. Here we see this argument being used in a television programme about lesbian/gay adoption.

Extract Seven: (Clarke, 2001: 565-566)

I really have quite strong feelings about the inappropriateness of lesbian and homosexual partners adopting children . . . If you think of a child in school, we know that other children can be cruel and may say to another child, “There’s something different about you, you’ve got two mummies,” or “You’ve got two daddies” . . . I think we’re adding to the complexity of children’s situations, and that really concerns me.

(Catherine MacAskil, lecturer in adoption and fostering, Heart of the Matter, February 1993: “Fostering prejudice”)

Clarke cites a number of examples of such an argument from a range of television debate programmes (2001: 566). Here we see how the existing prejudice (that homosexuals and even their children are bullied) is used to justify more prejudice (lesbian/gay parenting should not be allowed). This rhetorical strategy is a useful one for a speaker because it presents the her/him as someone who is caring and is actively involved in opposing prejudice (i.e. defending the children from bullying) instead of being someone who reverts to a circular argument of ‘blaming the victim’ (Clarke, 2001: 566).

Clarke’s studies (Clarke, 2001; Clarke, Kiztinger and Potter, 2004) show us that this strategy of using existing homophobia to justify the (homophobic) opposition to lesbian/gay parenting is not unique to these findings: Ellis (2001), Falk (1989), Mohr

(1988) and Raymond (1992) and Tasker and Golombok (1997) have all shown how homophobic bullying is used as the rhetorical justification for further homophobic practice.

Moving away from the area of homophobia we can see that the discursive strategy of using existing prejudice to justify further prejudice is also in use within the asylum debate. As the following extracts from my own research show, the existence of the (arguably) prejudicial British National Party (often referred to as 'extremists') is often used by other opponents of asylum seeking to argue for a more harsh approach to asylum seekers to be taken.

Extract Eight: (Goodman, in press, listed as extract four)

BBC 1 o'clock News – Howard Immigration speech 24/01/2005

1. Sanford the chairman of the anti
2. immigration organisation migration (.) watch toured the studios
3. this morning (.) welcoming Conservative proposals to reduce
4. those figures (.) sharply
5. Green eighty percent of the population want to see much tougher
6. immigration control:s (.) including very importantly .hhh
7. fifty two percent .hhh of the ethnic minority communities (.)
8. when public er feeling is that stro:ng (.) the main political
9. parties must respond to it (.) or they leave the field wide
10. open to the extremists

Extract Nine: (Goodman, in press, listed as extract seven)

Asylum: Face the Nation. BBC1. 23/07/03

1. Ommar and Rich Salanky erm er points out that erm as some one
2. of the er from the ethnic minorities he's worried about how (.) a
3. liberal (.) asylum policy could be (.) could be er exploited he
4. says "why do so many people seek asylum in the UK? It's
5. because we're a soft touch and it will play into the hand of the
6. British National Party"

In extract eight we see Sir Andrew Green, the head of the anti-immigration organisation 'Migration Watch', respond to a news interviewer Stanford about a plan to reduce the levels of immigration and asylum to the UK by claiming that it is important to have much tougher immigration controls. In extract nine we see a very similar argument made by a caller to a televised debate programme. Both of these contributions follow the same simple structure: There is opposition to the 'soft' approach to allowing asylum seekers/immigrants into the UK therefore it must be 'toughened up' to prevent extremists from coming to power.

These members do not draw upon the parallels between the policies they are proposing and those of the 'extremists' that they claim to be opposing as this could alert the listener to the circular nature of the argument. As with the homophobic arguments above, these arguments rely on existing prejudice (in this case the existence of extremist political parties like the British National Party) to justify the further prejudice (in this case policies that exclude asylum seekers). Notice also how the strategy I have called 'invoking ethnic minorities' (e.g. Goodman, in press) where people either claim to have support of ethnic minorities (as Green does in extract

eight) or of making salient the speaker's own ethnic minority status (as is the case in extract nine). This strategy helps to inoculate the speaker against accusations of prejudice or to present the speaker as someone more likely to be a victim than a perpetrator of prejudice. This functions to distance the speaker from the prejudicial nature of the talk and may be another example of a generalizable discursive strategy.

I have now shown how existing prejudice is used to justify further prejudice in both opposition to homosexual parenting and to asylum seeking. In this next extract from Figgou and Condor's (2006) study of lay representations of prejudice in Greece, we see an example of how prejudice towards immigrant Albanians is justified on the grounds of a prejudicial argument that the speaker explicitly accepts as, at least potentially, inaccurate.

Extract Ten: (Figgou and Condor, 2006: 236, listed as extract nine)

- 1 Ilektra: I have the feeling however that our racism is less organized [compared to
2 that in Germany] (.) I have in mind for example the racist organizations
3 against the Turks (.) against the foreigners in Germany (.) still things are
4 different here
- 5 Lia: I see (.) hmm (.) during the last year however (.) I'm not sure if this is the
6 case (1.5) I heard for example about this association of people who have
7 been robbed by Albanians (.) I think they were on the telly last week
- 8 Ilektra: Yes (.) they have elected a president [laughs] I heard about it (.) It's quite
9 extreme (.) indeed (.) you know what I'm thinking though (1.5) some
10 people in remote villages may feel threatened (.) they may have to live
11 with this feeling of lack of safety that you and I don't have to face (.) I'm

- 12 not sure (.) but I feel that I don't know what I would do if I had to live
13 under these conditions
- 14 Lia: So you say that some people are reacting because they are in danger?
15 They live under conditions of lack of safety?
- 16 Ilektra: Not necessarily (.) I mean they may just think that they are in danger (.)
17 they may just be afraid that they are in danger (.) I'm sure it is not true (.)
18 not in all cases.

By this point it may not be surprising to see that Figgou and Condor draw parallels with similar findings: 'The use of a discourse of perceived risk to justify and legitimate practical measures aimed at social exclusion has been identified in other contexts' (2006: 237). This perceived risk of crime, however, refers to a prejudicial argument based upon the criminal nature of Albanians – a position that Ilektra does not even accept to be true, even though this is used to justify the existence of a prejudicial organisation. This means that the existence of prejudice is used to excuse further prejudice. As Figgou and Condor describe it 'the stereotype of Albanian criminality effectively served the social function of justifying discriminatory action' (2006: 239).

I have therefore demonstrated that the discursive strategy of using existing prejudice to justify (or excuse) further prejudice is used in a number of diverse contexts – opposing gay/lesbian parenting, opposing asylum seeking rights and excusing anti Albanian policies.

5. Discussion

In this paper I have now presented a number of areas where discursive strategies can be seen to be generalizable. Beginning with conversation analytic findings I have shown how certain conversational structures can be seen to be generalized across conversational settings; Schegloff (e.g. 1968) has shown that the opening turns of conversations are very consistent and Atkinson (1984) has shown how certain conversational features are consistently present in talks that invoke applause. I have also shown how the rhetorical strategy of using an ‘us and them’ dichotomy helps to present immigrants and asylum seekers as different and therefore undeserving of ‘our’ sympathy. Because of the effectiveness of this strategy it can be seen to be used in a variety of contexts – in a range of countries and by a range of different speakers – always performing the same action of opposing people coming into a country. Therefore, I am claiming that this strategy is generalizable. The same can be seen with the strategy of justifying prejudice by drawing on cases of existing prejudice. In a variety of conversational settings about a range of different issues we can see the same discursive strategy being used to accomplish the same prejudicial ends. Together, these examples show us that discursive psychological findings can be seen as generalizable.

The type of generalizability I am claiming exists within discursive analytic findings is not the same as that claimed to exist in qualitative findings, however. I am not claiming, for example, to be able to make predictions based upon how many people will use a certain strategy. Instead I am claiming that on the basis of the findings of a detailed analysis, such as those drawn upon in this paper, the analyst should be able to state that the following is true:

1. A discursive strategy can (and in the course of analysis *should*) be shown to achieve a certain rhetorical accomplishment (e.g. the 'us and them' dichotomy functions to present people from abroad as different and undeserving of sympathy).
2. This strategy will often be used in a range of conversational settings in an attempt to bring about this rhetorical accomplishment (e.g. we see the 'us and them' strategy used in a number of countries by both politicians and members of the public).
3. If this strategy often brings about the same accomplishment this strategy can be described as a successful strategy (this is true of the 'us and them' distinction).
4. It can be shown that successful strategies will be used by a range of speakers in a range of contexts to bring about the same rhetorical end. To this extent it is generalizable.
5. We may begin to see opposition to successful and generally used strategies (as with the attempted reclassification of the 'us and them' distinction in extract five).

The implications for discursive psychology of claiming that its findings can be generalized are significant. Instead of claiming that generalizability is sacrificed in favour of a rich and detailed understanding of the subject being investigated, discursive psychologists should be able to claim *both* a detailed analysis and a level of generalizability. On the basis of this discourse analysts should, perhaps, pay more attention to the wider implications of what they discover and those with a more critical approach (e.g. Edley, 2001; Lynn and Lea, 2003) could consider developing

ways to challenge existing – and generalizable – damaging (and/or prejudicial) discursive strategies.

Making a claim about the generalizability of a discursive strategy should, however, be done cautiously. For example, the analyst must show a strategy working in a number of different contexts if it is to be shown to be generalizable. This may not always be possible within the scope of a research project, in which case the analyst will need to draw upon existing research where a strategy has been used to accomplish the same rhetorical goal, or conduct further analysis to ascertain whether or not the strategy is being used in different contexts.

The argumentative nature of these strategies means that their generalizability cannot be expected to endure over time; especially as new discursive strategies are used to counter existing ones. For example, the ‘taboo on prejudice’ (e.g. Augoustinos et al, 2005; Billig, 1988) where people attempt to rhetorically distance themselves from being presented as racist and/or prejudice is a well documented and generalizable discursive pattern that has allowed accusations of racism to be a successful argumentative tool. However, recent discursive findings suggest that a new taboo on *accusations* of racism may be undermining this existing strategy (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007; Goodman, forthcoming) to the extent that a once generalizable strategy may no longer achieve the same rhetorical ends. It is also the case that discursive analytical findings may not be repeatable as different analysts may make different findings based on the same data (as is shown in van den Berg, Wetherell, and Houtkoop-Steenstra’s (2003) book where different analysts addressed an existing corpus of data each with their own findings). Nevertheless, the point here is that all of

these differing findings can be seen to be generalizable as long as thorough analysis shows this to be the case.

To conclude, where it has been widely accepted that discursive psychological findings are not generalizable I have shown that a discursive strategy can be generalizable to the extent that the 'action' (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992) that it accomplishes can be generalized across contexts.

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