

Stream: DEVELOPMENTS IN QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS: OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE

### **Developing Discursive methodology**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will describe how the theoretical insights of discursive approaches can be developed into a robust research methodology, which can highlight the unique ways in which culturally located individuals interpret particular discursive engagements. The logic of the methodology will be set out and then a research example will demonstrate its application. In the example offered I will examine discursive engagements by young students with selected alcohol advertising texts. I will summarise how we established a social context (from across the diversity of local texts about alcohol in Aotearoa) and then took multiple forms of account about selected advertising texts from individuals (young participants, media producers, and myself as researcher) for systematic analyses to contrast and compare accounts and relationships between accounts with context. I will identify where and how connections were, or were not, being made and how particular points of resonance became identifiable. This study offers an example of an alternative approach for those working to understand discursive engagements in relation to the wider discursive-environmental context.

### **Defining the epistemic territory**

It is important to define what is meant by 'taking a discursive approach', because such definitions constitute the subject of many ongoing and unresolved debates (cf., Hammersley, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Parker, 2002; Potter, 2003a, 2003b), an outcome of which is a distinct lack of clarity about this still emerging field. Discursive approaches have been developing across a wide range of disciplines, through both theory and praxis, and offer epistemologically, theoretically, and methodologically diverse positions (e.g. Burman, 1991; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Gavey, 2002; Hook, 2001; Macleod, 2002; Parker, 2002; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Slembrouck, 2001; Torfing, 2004; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001a, 2001b). In addition to its theoretical debates, discursive research, like many other forms of qualitative research, has been challenged as to its methodological adequacy (e.g. Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2003; Barker, 2003; Parker, 2002). Such challenges arise because methodology and method often lack consonance, are conflated, or tend to be poorly articulated and offered in terms that both obfuscate understanding and evade detail (Macleod, 2002). To undertake discursive work therefore requires address of the main theoretical confusions within debates as well as increased methodological robustness.

The theoretical confusions that require address are those of paradigm and those created through confluences of discursive processes with discursive contents. The fundamental, though not always well-articulated, paradigmatic division in discursive work lies between 'positivist' and 'post-structuralist' projects (these locational terms are used loosely to encompass multiple differences). Paradigmatic location is often a matter of analysis as projects may explicitly identify as paradigmatically post-structuralist but still operate within positivist logics (Cherrington, Chamberlain, & Grixti, 2006). However, the paradigmatic differences between these positions are not reconcilable. Positivist-discursive projects represent an uptake of the language, ideas and methods of paradigmatically discursive projects, but these are not part of any wider epistemic shift. What 'post-structuralist' projects have in common is a recognition of human processes of meaning-making (all forms of signification) as playing critical roles in constructing and mediating people's ways and experiences of being and acting (e.g. Burman, 1991, 1996; Parker, 2002; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Despite a strong tendency to overemphasise language in many post-structuralist projects, 'processes of meaning-making' can (and should) include all languages, acts, practices, relationships, institutional arrangements, material conditions, representations, and any other forms mediating and shaping human understandings, behaviours, and experiences, including actual embodied experience.

What I would refer to as *paradigmatically* discursive positions, argue that humans' sense of themselves (their 'subjectivities') and their knowledge/s about life and how to be are experiences 'effected' through interactions of particular embodied, material, cultural, social, relational, experiential, and historic locations. This position also understands researchers as subjective beings in particular material, cultural, social, relational, and historic locations, and as therefore required to seek methods of gaining awareness of, and reflecting critically on those locations in their research.

As the definition above suggests, at a macro-level a paradigmatically discursive-theoretical position is in fact a 'grand-theory' about human processes, because it represents an overarching argument about how subjectivities, life-experiences, cultures, and communities are produced and maintained. This may not be popular to suggest, because grand theories tend to be essentialising, inevitably constraining, and they fail to allow space for the range and diversity of human experiences (Dahlgren, 2004; Nava, Blake, MacRury, & Richards, 1997), but to not to make this claim is to avoid the obvious. That said a meta-discursive position can only avoid a trap of essentialism if discursive processes are not defined as having any essential and common form or effect. Discursive theories about processes must not, therefore, be conflated with theories about what the contents or effects of those processes might mean. Unfortunately, this conflation is presently all too common (Cherrington, 2005).

Any move to talk about what discursive processes, or the outcomes of those processes, actually mean represents a crucial shift from looking at how they might work. This is not to say that interpretation and argument about how discursive processes are experienced by people should not be engaged with; they should. It is an insistence on holding awareness of the vital difference between recognising (and seeking to research) processes and having opinions about those processes, or offering particular versions of how those processes should be understood. For example, where discursive approaches are used in conjunction with Marxism/s or psychoanalytic theories (e.g. Parker, 2002), such work should be represented as coming from Marxist or psychoanalytic theoretical positions; not as theoretically discursive (see the similar critique from Hepburn in Parker, 2002, p.240). In the same way, when attention is given to 'discourses' in discursive projects, researchers need to clearly distinguish these 'discourses' as artificial abstractions from ongoing processes as opposed to reify them, and be clear when offering stories as researchers about motives, given effects, or specific contents that these are also moments of participation in discursive processes (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 2002). Thus, a meta-discursive position can represent a theory about processes, but clear separation is required of that theoretical position from theories about the meanings, contents, or effects of those processes.

Thus, the position informing this paper can be defined as an epistemologically and meta-theoretically materially aware discursive-theoretical position, arguing that our 'knowledge/s' of the worlds we inhabit are socio-culturally-historically produced, and that all experiences are mediated through culturally particular ways of making sense, and through the culturally particular locations of materially located, embodied beings. This is not, as some might argue, an argument for no reality. It argues that our 'realities' – defined in this context as what we 'know' of our worlds, or how we assume them to be – are inescapably and endlessly mediated and that our bodies, objects, and material conditions are as much mediatory elements in discursive processes as languages, gestures, or images (Lury, 1996). Thus an individual and 'the social' can be understood as producing, as well as being produced through, social-discursive processes. Every word, every act, every space, every condition, every institution, every ritual (and so on) in the day-to-day interactions of human lives, are processes of mediation, or struggle, about what and how things are in which certain meanings, or particular 'discursive

formations' (coherent discursive structuring/s about a subject), gain dominance over other ways of making sense of things. Through such interactions, what is generated is a 'reality', something that is temporarily albeit always unstably 'effected' (Foucault, 1983). Followed through, this position argues a methodological logic that focuses on points at which such 'realities' are generated as places for a discursive researcher to engage.

### **Key theoretical insights informing operationalisation of a discursive approach**

The logic that the discursive-theoretical position described offers for developing methodology in research is that the central focus must be on the range and diversity of what is discursively on offer around the subject of interest, and on how people are located and positioned within that range and diversity. In this model diversity (variability) is not a problem for understanding, nor does it have to be controlled. Diversity is now the point of access for mapping and understanding what is taking place. By examining the range of what is discursively on offer about a subject (like alcohol), and then locating what people have to say about this (e.g. through ad-texts, or in response to them) in this wider discursive context (what is more broadly on offer about the subject), locations, positions, connections, and differences can be made apparent. Through contrasting and comparing those locations, positions and connections (or lack thereof) the processes through which particular positions and interpretative experiences are engendered may be obtained. Recognition that positions and locations can be fluid also requires discursive methodology attends not only to range and connections within what is discursively on offer but also the subtleties of movement around that by individuals. The approach that has been developed to operationalise this discursive-theoretical logic can be described as 'Discursive Sonar'. Sonar is only effective if structure is present to be revealed and it has already been argued discursivity is a process not structures. However, structuring *effects* occur within discursive processes and it is these that can be made apparent. The project designed to 'test' the worth of this approach was media based. It was decided to focus on examining participant interactions with two alcohol advertising texts. The theoretical insights guiding development were as follows:

#### **Discursive activity/s take place in particular contexts: Establish a location**

Attention to a subject of interest within a wider discursive context is critical because any discursive formations (in this instance in an advertisement or about an advertisement) are re-produced and made possible (or not possible) through a wider discursive context. In research, whether macro, medium range or micro focussed, any discursive productions or discursive engagements should be understood as representing active fragments of participation within broader discursive processes (conceptual and material). Through these local discursive processes any ideas that are re-generated (maintained, transformed or altered), drawn on or re-constructed are done so through possibilities made available within an available discursive range, that is through salient knowledge/s in circulation and through experiences of those involved. In the present project, to gain a sense of the space/s, processes, and dimensions of the discursive struggles in which any one alcohol ad-text and set of responses to that were being engaged (deliberately or not) therefore required locating and drawing attention to the competing strands of talk and activities about alcohol on which the ad-texts and audiences of those ad-texts were drawing. This discursive-context could then enable 'location' and consideration of the ways in which the ideas being expressed in the research (in the ad-texts or by participants) were

connecting, resonating or differing with each other *and* within the wider range of formations on offer.

Theoretically any such overview of broader social histories, conditions, and discursive formations re-generating ideas about any subject cannot ever be complete. However, it is argued here that an adequately researched background, mapping key points of activity and struggle around how alcohol has been, and is, made sense of and used within local communities, should convey a sufficient sense of the discursive range constituting the wider contexts in which to locate the productions-engagements of interest. To generate a sense of this locational space in relation to alcohol in Aotearoa/New Zealand required attention to a reasonably comprehensive range of materials and information, in the form of various arguments and positions about alcohol from within a wide range of historical and contemporary literature, including: fact, fiction, documents, research studies, Government and organisational information, policy documents, drug and alcohol health papers and reports, media programmes and articles, general reports, public notices, and websites. Once reviewed, these materials were drawn on to develop key themes that structured a background report, which formed the textual location for the research.

#### **Create a horizon for comparative work: Examine intent and interpretation**

Interpretive variance is inherent to textual interpretation (Ang, 1985; Chandler, 2000). However, making sense of interpretative variance will be much clearer if it can be established what was intended to be communicated as well as examining the range of what is interpreted as on offer, as well as examining how what is perceived as on offer is responded to. Such as strategy can explore attempts to construct and constrain interpretation/s on the part of an ‘author-producer’, and then identify if those attempts connect, miss, or ‘exceed’ intention as they are then interpreted and responded to by an ‘audience’. In addition, exploring what connects or diverges interpretatively with what was intended to be conveyed can offer a vital anchor for processes of analysis. This required that we included the voices of ‘production’ of the ad-texts as well as those of interpretation and response in the research.

#### **Discursivity is variant: Engage variance through divergent perspectives**

Discursivity is neither a linear nor predictable process, it is an unpredictable ‘struggle’ over how things are set out and ‘argued’ as being able to be understood (Changeux & Ricoeur, 2000). Through activities of talking, representing, behaving, and in setting out environments in certain ways, particular discursive formations (constructions about how things can/should be understood) are re-enacted, challenged, challenging, or even in a process of being re-worked. It is a struggle that takes place through how what is said, or done, is interpreted, understood, and responded to. In this way, listening, or in a media audience context spectatorship, or viewing, are also *acts* which represent forms of participation in discursive struggle. Seeing, making sense, interpreting, and responding are as much a part of discursive processes as acting, speaking, and offering versions of how things should be understood. Every time we act, speak, listen, look or respond we draw on the range of what is discursively available to us. Because discursivity is a process of struggle engendered through contesting perspectives and divergent positions, strategies of participant recruitment are required to obtain diversity, through particular

experiences, ages, genders, backgrounds and so on, but also through generating and being aware of shifts in an individual participants positions.

**Discursive variance is individual as well as inter-individual: Shifts in awareness can be obtained by engaging more critically with what is on offer**

Discursive processes are, by necessity, something of which we, as participants, are not always actively aware of (Cherrington, 2005). Our 'struggles' over meaning may take place at all levels of lived experiences, but those struggles are predominantly engaged in without our being deliberate about them. Critical awareness of being discursively engaged is entirely possible, but not usual. However, when critical awareness is engaged new positions can be introduced for individuals along with some heightened awareness of personal shifts and in this space opportunities for re-working ideas become more likely (cf. the exchange between Changeux & Ricoeur, 2000). (It is worth noting that this concept has implications for interventions.) It was therefore decided to employ forms of 'critical engagement' for participants that could enable the experience of engaging with the texts in ways that could question, interrupt, and critique. Theoretically this should enable participants to shift into different forms of textual relationship and offer some visibility to positional fluidity and how one position might become salient over another.

A point needs to be made about deliberately 'critical engagement'. This approach is not an attempt to replicate 'natural' discursive experiences; theoretically this is impossible. Any participation in research represents a particular form of discursive engagement that will be different in certain ways from 'normal' processes of production or viewing, the act of being participants in the research forming the key part of what constitutes the context of engagement in this instance. Theoretically, taking part in research will already represent a more critically aware form of discursive engagement. Methodologically therefore, working with participants who have had some experience of more critical forms of textual engagements should enhance the range of engagements with the text, bringing what people may usually be less aware of more easily into discussions (e.g. naturalised performances of gender). Selecting participants who all brought some experience of critical engagements with media was identified as a strategy that would facilitate interpretative range. This was realised through working with young media students, with media producers and for me, as researcher participant, with a background in media studies. The producers, the students, and I would all be able to engage critically with the texts, but from different – and with the students from specifically youthful – perspectives.

It was acknowledged that engagements of the producers with their own advertising texts were likely to be dominated by a particular type of media expertise and position: that is, their commercial marketing orientation related to their client needs or from their commercial creative perspectives. But theoretically, as well as the themes and ideas that producers intend to be on offer in the texts, discursive formations should be operating in the ad-texts that they as producers of those texts (constrained through their own focus and positions) will be less immediately aware, or entirely unaware, of having produced, yet that were still 'encoded' by them. In order to attempt to explore the realms of what producers might be less aware of as themes they had set into their work required some

deliberate strategy through which a more critical reflexivity might be engaged. In discursive-theoretical terms a more critical perspective may be generated by creating engagement with how others may view something (e.g. in this instance by public health interests or Advertising Standard Authority codes). By increasing criticality more should be apparent of the discursive debates that the producers are engaged in which shape their work. The strategy determined to achieve this duality of response was to seek a sense of the background to the work and of what the producers had intended to communicate to whom, and later to shift to invite producers to comment specifically on issues related to the ads around the Advertising Standards codes, and challenges that might be brought to themes such as gender, sexuality, and cultural performances within the ad-texts

**Discursivity is also about processes that generate consonance and investment**

Consonance is also a feature of discursivity, where resonance with what is on offer can generate recognition and shared investment in formations (e.g. if all participants are health researchers this will produce visible resonances as well as differences around the merits of an alcohol ad-text). Therefore, methodological logic also requires forms of participant commonality being identifiable as well as participant differences. Many variant positions could have been brought to this project. However, because of the consistent concerns expressed locally and overseas about under-age youth engagements with alcohol and alcohol advertising texts, working with young people under the drinking age offered a very pertinent form of participant variance. It was therefore decided to recruit students just below the drinking age to the project.

**Discursive formations are related and referential: Examine relationships, presences and absences**

The discursive structuring forming one set of ideas, such as those about a beer, draws on and references the structuring of others. For example, an ad-text which appears wholly gendered as male and about a 'man's beer' deliberately speaks to men, drawing on ideas about men, but also drawing on ideas about women, children, leisure and so on. What something means is contested within the spoken and the practiced, and through dimensions of what is less visibly manifest or even through what is absent. In research attention is therefore required to what is drawn on, constructed through, included, or excluded through all forms of signification, and the likely impacts and consequences of this (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); recognising, of course, that any discussion about impacts or consequences is interpretative commentary in the research, not 'truth' as such.

**Build reflexivity into research**

The methodological requirement to build reflexivity into the research required a strategy of inclusion of me as researcher in the processes of commentary (as participant) and then comparison and contrast (with others). The approach determined to achieve this was to undertake a traditional academic media review of the alcohol advertising texts in the study, which could then be examined in relation to other participants' views. As an academically trained media 'voice' my academically inflected analysis could offer one point of comparison but by locating that voice and examining it against others could also function as a reflexive technique to illuminate my own positions and ways in which they

had shaped my view/s. From a discursive perspective, I should begin to ‘hear’ myself speak, in the contexts of locations and of other voices.

### **What about sample sizes?**

A peer review of this project raised a concern about the validity of working with such a ‘small’ sample in research; a concern that raises two important issues. Firstly, this project was designed to investigate the potential offered in a discursive approach. This is an investigation of a model prior to any further application of that model to broader study. This is not to say that larger or more complex studies might not be undertaken within this framework – they can. Secondly, ‘sample’ size is a reference to (positivist) concerns with being able to generalise. Within the discursive model described here such a concern is not relevant. The present framework seeks to understand interpretative commonalities but not to suggest that interpretative commonality can mean the same experience. This is an alternative model, and criterion for assessment of it, will also be alternative to what is usual for establishing ‘validity’ in more traditional media research.

### **The usefulness of working with contrasting texts**

Determining which particular texts should be used for this study simply required a current example of alcohol advertising. Because of the methodological decision to work with youth, it was determined that there were benefits to using not one but two differently targeted advertisements. Working comparatively with two commercials – aimed at younger or older target audiences – potentially bringing out interpretative differences between engagements that may be of interest. Lion Breweries, a high profile alcohol advertiser in Aotearoa/New Zealand has two main beer brands: Lion Red and Speight’s. Lion Red is aimed at a younger ‘30-something’ target group and Speight’s is targeted at a more mature ‘40-something’ target group (MearesTaine, 2002). The 2002 Lion Red and Speight’s campaigns were therefore identified as the texts to use for the research.

### **Processes of analysis**

Analysis of the participant texts incorporated attention to participants’ discussions around:

- Audio and visual activities and the ways in which participants perceived these to communicate or interact, including actors, colours, lighting, clothing, environments, objects, and behaviours, music, noises, language, accents, and ‘tone’.
- Constructions in talk that were generated through categorisation and/or exclusion and articulation (as perceived in texts and as constructed in talk) around: types of spaces, peoples, activities, and ideas and ways in which the participants perceived ad-text constructions as including, validating, marginalising, or excluding.
- Specific story/s being told about ‘how things are’ (perceived in texts or by participants); examining how talk, activities, and environments were understood to work to construct different categories (e.g. alcohol, gender, ethnicity, leisure) and the articulations about implications of those.



- Discursive constructions around objects/subject positions, examining the types of subjects and positions constructed as on offer, or constructed in talk and how these are made sense of and participant expressions about the implications of these.
- Enunciative strategies being used (perceived by participants as used in texts or being employed by participants) and any points of dissonance or struggle and gaps and absences within those, examining the rhetorical work being done and the different debates implicated.
- Looking at any of the different elements of all the above as mechanisms of engagement. Considering how and why particular elements in discussions appeared to work to engage different participants and how those same mechanisms might be acting to exclude or create resistance or refusal for others (e.g. gendered appeals).

Each individual participant's interactions with the content and themes they identified in the ad-texts were contrasted and compared with the views of the other participants and with what producers had intended those texts to communicate. These responses and positions were then located through a second layer of comparison and contrast, with the themes identified in the locational text.

### **'Findings'**

As was expected, the producers' descriptions about development of the ad-texts, and the participants' interactions with the ad-texts, became apparent as moments in much wider ongoing debates. As what was represented within the ad-texts attempted to engender recognition of, and positive engagements with, particular discursive formations, what became evident was that each person engaging with the ad-texts was doing so from very particular locations and positions, and what they brought to bear interpretatively from those locations and positions was what determined their interpretative-response. A brief outline of some of the findings speaks to how the approach worked, and also to the research benefits brought through such an approach.

#### *Destabilising notions of singularity*

This research strongly identified the benefits of attending to multiple perspectives and working *with* variances of all forms. Sometimes interpretative variance operated less around differences over overt textual meanings than it did in responses and those response variances were worthy of attention. 'We' (the students and I) 'got' most of the main ideas the advertisers suggested that they meant to convey, but as individual participants we often 'saw' those things very differently, as we responded from our different contexts and positions. These differences in our responses revealed useful information, as well as particular forms of 'culture blindness' that were operating. For example the Lion Red ad-text contained a 'socially responsible' message about taking a taxi home that we all identified as present, but the students highlighted the material barrier of cost to being socially responsible in this way that the producers and I – and presumably the advertising standards authorities – had overlooked. The younger students also highlighted forms of power relations (how certain people, especially who have drunk too much, might get treated by taxi drivers) that we as older, financially privileged, white

participants, could not 'see'. In this way the research process was able to act as a form of pedagogy as well as a form of illumination about positions and processes.

*Accounting for the complexities of inter-textuality*

This research revealed the importance, and benefits, of finding ways to address the complexities of discursive 'inter-textualities'. For example, participants understood the ad-texts as communications about products and their use but they also related to those products as objects already in use well beyond the ad-texts and it was conditions and uses beyond the ad-texts that were often drawn on to judge the 'realities' of the ad-text. How this inter-textuality operates, and why it is important to understand it, is illustrated by the example of how much of the current health research constructs alcohol advertisements as having some causal role in evoking excessive drinking and to problematic behavioural outcomes through reinforcing problematic forms of masculinities (Wylie, Caswell, & Stewart, 1991). There are strict codes ensuring alcohol ad-texts do not show drinking to excess, or that they do not assert undesirable qualities and neither ad-text in the research showed such behaviours. Yet the Lion Red ad was clearly perceived by participants to be about people out getting 'pissed'. What became clear through analysis was that participants' *experiences* of using, or seeing people use, Lion Red were informing this 'excessive' reading of what was on offer in the ad-text. Lion Red is a cheap local beer that (in the words of one participant) "people just use to get pissed". Experiences of how Lion Red is actually used beyond the ad-text represented the criteria not only for judging the brand but for framing how the ad-text about the brand was seen and responded to. Current explanatory models are simply too limited to properly account for such complexities.

Similarly, in terms of the concern expressed about links between male characteristics such as 'toughness' and 'ruggedness' in alcohol advertising and enacted male violence (Wylie, et al, 1991), what this research highlighted was that the Lion Red ad-text was not perceived as communicating high risk masculine qualities. In fact the men on offer in Lion Red were perceived as rather naïve and distinctly non-threatening. But the product Lion Red was strongly linked to very particular, materially located communities in conditions of social and economic disadvantage, where violence and heavy alcohol consumption are both common. This is an important consideration. It raises questions about what we attempt to constrain when we set semiotic boundaries, and also about whether certain 'qualities' can be so singular in meaning (Sir Edmund Hilary is a rugged and tough individual but certainly not one who evokes violence). It starts to look as if the argument is, in fact, that masculinities that are recognisably linked to communities with high levels of social problems should not be evoked.

What is important to note here is that whilst a discursive production may seek to exclude other subordinate or contradictory ideas, (Lion Red drinkers get pissed) those productions necessarily refer to those other ideas, or contain what Derrida referred to as the absent trace of them (Derrida, 1994). In this way any ad-texts about alcohol already contain the conditions for discursive struggles within themselves, what is realised then depending on interpretations and responses. An advertisement for alcohol necessarily bears traces of all formations in circulation around alcohol harms, which, whilst they may or may not be

taken up in interpretation, can never be wholly excluded as a possibility. Equally, public health talk about alcohol advertising can focus on formations about harms, but they cannot eliminate them as connected to pleasures. Any view depends on focus and position. This complicates ideas about codes and standards and also answers questions about why it is health researchers keep ‘finding’ such negative traces in alcohol ad-texts.

The students in the study continually highlighted the importance of such interactions between different discursive forms (e.g. the conceptual and the material/experiential). It is common in research to focus on single mediums or to abstract content for examination in isolation but a wide range of commercial and non-commercial activities, conditions *and* experiences were constantly referred to and clearly interacting as they were drawn on by the young students. Debates ranged to and fro as personal experiences were set in debate with parents’ views, or promotional activities, or another ad-text as the participants responded to the ad-texts. Any aim to make sense of, or intervene in life-choices also needs to acknowledge and find better ways to consider such range when addressing subjects such as how we become informed to make choices.

The producers also described the strong importance of inter-textuality, which for them was about the relationship between the ad-texts to ‘real’ consumers through ways in which their own research with consumers had shaped their work. In production terms their ad-texts had been shaped to ‘speak’ to real communities but those real communities had also set constraints around what could be sensibly encoded in the texts. One producer described hoping to one day have a female lead in Speight’s whilst recognising the strong resistance that might engender. What the producers described of their processes demonstrated a far more complex text-consumer relationship than traditional models allow. What the producers also communicated about their research indicated that they are already working as very effective discursive researchers – but without the theoretical frameworks described here. Whilst advertisers are often described as very sophisticated in their methods what became apparent was theirs was a very praxis driven model. They did not articulate a theoretical logic to their work; it was expressed instead as “common sense”, though clearly their methods were very effective. If they did understand a theoretical view then they might realise the benefits of incorporating their own positions into the research. In this research the producers clearly revealed their own investments in particular ideas. If they had such insight it could only improve their craft and without a robust theoretical awareness it makes their advantage more vulnerable. Neither their method nor their lack of theoretical framework would be clear if that had not been participants in research and highlights the value of the inclusion of both those that ‘encode’ and those that interpret-respond in such research.

#### *Highlighting textual ‘mechanisms’ of connection*

Focusing on commonalities across engagements identified that ‘interpretative communities’ could be temporarily produced through common resonances in responses, which were engendered through forms of textual ‘mechanism’. For example, local versions of hegemonic masculinities on offer in the ad-texts became identifiable as: meaningful and important for the male producers; meaningful and important for key consumers of the brands producers had conducted research with; as having an important

history within Aotearoa/New Zealand; as linked to certain forms of desire for some women; and as clearly recognisable but rather dated for many of the younger students in the research. What also became clear were the complex shifts that could be produced for individuals in one ad-text. Although the female producer and I both described forms of resistance to much of what we perceived as very patriarchal and colonial in terms of the ideas structuring the Speight's ad-text the very portrayal of 'pioneering man' in that same ad-text also had unintentionally positive resonances for us. We both identified that despite recognising 'pioneering man's' origins, and despite discursive alternatives having come into our range, this discursive thread from our histories had structured desire in our pasts and still held a certain sway for us. Even as we identified that desirability as probably both mythic and unsatisfactory, we still experienced the pull of this as a constituting force. Interestingly, for the advertisers this finding provided some explanation for them as to why the ad-text had stimulated an unexpected sales response from some groups of women.

By focusing on diversity and variance in the engagements taking place that some cultural shifts taking place around how alcohol is understood in Aotearoa/New Zealand were highlighted as shifts became apparent between the generations involved in the project. For example, the aesthetics of production values such as the use of music, the evoking of fun, and the use of humour were all key 'mechanisms' that acted as common points of pleasurable engagement which could transcend age. But pleasures could also be very 'community' specific. 'Pioneering man' from Speight's pleased older males but divided them from their younger male counterparts. Yet, the 'look' of the 'sexy' female protagonists in the Lion Red ad-text created a temporary common male response of 'pleasurable' that crossed age 'boundaries'. At the same time the Lion Red women created a strongly resistant female response from the young female students, who found the offer very offensive, whereas the older female producer and I reacted much less to this than we did to a perceived colonial patriarchy about Speight's, which the younger women seemed unaware of.

*Shifting positions underscored the roles of salience and awareness in interpretation*

The easy shifting between liked and disliked, resisted and challenged in the participant responses reiterated problems with research models which seek to identify meanings as stable or singular. Shifts were engendered through changes in what was made salient, or what people were made aware of through the focus in discussions. When a resistant view of the Lion Red women as sexist was debated another participant easily shifted to support that view despite having argued them as sexy moments before. Once the resistant view of 'sexiness' portrayed in Lion Red was discussed with the male producers they certainly communicated greater awareness of what it was that they had encoded and why it might be resisted, but they then quickly moved to 'manage' why what they had set out could still be reasonable if those resisting were positioned as unreasonable (e.g. 'some lefty feminists might mind...').

*A youth 'effect'*

In the research it was clear that the processes of interpretative responses for younger participants were not so different. It was the ways in which their interpretative responses

were structured, through particular positions, priorities and contexts, which was different. To access such youth inflections we need to learn how to hear young people and recognise the ways in which they differ. What became significant as common for the younger participants was the ways in which they recognised the ad-texts as 'adult'. Whilst they did respond to aspects of the ad-texts as pleasurable or fun they also clearly refused the spaces and subjects on offer as not about them or their worlds. They saw the ad-texts as full of "old geezers" and the spaces in which they were located as "not ours". Quite simply, both the ad-texts in this study lacked relevance for them in many respects and the older targeted of the two texts was the least relevant. What they did refer to in their talk, however, were alcohol ad-texts that were perceived as much more relevant to them, and they described why. When music is resonant (and for these young people this means contemporary and liked) an ad-text is much more engaging. Pace is also very engaging. Similarly, when the spaces evoked in an ad-text are recognisably youthful they are much more engaging. These are important comments when one remembers that the use of music is almost ubiquitous in alcohol advertising and yet unmonitored through present codes. Ad-texts that use strongly youthful reference points, like one DB Export beer ad-text with a Matrix parody, or a Jim Beam ad-text where the male protagonist evoked a desiring response by the younger women had clearly had a strong impact on these students. Again, these are complexities that are not addressed in current research models or current advertising codes.

*Location in context gives greater meaning to debates*

By locating the interactions between participants and ad-texts within the context of wider struggles over meanings around alcohol in Aotearoa/New Zealand the research showed ways in which both ad-texts and participants reflected, employed, and debated those wider struggles. Histories of masculinities and 'mate-ship' were understandably entwined with beer if colonial history was examined along with its histories of a population that had fought hard to keep alcohol, and been constrained to men only drinking spaces. For older consumers of beer these ad-texts were articulations of forms of cultural identifies that had deep and significant forms of resonance. Yet, for all its power with older men this history was visibly and rapidly losing purchase for the younger participants who dimly recognised what it represented and were much more ambivalent about the offer.

Looked at in context different forms of interpretative struggle were not only engaged in by participants, they were also identifiable as operating within the ad-texts. For example, the more dominant forms of masculinities expressed in the Lion Red ad-text were recognised as softer and more contemporary than those of Speight's. Lion Red had also admitted a certain diversity of ethnicity and some women into its drinking spaces, where Speight's was still visibly "only old white geezers". Despite still attempting to manage or marginalise those alternatives (e.g. women as objects of pleasure and wine drinkers as gay) they had been admitted into the space of the ad-text as indentificatory forms, which those ad-texts could no longer fully exclude.

Traditional approaches to discursive engagements tend to elide the very variability this model works with. Traditional models also lack methods of reflexivity that can offer any visibility to the research itself as engaged in discursive process. Yet unless that engagement is put into context and critically examined any effects of it (in terms of

position and location) will remain unrecognised. This is vital in the context of a subject like health research around alcohol. The majority of alcohol health research persists in constructing excessive consumption as a high risk and abnormal activity (Cherrington, Chamberlain, & Grixti, 2006). The locational text in this research identified a local relationship with alcohol in which excessive drinking is often very 'normal'. The students, producers and I all articulated an understanding of excessive consumptions as 'normal' within many 'kiwi' cultures. Even if what was being offered by participants was a performative response for my benefit, the expression was still of the idea that excessive drinking can be 'normal'. In this context iteration of abnormality and risk around excess would seem to be a dominant logic that requires critique. It may be exactly 'normalcy' that is the risk.

### *In summary*

As one form of 'operationalisation' of discursive theory this project appears to offer a viable framework, which develops the logic of discursivity to useful effect. It is a framework that could be easily adapted to other forms of discursive engagements and certainly would seem to merit further development. Development of such an alternative might allow for manoeuvre beyond the barriers of abstraction and 'effects' to examine the ways in which media or other dominant discursive forms interact, and are interacted with, to shape choices in our social worlds.

The approach described may seem demanding in research terms because it requires considerable effort to develop robust locational frameworks and to work with multiple groups of participants to generate texts for multiple layers of discursive analysis. However, because of these things it perhaps offers a better chance to make sense of how, and why, ideas or behaviours being re-produced within cultural contexts, and why such re-productions seem sensible to one set of people when they only seem problematic to others. It is only through 'contextualisation' of the (re)productions of particular discursive formations (both as productions and as engagements with those productions) that we can highlight, allow space for, and come to grips with, variances. When we do examine such subjects in all their complexity then perhaps we can better consider what to do about them.

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