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Author: D. L. Palmer
Title: Who are you and who are you not? Discourse and Agency in Sustainability Research
Editor: K. Richmond
Conference Name: Revisioning Institutions: Change in the 21st Century. TASA 2004 Conference, revisioning sociology
Conference Location: La Trobe Bundoora Vic
Publisher: La Trobe University
Year: 2004
Pages: 13
Date: 8-11 December 2004

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Author Address: lpalmer@csu.edu.au

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CRO identification number: 14249
Who are you and who are you not? - Discourse and agency in sustainability research

Dr Len Palmer
Social Science and Liberal Studies
Charles Sturt University
Panorama Avenue
Bathurst
NSW 2795

This paper is the result of research supported by Charles Sturt University. I would like to thank Helen Quinn, Andy Brown and Yvette Zurek for feedback on drafts.

Tel. 02 63 384532
Fax. 02 63 384401
Email. lpalmer@csu.edu.au

Microsoft Word, Version 2002 (10.4524, 4219) SP-2
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Abstract

How do we understand who we are when the traditional foundations of identity become undermined by ideas that stress the interactive, relational, performative and contextual dimensions of identity as subjectivity? This paper reports on the use of a methodological approach based on foucauldian insights on subjectivity and discourse in research on sustainable grazing in Australian agriculture. Specifically, several attempts to identify the workings of subjectification (discourse, subjectivity and agency) are reported from research on sustainable grazing. The paper firstly reports on aspects of a small survey (n = 85) undertaken among visitors to the Australian National Field Days at Borenore near Orange, NSW, in 2001. The research shows the relevance of a discourse approach. The paper secondly reports on a pilot study, where a range of issues were examined around the question of sustainable grazing adoption, ie why have some graziers adopted sustainable grazing practices, and some not? What emerged was a very interesting issue wherein some graziers changed their stance on whether they had undertaken any sustainable grazing. The challenges of carrying out this kind of research yield ontological, epistemological and methodological issues of relevance to contemporary sociological research seeking to engage with the world in a poststructuralist way.
Current social and cultural theory is excitingly eclectic, open and cross-disciplinary. The dominance of positivist ontology and epistemology of sociological research in the twentieth century has waned, and now looks like a phase, rather than an evolutionary peak of research. This interregnum, marked by the stance of objectivity and value-freedom of the research ‘discovery’ process, and sober scientific certainty, increasingly became the focus of many critiques, ranging from hermeneutics and phenomenological philosophy, ethnographic and participant observation research, social constructionist, and later postmodernist and postructuralist methods, many advocating qualitative methods as equal or superior to the positivist, quantitative orthodoxy, with its ‘fertile obsession’ with validity, and the researchers ‘mask of authority’ (Lather 1993:674).

The desire to carry out fieldwork has not lessened with the waning project indicated above. The emergence of a critical ontological and epistemological awareness into mainstream sociology is clear from several Australian introductory sociology texts (eg Bessant and Watts 1999, 2003; Holmes et al 2002). The emergence of widespread recognition of postmodern theory has also impacted on empirical research, conceiving
the empirical and the real as socially constructed through discourse (Palmer and Quinn 1997; Palmer 1997).

The major conceptual framework derived from Foucault’s poststructuralism has been outlined often (see Danaher et al 2000; Weedon 1997; Barker 2003; Hall 1997), and does not get in-depth treatment here. The relevant elements of the poststructuralist ontology are that identity or subjectivity arises from subject positions implicit in institutional discourses. Discourse is defined as “… a bounded body of knowledge and associated practices, a particular identifiable way of giving meaning to reality via words or imagery” (Lupton 1999:15). This is the widely recognised determinist Foucault of governmentality, disciplinarity and ‘docile bodies’ infamy. Hall (1996) has pointed out, as have many others, that the agency aspects of Foucault are not well developed. Nevertheless, some theorists working to develop the foucauldian framework emphasise the role of agency in social processes (Weedon 1997; Hall 1996; Butler 1990, 1992, 1993; McNay 2000). The poststructuralist ontology is therefore constructed through a theory of discourse and agency where subject positions are encountered and enacted through interpellation (hailing) and performativity, ‘becoming’ and self-regulation and surveillance, resistance or refusal, producing unruly bodies and groups.

We cannot constitute our agency outside of discourses and related subject positions, but our subjectivity does have ‘contingent foundations’ (Butler 1992: 12). Without a discourse with implied subject positions no identification process is possible. I cannot be gay in the modern sense, that is, as someone defined by my sexual preference, until such a discourse emerges, as it did late in the nineteenth century (Foucault 1990). I
cannot be mad in the modern sense of mental illness until the modern institutions of
science and medicine have been established and modern psychiatry has defined
insanity as a disease, displacing earlier conceptions of madness as possession by
demons (Foucault 1988). These issues clearly involve questions of power, to create
knowledge, to claim expertise and the authority to name conditions, issues and
subjectivities. If subjectivities/identities are not just to be seen as passive markers in
interaction (Butler 1992: 15-16), identity is ontologically constructed through the
nexus between discourse – agency – action, where accepting an identity – Yes I am
gay – is a fusion of discursive/textual/ interactive/performative moments requiring the
constitution of my agency in the process.

How we understand this process is linked to analysis of the discursive/textual/agency
process too. The epistemology of such a world involves identifying the discourses at
work, the subject positions implied in those discourses, and I want to suggest that
there is potentially a tri-directional process of agentic negotiation, acceptance or
refusal which concretises the subjectification process as a whole. I may be gay (but
not in the stereotyped ways often offered to me, or only sometimes). I am gay. I am
not gay.

The nexus between this epistemology, methodology and method, effects both a
dizzying difference but also a disconcerting familiarity. Everything has changed but
little has changed. Quantitative surveys are still optional to qualitative ethnographies,
but understood as social constructions where the researcher is herself a key agent in
the construction process. Potentially, most research becomes a process of
subjectification including agency where on one level the researched are doing the
work of agentically opting for this or that identity, subject position or subjectivity. For example, request for information such as ‘Address’ becomes ‘are you a person who lives in X?’, and ‘Age’ becomes ‘are you a person in this or that age group?’. This view of the implicit constitution of subjectification processes will be taken up later in the paper, but suffice it to say here that this dimension much expands subjectification beyond the more narrowly defined issues of identity, being part of many social interactive processes building sociality.

Orange National Field days 2001

While not all visitors at the field days are graziers or farmers, it was anticipated, with prior experience that most people who go to this mixture of exhibition, demonstrations, retail and wholesale sales, will be familiar with the discursive culture of agriculture and rurality. The field days are an arena of discursive culture and language relating to sustainability. The survey will only be described here in relation
The first section asked respondents to define sustainability in their own words. Nearly all visitors approached were able to give an answer. To simplify the results, the answers appeared to split into two main groups with one of these open to a mid or subsidiary interpretation. Very briefly, one group of self-definitions of sustainability were oriented to an environmental emphasis or perspective. A typical example is: ‘…doing in 100 years what we are doing now (if not better)’. A second group saw sustainability as a production issue, identifying economic issues or profitability or production inputs as central. An example of this is: ‘produce as much as we can now and do it into the future preferably at higher production levels’.
What was pertinent was that the analysis of the answers from the survey appeared to produce discourses of sustainability. Of course these results are the outcome of an interpretive process. But since we are not hampered by a positivist and objectivist ontology, this is appropriate. Issues of ‘subjectivism’ are not completely erased, and nor can they be. But the process is, or can be, transparent and open to review.

**Eight discourses of sustainability**

In another section of the field days research, political positions (Huckle 1996) were formulated as eight discourses to see if respondents recognised them, could choose between them and express the clearly ambiguous meanings around the term sustainability. At one level, the research was testing the proposal that the political
field of positions on sustainability could be used to map the discursive field around sustainability (Palmer 2003).

As an exercise in constituting discourses, the survey was a success. As can be seen below, discrimination was achieved within the Agree/Disagree format of the questions. A ranking is shown in the numbers of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the consecutive discursive statements about sustainability.

Sustainability:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>requires that I recognise that it is my duty to protect the environment and accept my obligations to society? (green Individualist discourse)</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needs governments to maintain the stability of the economy without exhausting limited resources, like coal and gas? (socialist sustainable discourse)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is only possible through personal change and personal involvement in changing our organisations? (green reformist discourse)</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>requires us to recognise the role of women in society and the need for them to be more involved in environmental decisions? (feminist discourse)</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needs to be achieved within free markets, preserving individual property rights and small government? (laissez faire liberal discourse).</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is only possible through democratic organisations, producer groups, local action groups and cooperatives? (democratic discourse)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is mostly a problem created by the rich industrialised countries and poor third world countries have few choices? (third world or post-colonial discourse)</td>
<td>47% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should be paid for by higher prices, environmental taxes and pollution licences? (neo-classical discourse)</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflections and issues from the field-days survey**

Overall, the field days study seemed to support the ideas of sustainability working through discourses. When left to their own devices and not prompted by ideas in the research nearly all of the respondents could express sustainability in various degrees of elaboration or pithiness. When offered definitions of sustainability, respondents appeared to recognise these ideas and could therefore be taken to be recognisably circulating in our culture, according to foucauldian ontology.
Of course, a weakness of all surveys is that the questions posed potentially ‘blinker’ the options available, and that the respondent may well have chosen or offered a different definition of sustainability than that offered in the questions. This is true. However the research design here did allow for the respondents to offer their own definitions first, so maybe this objection should be shifted to a query on the relationship between the definitions of sustainability offered in their own words to the rates of agreement and/or disagreement found to the eight discursive choices offered. This aspect is discussed in Palmer (2003).

Finally, a question could be asked about the agency dimension of these discursive investigations. In other words, what is at play when someone is asked in a research survey questions such as: What does sustainability mean to you? Which of these definitions of sustainability do you agree or disagree with? It seems likely that such questions implicitly offer subject positions able to ‘hail’ responses of an agentic kind. To put it another way: If I ask if you agree with ‘such-and-such’ statement of sustainability, am I not also asking you to decide an element of who you are, ie identity or subjectivity? This issue bears further research.

Pilot study on sustainable grazing
In this study, sustainable grazing was defined as some form of grazing management that controls stock access to successive pasture units, often in a rotational or cell or time-based pasture management regime. It usually involves breaking up pastures on farms into smaller paddocks with increased fencing and water provision requirements.

Even non-rural folk can see there are likely to be economic dimensions to sustainable grazing adoption, but also social (family, people, relationships), environmental (degrading pasture, salinity, soil erosion) and cultural (community, media, training) dimensions to such decisions. These dimensions are pursued in the research, including some questions about identity/subjectivity. However the issue I want to focus on here concerns a prior aspect, which also involves a discursive/agency dimension.

**First contact**
Following random sampling, each grazier was contacted for agreement to an interview. In the process it was ascertained whether the person was employing sustainable grazing practices or not. In addition the graziers were asked if they had trialled sustainable grazing or not, since it would be valuable to know whether the questions were being answered by someone who had experienced sustainable grazing and abandoned it, and the reasons for that. The reasoning was that the information, sources, knowledge and influences revealed by sustainable grazing adopters (and triallers) could be contrasted against the information, sources, knowledge and influences revealed by sustainable grazing non-adopters, some of whom could be resisters.

Second contact
When the graziers were actually interviewed, questions in the interview schedule were posed about their status as employing sustainable grazing practices, or not, including whether a trial had been or was being undertaken. Here, an interesting thing happened. In several cases, graziers who on first contact said they had not tried or adopted sustainable grazing now answered that they did. Since the answer they gave to this question was essential to the questionnaire design regarding the course of the interview, the interviewer opted to follow the interviewee’s current answer.

But why would graziers say in a first contact conversation that they had not tried or taken on sustainable grazing, say in the second contact context (the interview) that they had? It should be added that if on first contact a grazier said they were not using sustainable grazing methods, they were encouraged to take part because it was the differences between adopters and non-adopters that was being studied.

Interpellating sustainable graziers
Discourse and agency were at work here. Despite assurances about the equal value of not being a sustainable grazing adopter, these few graziers appear willing to redefine their own relationship to the relatively more powerful subject position of being an adopter of the ‘thing’ that someone has come to their property to interview them about. In short, the discourse of sustainability hailed them more strongly to the subject position of the adopter than the subject position of the non-adopter.

I am certainly not suggesting here that any grazier lied. Rather what is at work is the relatively powerful effect of discourse and what these graziers did with their agency. In this regard it is useful, in Butler’s terms, that we note that “… subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view.” (1992: 13). Why would, a grazier exercise his or her agency to accept the negative version of the subject binary? In agency terms we can see that the subject position of adopter was stronger to them, given their interest in sustainable grazing indicated by their place on the SGS mail list, given that they had been contacted once and had discussed the interest of the study in sustainable grazing with the researcher, and given that an interviewer was there wanting to ask questions about their grazing practices and the dimensions of the process of grazing change or not.

Further, if as Foucault argues, that resistance is integral to the relational aspects of power implicit in the subjectification process, we may see the few graziers who ‘changed their minds’ as exercising their agency to resist the non-adopter subject position in which they positioned themselves on first contact. In fact, we suggest a third option might be to negotiate within themselves and with the researchers through
whom the discourse of sustainability ‘speaks’. That is, subjects may exercise their agency in the subjectification process to negotiate, accept, or refuse the subject positions to which they are ‘hailed’.

Conclusion: ontology, epistemology and methodology

In this paper I have outlined some dimensions of research exploring a poststructuralist ontology, based on the recognition and employment of discourses. Self-defined sustainability was relatively easily sorted into two discursive patterns. Respondents were also able to recognise and discriminate between eight discourses of sustainability offered to them, representing political positions on what sustainability means. Finally, a case was examined where a small number of graziers at first said they were not sustainable graziers, then, later at interview said that they were. This is understood as the implicit working of the discourse-agency process, where the graziers used their agency to resist the subject position of not being a sustainable grazer, ie claiming to
be sustainable graziers. We could see this as graziers claiming and using power to represent themselves.

The epistemological process of knowing the world postructurally requires a focus on discourse and agency. By analysing social processes as subjectification processes using the concepts of discourse and agency, allows a much wider knowledge of the place of subjectification in sociality.

Methodologically, using postructuralist theory to focus attention on subjectification processes opens up a dimension of research hitherto accessible only through positivist, modernist (and humanist) ontology and epistemology, which are blind to these issues. The role of the agentic moments of research needs further exploration by researchers sensitive to postructuralist theory. Researchers using methods understood as commonsense or positivist explorations, such as questionnaires and interviews, need awareness of the social constructionist and agentic processes of subjectification processes, broadly defined, to be self-aware and reflective of the social processes at work in their research.

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