

*Constructing Panic: The Discourse of Agoraphobia* by Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. 244 pp.

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The collaborative efforts of psychologist Lisa Capps and linguist Elinor Ochs have yielded an innovative and insightful examination of how the psychiatric disorder of agoraphobia (defined as a fear of open spaces) is narratively constructed by a sufferer ("Meg Logan") of the disorder. Placing primacy on Meg's understanding of agoraphobia, Capps and Ochs develop a compelling case for plumbing the depths (or, to use their metaphor, dismantling the architecture) of an individual's story in order to access both the dominant narrative *and* the subjugated narrative—the narrative that may be hidden to the sufferer but that may lie at the core of the disorder. Their stated goal is not to identify the cause of agoraphobia, but to "illuminate the sufferer's own understandings of the environmental conditions and interpersonal dynamics that trigger panic, demonstrating the depth of insight that can be gleaned by looking at the grammatical and discursive architecture of stories" (p. 82).

In chapter one, Capps and Ochs briefly review the psychological literature about agoraphobia and lay out their research methods. Finding that structured interviews and questionnaires were inadequate in describing Meg's lived experience of agoraphobia, Capps spent two and one half years making visits to the Logan's home, talking at length with Meg and with her family and videotaping dinners and other interactive occasions.

As discussed in chapter two, the authors view language as a (if not the most) powerful shaper of existence, referring throughout the book to Toni Morrison's statement from her 1994 Nobel lecture that, "Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created." Storytelling acts as a medium of existence, thus stories contain theories about reality. The authors contend that through analysis of narrative plot structure, it is possible to capture those theories and to come closer to an individual's self-representation. Ultimately, this deeper understanding of self-construction could lead to therapeutic re-construction of one's life story.

In Meg's case, two theories of panic were identified, and linguistic explication of these theories comprises the majority of the book (chapters three through seven). Meg's (conscious) theory about her disorder is that she panics as an irrational/abnormal response to certain places. The authors' theory—and they

would say Meg's *narrative's* theory—about her agoraphobia is that she faces a communicative dilemma, an inability to express negative reactions to proposals made to her by others. Selected narratives (or "panic stories" such as the water story, the thirtieth birthday story, the Big Mama story) are presented and re-presented in order to illustrate a variety of linguistic features shaping these theories. Chapter three addresses how Meg "tells" panic, for example how she positions her theory about place in the climax of each panic story, thus giving the panic an overwhelming, spiraling life of its own. In chapter four, the authors look at Meg's grammatical construction of panic; it is in this chapter that Capps and Ochs develop their unique notion of a "grammar of emotion." They examine such grammatical features as adverbial phrases (e.g., "out of the blue"), mental and modal verbs, and place adverbs, categorizing them into Meg's "grammar of abnormality" and "grammar of helplessness." These grammars serve to create coherence in Meg's overall panic experience.

While the previous chapters deal more with Meg's explicit construction of panic, chapter five delves into the subjugated or hidden narrative, and thus addresses the clinical value of conducting detailed discourse analysis. Schematization of Meg's narratives uncover her tendency to accommodate rather than express reservations about or reject others' proposals for activities involving her. The value in discourse analysis is exemplified by the authors' finding that Meg always uses the imperative "let's" to describe how people proposed various activities to her. Ochs's and Capps's interpretation of this is as follows:

The use of "let's" seems a friendly and communal way of engaging another in an upcoming activity...Yet the "let's" imperative is an imperative. The speaker is not *asking* the addressee if she is able to or desires to participate in the proposed activity...It is almost as if to reject the proposal entails rejecting membership in this group...The proposals put forward to Meg may not have had this grammatical shape: what is significant is that in Meg's ruminations about past panic experiences, she formulates these proposals consistently in this manner (pp. 86-7).

Meg's inability to reject, and hence her accommodation of, proposals leads her to panic, which then leads her to *nonaccommodation*, avoidance of negotiation, temporary resolution of communicative difficulties, and thus reiteration of agoraphobia. So, paradoxically (as described in chapter seven, "Paradoxes of Panic"), Meg's agoraphobia both restricts her and relieves her, and this is apparent in her discourse and grammar.

Though Meg locates her panic problems solely with herself, she alone does not construct her agoraphobic identity, as the authors point out in chapter eight. They compare the family unit to an orchestra, each member (husband, son, daughter) playing a vital role in the creation and maintenance of the music/narrative: Meg as an "irrational woman." In addition to analyzing Meg's narratives, an important component of the authors' endeavor is to examine the socialization of emotion in the family context. Capps's access to day-to-day family interaction provides a unique window onto the linguistic transmission of emotion, particularly anxiety. Through a variety of examples, the authors

illustrate that Meg and her husband do engage in socializing anxiety and an overall lack of control and agency, particularly in their daughter.

The authors propose in the concluding chapter that with linguistic training, therapists could be more sensitive to clients' constructions of their experiences. As Capps and Ochs point out, constructivist psychotherapists have recently been interested in narratives, but they have not tended to look carefully at narrative construction: "How exactly do narrators build settings and events and psychological demeanors? What linguistic resources do they habitually draw on to build narrative portraits and emotional landscapes? How do these narrative practices evolve over the course of a single therapeutic encounter? Over a series of encounters?" (pp. 178-9). Through close examination (and the authors might say *necessarily* through close examination) and critical analysis of linguistic tools, co-authored (therapist and client) transformation of narratives could take place. The authors provide discursive and grammatical pointers, reviewing a number of tools referred to in the analytical chapters.

*Constructing Panic* is a straightforward, smoothly written book. I am, however, left with some concerns and questions. The overarching emphasis on Meg's narrative left some contextual gaps about Meg's life. Meg *became* her narrative in this book. In order to have more context for the narratives I would have liked to know more background about her (e.g., Meg's history, her family background, the nature of her parents' relationship, the history of her marriage). I also hoped for more information about Meg's experiences with therapy and with her current therapist. The authors discuss the notion that narratives are co-constructed by those interacting with the sufferer, including the therapist. What about Meg's therapist? The authors do not elaborate on this therapeutic relationship, or its effects on Meg's narratives.

The clinical feasibility—but not relevance—of in-depth discourse analysis is questionable. It would, of course, be tremendously helpful if therapists were linguistically trained. How much training would the authors' level of analysis require? What would this type of analysis mean for the clinical setting? Sessions would have to be taped and, ideally, transcribed, compared to one another, compared to others like them (for example, Meg's compared to other agoraphobics'). The time involved in the process could be prohibitive. Furthermore, analyzing and transforming only the client's narratives might be just half of the battle against a disorder such as agoraphobia. The authors discussed how William, through his narrative and body language, invalidated Meg's stories, and that her children were also wrapped up in anxiety-oriented narratives. It seems, then, that narrative re-construction would have to take place in all those who interact with the sufferer.

In the epilogue, we learn that Meg is doing somewhat better (and she has begun to take medication). The authors advocate therapists working with clients on their narrative constructions of their disorders. Did Capps do this with Meg? How was the authors' analysis used for Meg's benefit? Did her therapist have

access to the analysis? It would have been helpful to read of the follow-up of Meg's case, particularly because this type of analysis is so innovative.

Finally, there is a larger question as to what Meg's story tells us about gender relations in the United States. Why does Meg feel such helplessness, such powerlessness? The authors note that agoraphobia is much more common among women than men, and that the communication dilemmas shaping agoraphobia are dilemmas that many women face, i.e., an inability to express negative reactions and a tendency to accommodate others at the expense of one's own wishes. Thus agoraphobia is political both as a psychiatric diagnosis and as a predominantly female experience of communication difficulties. So while changing one woman's narrative might help that woman, there still remains the question of how to change women's circumstances, so they would feel better able to express themselves.

No book can address every angle on a particular issue. Particularly because of the pilot nature of this study, I believe this book was meant to raise questions. Capps and Ochs do an admirable job of interweaving psychological and linguistic threads through one woman's narratives of agoraphobia. They stress the importance of looking *at*, rather than *through*, narratives. Discourse and grammar can tell us much about how people create their worlds, and the authors of *Constructing Panic* have provided an excellent and unprecedented model for linguists, therapists, anthropologists, and others who work with people's words in order to understand their lives.