Discourses We Live By
Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour

Edited by Hazel R. Wright and Marianne Høyen

What are the influences that govern how people view their worlds? What are the embedded values and practices that underpin the ways people think and act? Discourses We Live By approaches these questions through narrative research, in a process that uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to (and identity within) the physical and cultural space they inhabit.

This book is a rich and multifaceted collection of twenty-eight chapters that use varied lenses to examine the discourses that shape people’s lives. The contributors are themselves from many backgrounds – different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, diverse professional practices and a range of countries and cultures. They represent a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and variously apply their research methods – but share a common interest in people, their lives, thoughts and actions. Gathering such eclectic experiences as those of student-teachers in Kenya, a released prisoner in Denmark, academics in Colombia, a group of migrants learning English, and gambling addiction support-workers in Italy, alongside more mainstream educational themes, the book presents a fascinating array of insights.

Discourses We Live By will be essential reading for adult educators and practitioners, those involved with educational and professional practice, narrative researchers, and many sociologists. It will appeal to all who want to know how narratives shape the way we live and the way we talk about our lives.

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9. Punishment Discourses in Everyday Life

Khum Raj Pathak

Khum Raj Pathak exposes the subliminal power of violence in controlling behaviour, drawing upon language from the workplace, politics and the media in Britain and narrative research in Nepal. He shows how violent language becomes embedded in a culture and how the experience of violence promotes conformity indirectly through fear, before challenging us to consider how educators and the whole of society might speak differently.

The normalization of punitive violence is aided and abetted by the normalization of violent language. I emerged from four years studying the damaging effects of corporal punishment in Nepalese schools with a heightened sensitivity to the language of threats and beatings, not least through the memories it reawakened from my own painful past, as both a pupil and a Maths teacher in Nepal. I recognize punishment discourses everywhere, from work to leisure; from the demands of citizenship to the private sphere of relationships. In particular, punishment discourses colonize global media, saturating our everyday lives and brutalizing our inner selves. The English language, honed and refined by generations of ‘survivors’ from public schools, is especially adept at incorporating violence into language. Such harsh disciplinarian discourses are slavishly reproduced by English language media everywhere, particularly in India, and in Nepal as it strives to appear modern, at the expense of gentler, reflective discourse traditions.

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What Are Punishment Discourses?

There is a language which is used to support the development of society’s disciplinary rules: words which become a power in themselves. The movement from disciplinary concepts to physical power is explored by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1995/1977). Foucault re-thinks Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887/1996) where Nietzsche exposes punishment discourses as merely ‘signs indicating that a will to power has mastered something less powerful than itself and impressed the meaning of a function upon it in accordance with its own interests’ (ibid., p. 58). Foucault analyses the genealogy of morality and punishment in the modern world as a gaze and a technology that are deliberately embedded in the human body. Such disciplinary processes impose norms and rules whose observance carries rewards. This framework underpins studies of punishment in the disciplines of criminology, education and sociology.

In this chapter, I discuss punishment as a discourse, a normalization of violent language, embedded in the language of everyday life especially by Nepalese schools. Here, I define punishment discourses as discourses that threaten (*do this or else*), use instrumental reason (*if you want x, then you must do y*), demand (*you are expected to*) or actually announce penalties. On one level, these hardly qualify as discourses, since they signify power and appropriation rather than communication based upon freedom and equality. They instantly create a dichotomy between the rule-maker and the ‘other’, who is ruled and punished.

The exposure of contingency could facilitate the possibility of change and transformation. Yet there is something about everyday punishment discourses that often invites acceptance and resignation rather than critique and resistance. One possible reason might be because they are used by people seen as ‘only doing their jobs’—bureaucrats, law-enforcers, politicians, employers, managers, reporters—those responsible for organizing our thoughts and behaviours, apparently ‘for our own good’. We seldom reflect upon the dangers of justifying behaviour on the basis of necessity alone, which could ultimately lead from the ‘jobsworth’ to a dimly sensed role in the Holocaust, as described by Zygmunt Bauman (1990, p. 133). In today’s performativity-led economy, most criticism focuses on inefficiency and
poor productivity rather than peaked-cap interventions, which were once overt, strict or bossy. Now we experience a subtle auto-domination which makes individuals flagellate themselves, terrified of not meeting their performance targets. In this way, any instincts of resistance to authoritarianism are diluted and diverted away from an unkind boss or other economic oppressor. Neoliberalism skilfully creates enough insecurity and financial dependency to make individuals punish themselves — with far greater efficiency and brutality than any state.

How Does Everyday Language Embed Violence Within Society?

Violent language saturates everyday life in British culture to the extent that most people hardly recognize it as such. Once alerted, however, the number of examples seem almost overwhelming. The most superficial analysis of media content is sufficient to identify terms used to capture the reader’s attention with brutalizing effects and the reckless propagation of aggression. In a seemingly innocuous newspaper article about football, we learn that a team has been ‘thrashed’ then ‘laid into’ by its managers. Public services face ‘cuts’ and ‘cutbacks’, budgets are ‘slashed’. Governments deal out ‘blows’ and ‘crackdowns’ and ‘short, sharp shocks’. In the UK general election of 2019, the opposition were said to have been ‘massacred’ (McKinstry, 2019).

In the world of work, employers write job descriptions in which they ‘expect’ employees to ‘hit the ground running’ and meet ‘strict deadlines’. Physical pain and the threat of death lurk here by association. Teachers, in particular, must meet ‘targets’, a word derived from archery, or ‘KPI’, which stands for ‘Key Performance Indicators’. Even everyday citizenship involves harsh language. Members of society are penalized for ‘non-compliance’, a terrifyingly normalized condemnation issued to describe crimes such as objecting to medication or failing to send off tax or pension documents (before a ‘deadline’). In numerous contexts, our details must be sent online by clicking on the word ‘submit’.

These terms not only carry violent and disciplinarian connotations but also involve reification, abstraction and constructions of ‘necessity’. Under this terminology, human beings possess no intrinsic value that might protect them from these disrespectful verbal or written assaults.
Employees must ‘perform’ like engines or circus animals. Health service ‘cuts’ are mentioned as if they are a remote abstraction rather than the physical removal of specific life-saving treatments. Under the guise of discipline, the shifts in power heralded by these terms are widely accepted as a ‘necessity’. If a government announced that it was going to take away the medicine from an individual cancer sufferer, there might be an outcry, but when it is just part of the ‘general cuts’, the public accept exactly the same consequences with merely a sigh of resignation.

Violent language has been especially favoured by the political right and by neoliberal ideologies of performativity and economization, which seek to punish by elimination the ‘unproductive’ or ‘non-viable’, creating a fear-conditioned ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2014; Moore & Robinson, 2015, p. 2776). But it is also used by authoritarian powers of all political hues seeking to exert control, suppress resistance or undermine the survival strategies of the most vulnerable. To give some more examples from English newspapers: we have ‘crackdowns’ on benefit cheats or illegal immigrants and failing schools ‘whipped into shape’. Many violent words are apolitical and appeal to a widely accepted miserable way of working, a short-term repression for long-term survival recognized by Freud (Freud, 2010/1920, p. 185) and developed by Marcuse as the ‘Reality Principle’ (Marcuse, 1987/1956, pp. 12–13). Countless office workers say they must ‘crack on’, barely noticing that this is an association with a ‘crack on the head’ which causes us to furrow our brow. We all work to ‘deadlines’, for example, even though this word secretes an implicit threat of death for crossing a given timeline. Even non-violent resistance can involve ‘strikes’ and ‘clashes’. Traffic violations can lead to culprits being ‘slapped with a fine’; people may be ‘shut down’ by those who disagree with them. There is a peculiar thirst for the violent verbs that shock or excite us into buying tabloid newspapers following competitions or matches, and in computer games; almost as if violence enhances their fetish value.

This violent discourse makes it harder to introduce the language of compassion, sympathy or understanding, and those who try may rapidly be branded a ‘snowflake’ by alt-right trolls. As we learn from the history of genocide, ‘vilifying rhetoric has contributed to mass violence’ particularly among those predisposed to aggression (Kalmoe, 2018). The disrespect, reification and hardening of heart induced by violent
language may lead swiftly to violence and killing, certainly to bullying and victimization.

Why Are Our Defences Against Punitive Language So Weak?

How does violent rhetoric manage to permeate our consciousness and influence our behaviour so successfully? My research suggests that the punishment discourses of everyday life impact especially upon those of us who have experienced corporal punishment. These power-laden discourses can yet inspire resistance, however, as much as they can induce submission.

My research in Nepal involved interviewing several adults who, like myself, had experienced corporal punishment during their school years. Through an auto/biographical methodology, my participants and I began to link our contemporary struggles in punitive contexts to past experiences of punishment. We each described difficulties that we faced in risk-taking, challenging authority and pursuing ambitions; impeded at every turn by discourses that seemed frightening and brought back memories of physical punishments in childhood. Eerily, my participants often actually repeated the disempowering words that could have been said to them as children, such as, ‘you will never be good at anything’.

Mukunda’s Story

Mukunda, a thirty-four-year-old from Devchuli, described various business ambitions that had never come to fruition. He had hoped to buy some land then open a school. Later, he planned to open a computer shop. Instead, he was held back by irrational fears. Mukunda feared that he ‘did not have enough knowledge’ (despite being the first person in his village to gain a Master’s degree). He was scared that his business ‘might make a big loss’ — yet found himself bitterly regretting his indecision when friends of his opened successful computer shops and the land that he had viewed multiplied in value. Mukunda had even turned down a possible role as a community leader, saying:

I worried I might not be able to fulfil people’s expectations. I feel that if I fail to fulfil my promises to the people, they will have negative feelings
towards me. I am always afraid of that. Up till now society thinks I’m a good person but if I ever become a leader, then become unsuccessful, their opinion of me might change.

Where have these self-imposed restrictions come from? Mukunda traced them back to corporal punishment at school. Mukunda described two effects in particular. Firstly, a lack of creativity and innovation:

All the while the teacher was using punishment in the classroom, we didn’t try anything new. In fact, I never thought about new ideas. I just studied what the teacher told us to and how could any new ideas come from there? I did not have any new ideas at all.

Secondly, he voiced a fear that change or risk-taking could lead to punishment:

They made us follow them dogmatically. They always insisted that students listen to them and copy them precisely. If someone tried to do [anything] different, then they would be beaten severely.

This ‘NO’ to change, reinforced by years of beatings and witnessing beatings, carries its echo into adult life. Mukunda does not describe the voices that led him to suppress his ideas and ambitions, so we do not know whether they were implanted by others around him, or from himself, or both. But it is easy to envisage how, for somebody with his background, dire warnings against change — from whatever source — could have an instant impact. How could he bear the pressure of ‘targets’ or his businesses ‘crashing’?

Preeti’s Story

For my twenty-six-year-old female participant, Preeti, corporal punishment led to confusion:

I did exercise number three instead of number two or number four. I just got confused. Then I got beaten. Sometimes I used to ask my friends. […] When the teachers saw that they used to bang our heads together.

She also described ‘forgetting everything that she had just learnt’ once she saw the teacher enter the classroom. In later life, this temporary amnesia was repeated. Preeti explained how she tends to ‘forget what I believe and think’ and abandon any of her own ideas as soon as her
in-laws give her ‘instructions’. Corporal punishment also affected her appetite and sleep, especially after one teacher began using a stick with thorns in it from the Sisau tree. Preeti said:

Sometimes the beatings used to be quite a lot and my body could not bear it. I would have a fever and hotness in my body. I didn’t want any food on that day. [...] I used to dream that the teacher was beating me after not memorizing the text and other very frightening dreams. [...] Some nights I used to wake up suddenly, shouting.

To this day, Preeti remains afraid that she might ‘get punished’ if she disobeys her in-laws and when her powerlessness makes her ‘upset’, she is unable to eat. Again, she does not describe the discourses around her literally but it is clear that they do not encourage dissent and debate, only obedience and conformity. Preeti said that she dreaded arguments and would do anything to avoid conflict — to the extent of leaving her teaching job. Preeti’s housework, farm-work and shop-work ‘deadlines’ were so intense that she appeared baffled when I asked her about leisure time:

Time for myself? I’m not sure what you mean. I can’t study. Once I wake up at five, I am so worried about getting all my chores done in time. Every hour has its task or things go wrong.

This pressure was not countered by any alternative voice telling her to take it easy. Preeti’s fears must be understood in the context of rural Nepal. We often do not have the choice to postpone jobs until tomorrow: our survival depends on a strict timetable and tasks such as feeding and milking the buffalo are unavoidable. Nevertheless, I had the impression that Preeti, like so many women in Nepal, was over-worked and overwrought by oppressive voices emanating from both her conscience and her family.

Krishna’s Story

Krishna, a twenty-three-year-old farmer from Devchuli, had experienced the most severe corporal punishment, recalling how:

They (teachers) used to thrash us, hang us upside down… make us walk through the playground on our knees; there would be blood while doing
that. They used to torture us a lot. [...] They beat us with nettles and with a long, bamboo stick.

Krishna described being beaten ‘in every class, nearly every day’ and finally, at the age of sixteen, in front of the whole school following allegations that he had a girlfriend. The beatings were accompanied by constant criticism, beginning with unfair attacks on his ability to master Nepali (Magar was his first language). Verbal and physical attacks from authority figures also occurred once he left school for a job in India:

I cried at the beginning, as we had to wash up so fast and work such long hours compared to my life in Nepal. If we made any mistake, our bosses would beat us. They would swear at us with terrible words insulting our parents, saying that we worked too slowly.

Krishna then repeated as fact the words that his bosses might have said to him:

It was boring work but India was full of unemployed young men waiting to fill our job and I had no qualifications to get anything better.

As time went on, he began to overreact to oppressive language. To this day, Krishna admitted, with a revealing mixture of tenses:

If someone says something against me or tries to boss me about over something, I get very angry and wanted to fight with them. It became my habit.

Krishna described both his schooling and an attempted job as too difficult ‘brain-wise’, echoing the teachers who once labelled him as a weak student. For somebody with Krishna’s experiences of violent punishment, discourses of gentle encouragement were essential to his survival, but these never came. His experiences of work abroad involved both verbal and physical abuse, leaving him so damaged that he would spring up in a rage at the slightest criticism.

My Story

My own experiences of violence have been masked to an extent by my academic persona. Yet I, too, struggle with what is almost a psychological allergy to punishment discourses. Perfectly reasonable demands for work to be ‘submitted’ within ‘deadlines’ fill me with
sickening fears. This chapter itself was horrifically late. Threats of ‘or else’ seem to make me do the opposite and my creative ideas only seem to flow when I am in a peaceful atmosphere — such as the dead of night — free from pressure and punishment associations. Sometimes in public I stammer and forget what I was going to say, just as I used to in front of my most violent teachers. Similar difficulties are experienced by individuals who are already struggling to overcome violent memories from the past, exacerbated by punishment discourses in everyday life. Yet punishment discourses are seen as necessary and indispensable. In Britain they are fetishized, taboo, endowed with mystical properties, and difficult to challenge.

How Are Punishment Discourses Invested with Notions of Necessity?

Disciplining the workforce, increasing productivity, preventing idleness, corruption or inefficiency; many of us even try to frighten ourselves into a task (such as academic writing) that might require tremendous self-control. What can be done when polite requests are ignored? Moreover, punishment discourses are not necessarily chosen, but are often due to pressure from those above in the chain of command. An under-manager might berate and threaten her staff as she herself fears punishment for her team not meeting certain targets. The greater her fear, the harsher her language. Punitive language does not always indicate a metaphysically narrow focus; it might be due to temporary states of anxiety or feeling pressurized. It may be seen as a duty for a greater good. In Nepal, I remember using punitive discourses to prevent struggling pupils from having to drop down a class. At the time, I also believed that I had ‘no choice’ because I had seldom encountered non-punitive leadership.

This language is not unique to capitalism: many communist regimes have had demanding productivity targets, such as Stalin’s Five-Year Plans. The punitive discourses of capitalism, however, are especially skilful at infiltrating consciousness through careful marketing. A threat of punishment is concealed within sales pitches that suggest ‘can you afford NOT to buy this?’ Consumers thus fear the terrible consequences that might ensue from not buying an item, which could be anything
from a burglar alarm to a face cream. Neoliberal concerns about competitiveness, viability and comparative quality have intensified the pressure on companies to ensure that the productivity of each individual is squeezed to its maximum. There are also sado-masochistic elements in the public’s passion for punitive headlines and bombastic rhetoric, currently demonstrated by intense reactions to racial and sexual politics.

Despite our saturation with punitive discourses, Foucault reminds us that the ‘normalization’ and ‘naturalization’ of ‘disciplinary networks’ is not necessary and eternal but, instead, historical, constructed and therefore changeable (Foucault, 1995/1977, pp. 303–06). Alternative styles of discourse, representing more egalitarian power structures, exist but are increasingly scrutinized for efficacy. The progressive teaching techniques of last century favoured encouragement over negative criticism (see Reese, 2001 on the discourse of child-centred learning) and the use of encouraging words such as: ‘That is an interesting idea’ rather than: ‘You’re wrong’. Results-centric educational policy research has tended to undermine praise, citing it as an example of ‘ineffective practice’ (Coe, et al, 2014, p. 22). Police services experimenting with interactive methods of community policing and research in America found that, on balance, encouraging dialogue with residents carries some success in reducing crime and disorder (Reisig, 2010) suggesting that threats are not the best way to enforce obedience. Sub-cultures such as Rastafarianism and hippy culture have long favoured discourses of gentleness, openness and tolerance, mirroring how the hippy might seek to literally ‘drop-out’ from the violent pressures of judgement, competition, acquisition and indeed, the force of interpretation itself (Hall, 1968). The word ‘cool’ is used to express approval, acceptance, open-heartedness and open-mindedness, in direct contrast to punitive language. Traditional etiquette, in many languages, also contains a phraseology that expresses sensitivity and sympathy rather than condemnation. As Debrett’s puts it: ‘The essence of good manners is to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, to show empathy, so that nobody feels confused, excluded or exposed’ (Wyse, 2015). Where it does offer correction, the most polite language is tentative, respectful and minimalist. For example, saying ‘Perhaps you might consider…’, ‘Could I suggest that…’ or ‘I wonder if it might be better to…’, rather than more threatening direct language such as ‘You can’t
do that’. Although in England, power-relations remain unchanged by polite language (indeed, the courtesy and noblesse oblige of the upper classes has been part of their survival strategy), at least human beings emerge from such encounters feeling less reified and more respected. Other areas of tolerance include mystical traditions, which stress love rather than punitive dogma (Cupitt, 1998, p. 83) and working-class idioms intended to reduce blame and fear, such as: ‘Don’t worry about it mate’ and: ‘We all make mistakes’.

For Krishna, working as a washing-up assistant in India, the manner in which he was addressed by his bosses could have made all the difference to his career and prevented his over-determined and self-destructive reaction to any criticism, which he associated with physical abuse. Punishment discourses also affect motivation. Preeti described how she would study in order to memorize rather than to understand, and out of sheer fear rather from any excitement or joy she took in studying. Finally, Mukunda felt unable to start a business or become a community leader because of performativity anxieties. Instead of being motivated by dedication or love or compassion for his community, his mind was tortured by worries about how he would perform and how this would affect his social image.

**How Do We, as Educators, Overcome Dominant Punitive Discourses?**

To overcome punitive discourses we should start with ourselves and try to make our communication less threatening and frightening. This means recognizing how punitive language in the classroom can limit learning by creating an alienated and alienating ‘other’. Even so-called positive discipline, such as the awarding of stars, emerges from a punitive context (Kohn, 1999). A parallel may be made with competitive reality shows: contestants are degraded by the very fact that performances are judged and appraised by people holding up numbers. In education, as in the arts, how much more useful and fruitful are specific adjectives, engaged with specific aspects of an individual’s work.

In everyday life, punishment discourses may be transformed through challenging bureaucracy and bureaucratic methods that prevent the recognition of the uniqueness of individuals and situations. Managers
are seen to be managing properly if they provide a barrage of paperwork, containing quality control assessment forms, consumer feedback forms and Key Performance Indicators. However, the choices on such forms are usually limited by their reliance upon numbers or a few pre-determined answer options. Every week, for example, I have to rate my Tesco online shopping delivery driver on a scale of one to five. How can I ‘sum up’ another human being in the reifying language of the market? Grading itself contains punitive aspects that can be nonsensical, for example, in the way that reception-level children in Nepalese schools are condemned to streams, marked by numbers and letters, which withhold full approval for the majority of students. Bruner’s ideal, a climate enabling pupils to ‘experience success and failure not as reward and punishment, but as information’ (Bruner, 1961, p. 26), is made more difficult by grading, according to Alfie Kohn (Kohn, 1994). It prevents the classroom being perceived as ‘a safe place, where there is no fear of humiliation and punitive judgment’ (ibid, p. 40) and therefore discourages learners from asking for help. These punitive effects of grading make it morally suspect and the darling of identitarian ideologies, attracted by its orgy of power, control and condemnation.

Punishment discourses can also be challenged by increasing our awareness of violent adjectives and metaphors. Our sensitivity to racism has led to changes in language: we no longer talk about ‘blackening’ somebody’s character, for example. Similarly, we should reflect upon our use of words like thrash, cane, hit, and smash to describe everyday events, from sport to the economy. Are we right, for example, to embrace superhero cults that lead to the intrinsically violent word POW being used to decorate a pair of pants? The violence of words like ‘cuts’ can be beneficial as accurate reflections of the pain and suffering caused by the removal of funding for vulnerable people. Where ‘cuts’ become accepted as a general necessity, however, we appear to be desensitized to the suffering involved. To ban these violent words would also involve a degree of cruelty and violate the right to freedom of speech: would we really want to prosecute the pensioner for saying his football team was ‘thrashed’? Unless we set our ‘thinking against itself’, to use Adorno’s term (Adorno, 1973, p. 365), and admit the inadequacy of our conceptualization then we also become punishers. Nevertheless, reflecting upon a word’s potential associations might
help us to develop an aversion for normalized violent words and to understand why Adorno links conceptual condemnation to literal extermination (ibid., p. 362).

The removal of punitive discourses emanating from performativity ideologies is more difficult, since it challenges practices that feature frequently within economization and management strategies, deemed necessary for businesses to prove their efficiency and accountability to shareholders. Unions have worked to defend employees from the worst punitive discourses, but an increasing number of companies are replacing traditional reprimands with sinister forms of silent surveillance, including even embedding workers with microchips as part of their auto-quantification (Moore & Robinson, 2015, p. 2779). Such disciplinary strategies are no less aggressive and considerably more intrusive than the shouting and beatings of the past.

These wide-ranging examples show how punishment discourses are not merely an issue for the philosopher of education, but for the whole of human society. For my participants and for me, their prevalence forces us into a state of perpetual alertness: we constantly battle against their incapacitating effects upon every area of our private and collective lives.

References


