THE CONSTRUCTION AND USE OF BELIEF IN COGNITIVE THERAPY: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS.

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ABSTRACT.

This research explores how the notion of belief is constructed and used within the cognitive therapy domain. Utilising a multi-media approach, in which cognitive therapy texts were gathered from instructional books, demonstration videos, and interviews with practicing psychotherapists, the transcripts were analysed using Jonathan Potter, Derek Edwards and Margaret Wetherell's model of discourse analysis. The analytic attention was on the linguistic resources and practices therapists had available and used in constructing and deploying different notions of belief. By approaching therapists' belief talk in this way and showing the contingent, socially constructed, and rhetorical nature of their discourse use, two main constructions of belief became evident. These were of 'a belief itself' and of 'a believing person'. In addition, Davies and Harrés' positioning theory was utilised which highlighted two main subject positions; the therapist as the 'expert' and the client as the 'layperson'.

The findings tend to support the view that there are medium and therapist specific idiosyncratic aspects to belief, which are constructed and constituted in multiple repertoires and by various discursive strategies. This suggests a need for cognitive therapy to re-evaluate the notion of belief and its various uses, and highlights the benefits and pitfall of utilising a multi-media discursive approach.

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EXCERPT ONE.

An irreligious vacationer accidentally fell over the edge of the Grand Canyon and found himself dangling precariously from a small shrub. As he hung agonizingly close to imminent death, he mustered an awesome prayer of faith and conviction. Suddenly, his cries for supernatural intervention were answered by a thunderous question from the heavens, 'Do you believe?' Startled and inspired, the dangling convert cried, 'Yes...oh, yes, I do believe!' The voice thundered back, 'Do you really believe?' 'Yes, dear God...I really, really believe!' There was a brief silence before the heavenly voice wryly responded, 'Then let go of the shrub...'.

Excerpt from Mahoney, 1974, p. 229.