"Looking after the least fortunate in our society". Shared membership, common-sense, and morality as resources for identification between politicians and voters

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Politicians often go to great lengths to come across as "ordinary", despite being distinct from the "average" person. They can often be seen rooting for their hometown team or speaking colloquially. By engaging in these seemingly ordinary activities, politicians highlight their "average-ness". This enables them to cultivate a sense of identification as the basis for gaining political support.

The power of identification to persuade potential voters has been thoroughly discussed in the context of political communication. Kenneth Burke (1950) contended that the sense of identification a speaker instils in their audience is more significant than any rational argument included in their speech. Similarly, studying televised debates in the run-up to the 2002 German national elections, Reinemann and Maurer (2005) found that the candidates' use of commonplaces[1] – one of the main rhetorical practices for identification – garnered unanimous support from the audience, irrespective of political allegiance. Given the effectiveness that commonplaces   and other identification-building practices have in swaying an audience, they warrant further scrutiny which will improve our understanding of how these rhetorical tools are employed and function in political communication.

We present a case study from our ongoing project "Persuasion through identification in political discourse" funded by the Social Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. We focus on a fragment from the popular British TV programme *Question Time* which features a panel of politically relevant speakers answering questions from the audience, each other and the presenter. Using discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), we zoom in on one speaker's language use. We show how he mobilises shared category membership, common-sense, and morality to position himself and his party's politics in a way that would gain the audience's support.

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[1] For example, "it takes two to tango", "many hands make light work" and so forth.

We build on Billig's (1987) insights into how espousing "common-sensical opinions" (p. 226) evokes "a sense of moral community" (p. 230), which fosters identification. It is worth noting that, by drawing on discursive psychology, our approach differs from other perspectives on identification (e.g., Burke, 1950; Kelman, 1958; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). We focus on what speakers are "doing" with language, instead of the ostensible effects of language-in-use on the audience's attitudes or behaviour (Edwards, 1997; Humă, 2023).

The fragment below comes from a *Question Time* episode[2] broadcast on the 21st February 2019. It features Fiona Bruce (FB), the presenter; Mel Stride (MS), Conservative's Financial Secretary to the Treasury; and Andy McDonald (AM), Labour's Shadow Secretary for Transport. The panel were discussing a question from the audience regarding the ideological changes to the Labour and Conservative parties, which may require a by-election. In the fragment, Stride defends the Conservative Party in response to an implicit suggestion (prior to line 1) that the party may be subject to prejudice (i.e., by virtue of having been taken over by "the right"). For an explanation of the transcription conventions please see Hepburn and Bolden (2017).

Extract 1 QT 21/02/2019, 16.46-17.17

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 1   MS:   >but the question you were asking me about splits< what
 2         I'm saying is that I think if you .h (0.2) erm can get
 3         beYO:ND Brexit for just a momen(t)=and you look at things
 4         like has the Conservative party been taken over by the
 5         right=no (0.2) .h the Conservative party in parliament is
 6         united (0.4) [around] a progressive political agenda, =
 7   AM:                [oohh: ]
 8   MS:   =(0.3) that is about looking after (0.4) the least
 9         fo[rtunate      in     our      society    ]
10   AM:     [Mel °I wouldn't wanna see you when° you're] divided=
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11   MS:   =and and that message unfortunately is being c(h)rowded
12          out by this perpetual discussion .h >about Brexit (.)
13          [  HUGEly      important  ]    [hugely important]
14   FB:   [what about three of your M]P's [(have said) er-  ]
15   MS:   =though that i:s? (0.2) .pkt and that we get a de:al,
16          (0.4) and that >we do the right thing by our country
17          which is what we're working_<
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In defending his party, Stride claims the problem lies with the critics being too focused on Brexit. By advising a momentary shift in the focus of the debate away from Brexit (lines 2-3), Stride criticises his party's critics for directing their attention to an unessential topic (Demasi, 2019). This conveys that his opponents are narrow-minded and potentially have an axe to grind (Potter, 1996), thus undermining their criticism. All this serves to portray the Conservative Party as not being bound to one social issue; that is, having wider electoral appeal. This lays the groundwork for his identification.

Next, Stride doubles down both on the criticism of a split party, by emphatically claiming the Conservatives are "united" (line 5) against the accusation of right-wing prejudice by invoking his party's "progressive political agenda" (line 6). Here is where we find Stride's identification with the audience: the Conservatives' progressive politics. The claim that helping people in need drives the party's agenda taps into common-sense ideas of the desired character of a political party. The membership category "least fortunate" (line 9) makes relevant the normative moral response of helping members of that category (Jayyusi, 1984). Stride's choice of words for constructing this category invokes a class-based membership categorisation device (Holmes, 2019; Sacks, 1992) to justify arguing socioeconomic suffering may not be a matter of choice or merit (see Carr et al., 2019, 2021 for discursive representation of people in poverty).

The identification with the audience is also marked by the specific reference to those in need of help belonging to the collective "our society" (line 9). The first-person pronoun "our" is used here in a wide sense (Billig & Marinho, 2017) to include not only the panel

members or the studio audience, but ostensibly all British citizens. Thus, Stride can be heard claiming the central point on his party's agenda is one with wide reach, potentially relevant for all voting citizens.

To conclude, we would like to highlight two key observations distilled from the above analysis. First, we demonstrated how a politician uses membership categories and associated rights and responsibilities to construct a common-sensical position that his party shares with the audience. On this basis, we would like to propose that common-sense positions often drawn upon in identification are not readily available as "pre-fabricated packages" as has been previously suggested (e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971). Instead, here and in other cases in our collection, they appear to have been carefully constructed *in situ* to serve specific interactional goals. Second, given that in this fragment, Stride serves as a representative of the Conservative party, he invites the audience to identify with his party and their progressive agenda of helping "the least fortunate". This is achieved by leaving implicit who is responsible for the helping in combination with the inclusive formulation "our society". All in all, we hope this case study has brought attention to previously undocumented features of identification and has demonstrated the benefits of closely interrogating authentic interactions in televised political debates.

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