

## 3.2 Reading the signs and obeying the signals: discourse

### 3.2.1 Reading

#### Pre-reading activity

Consider the following questions with a partner:

1. Do you think you are free to choose what you want to do in an Australian Society?
2. In what ways might society try to control an individual's freedoms?

#### DISCOURSES

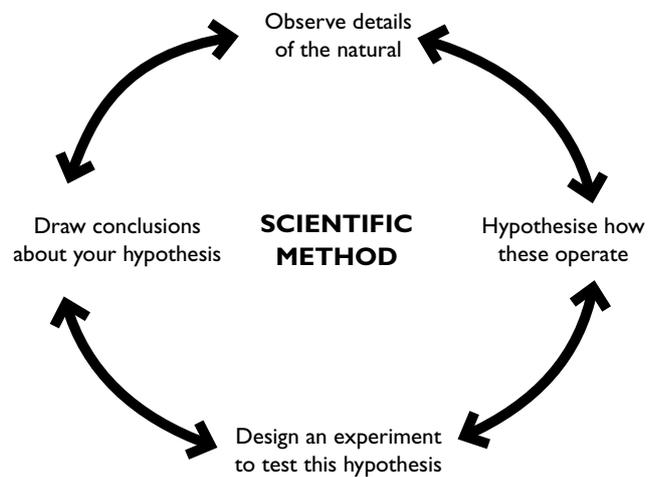
In considering the questions in the first section, you might have noticed that a distinction was being made between society and the individual. This distinction raises an interesting question: **How free is each of us really to control our own lives?**

Living in a society means we are constantly surrounded by other people. To prevent chaos and secure the safety, well-being and prosperity of the majority, people living in a society must find ways to organise their lives. Rules and processes to do this are developed and then agreed upon by the majority.

These rules and processes can be very visible and official (eg laws and regulations), or they might be unofficial and 'invisible' (eg conventions or accepted ways of doing things, and what is generally believed to be appropriate behaviour). These laws, regulations and conventions send out messages to the individual members of a society about how they should understand themselves and behave.

The French thinker Michel Foucault calls these messages **discourses**. He emphasises how language is used in these messages to shape our knowledge and behaviour:

For example, the discourse of science requires scientists to think and act in certain ways. It requires observation and objectivity. The quality and worth of a scientist's work will be judged by other scientists according to how well they follow accepted scientific method. From your own writing in science you know that you must express information and ideas in very specific forms and language: hypothesis, testing and experimentation, objective observation, drawing valid conclusions. Such language shapes what a scientist can justifiably do and understand about being a 'scientist'.



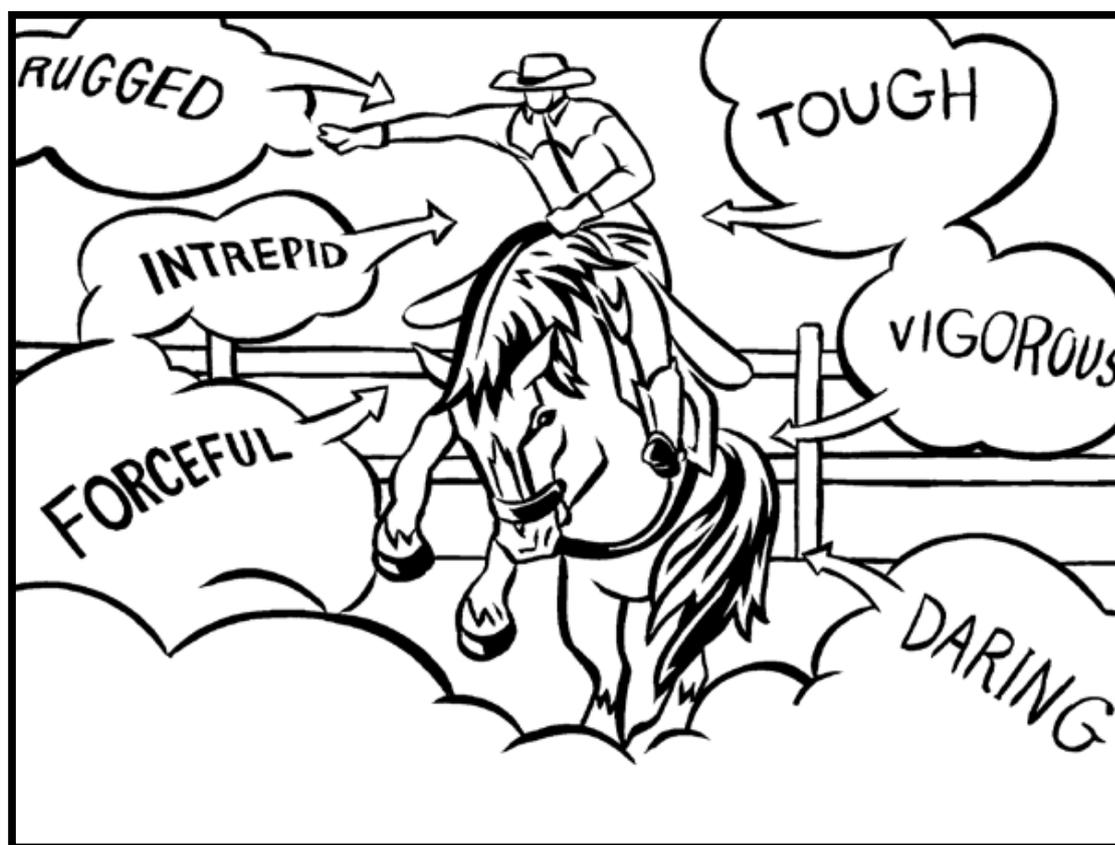
Similarly, a discourse of masculinity will influence how men understand themselves and what counts as acceptable behaviour. Men are commonly told in our society that they should be a 'bread winner', rely on intellect more than emotions, be physically strong, act bravely, and take risks.

The effect is that by saying things in a certain way, we transmit certain values.

Discourses shape the way we think about things by providing frameworks through which we make sense of and understand both ourselves and the world around us. The concept of discourse suggests that individuals learn how to 'be' in the world.

Scientists learn to be scientists because of the way language is used to explain what it is that scientists do. Men learn to be men because of the dominant types of language used to describe 'being' a man in our society.





Of course, the idea of 'being' anything in this world is very complex. Many discourses will intersect and combine to shape our understanding of who we are and what we do. A scientist will obviously be influenced by the discourse of science but also the discourse of his or her gender, and many other discourses as well.

If discourse shapes our thinking and behaviour the idea of 'free will' is very problematic. We are constantly hearing and seeing the 'message' that we are free to make our own futures. It pervades the movies, the mass media and other sources such as the education system. Rather than seeing this sort of belief as 'natural' or coming from within us, Foucault suggests that it is better understood as the product of different discourses at work around us. These might include the discourse of popular entertainment (hero wins through), the discourse of the mass media (emphasis on the bad to whip up controversy), and the discourse of the education system (work hard and you will achieve your goals).

In turn, all of these discourses might be understood as serving a larger goal: to produce individuals who have initiative and drive, and who will take risks. These are all important qualities for people to have in a capitalist economic system, which relies on people starting up and expanding their own businesses. Therefore, the discourses of popular entertainment, the mass-media and the education system can be said to reinforce a larger discourse: the discourse of a capitalist economy. In short, discourses are a society's way of producing the individuals it wants and needs.



### Check your understanding

Use the *Discourses* passage on the previous pages to help you to match the word on the left with the correct definition on the right. The words have been underlined in the passage.

| WORD         | DEFINITION  |
|--------------|---|
| Individual   | Customary way of doing things.  |
| Society      | Beliefs of a person or social group which they hold dear.                                 |
| Discourse    | Established practices or organisations.   |
| Values       | A series of actions, procedures, ways of doing things.                                    |
| Institutions | Properly authorised, approved by an authority.  |
| Processes    | Ways of thinking about and understanding the world.                                       |
| Official     | Doubtful, questionable, debatable.  |
| Visible      | To do with a system in which private wealth is used in producing and distributing goods.  |
| Conventions  | A group of humans joined by similar interests, shared institutions, and a common culture. |
| Capitalist   | That can be seen, apparent, evident.  |
| Problematic  | Single human being.   |

Write down any other words you need to know to understand the text. Try to work out the meaning from the context before you look them up in the dictionary.

### 3.2.2 Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In small groups, find examples of assumed free will in other common discourses (eg consumerism, leisure) and share these expressions with the class.
2. Consider the descriptions of the discourses of science and masculinity provided above. What connections might be made between the two descriptions to explain why science has been a field of human activity which has traditionally been dominated by men?
3. What other discourses might have influenced the history of science to become dominated by men? Consider this question with particular references to the discourses of the capitalist economy, the education system, popular entertainment and the mass media.



### 3.2.3 Textual analysis

**Texts:** *Heaven and hell* suite of television advertisements  
*Drink drive brain* television advertisement

#### Introductory activity

Having watched the series of advertisements *Heaven and hell* and *Drink drive brain*, discuss the following statements and rank them in order from 'most obvious in the advertisements' to 'least obvious in the advertisements'. Be prepared to justify your ranking by making reference to what you saw and heard in both advertisements.

- Young men are likely to behave in a more irresponsible way than older men
- Men are not very resistant to peer pressure
- Young men are skilful drivers
- Men are risk takers
- Men who drive on country roads are likely to behave irresponsibly
- Men do not stop to consider the possible consequences of their actions
- Young men take pride in their cars and their driving
- Young men like to please themselves and care little for what others think of them
- Men are always in control of their actions
- Men prefer to act rather than think.

#### Analysis

1. What discourses relating to masculinity were at play in the representation of the young driver in *Heaven and hell*? How were these made obvious to the viewer?
2. What alternative discourse of masculinity is introduced in the third advertisement through the figure of the emergency services officer? How is this alternative made obvious to the viewer?
3. What discourses relating to masculinity were at play in the representation of the driver in *Drink drive brain*? In what ways did this differ from *Heaven and hell*? What other discourses are responsible for these differences? (You should consider the differences in such things as age and location, and how these are shown to influence behaviour.)
4. Explain how a scientific discourse lends authority to the message of *Drink drive brain*? By contrast, what discourse(s) might be said to make *Heaven and hell* a powerful and successful series of advertisements?



### 3.2.4 Composing

Write a critical response of approximately 500 words to the following topic.

**Challenging male driving behaviour: how discourses shape meaning in the RTA television advertisements *Heaven and hell* and *Drink drive brain*.**

#### Critical response

| ASSESSMENT CRITERIA   | GRADE/ MARKS         |
|---|----------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Composes a sustained, coherent and sophisticated response</li> <li>■ Demonstrates a well-developed critical understanding of how different values, attitudes and discourses are conveyed through different language forms in the texts</li> <li>■ Provides a perceptive discussion of how different values, attitudes and discourses are challenged in the texts</li> <li>■ Uses language appropriate to audience, purpose and context in a highly effective way.</li> </ul> | A:<br>15<br>14<br>13 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Composes a sustained, coherent and effective response</li> <li>■ Demonstrates a critical understanding of how different values, attitudes and discourses are conveyed through different language forms in the texts</li> <li>■ Provides an insightful discussion of how different values, attitudes and discourses are challenged in the texts</li> <li>■ Uses language appropriate to audience, purpose and context in an effective way.</li> </ul>                         | B:<br>12<br>11<br>10 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Composes a sustained and coherent response</li> <li>■ Demonstrates understanding of how different values, attitudes and discourses are conveyed through different language forms in the texts</li> <li>■ Provides a discussion of how different values, attitudes and discourses are challenged in the texts</li> <li>■ Uses language appropriate to audience, purpose and context in a competent way.</li> </ul>  | C:<br>9<br>8<br>7    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Composes a response that is not always coherent and/or inconsistent</li> <li>■ Demonstrates limited understanding of how different values, attitudes and discourses are conveyed through different language forms in the texts</li> <li>■ Provides a limited discussion of how different values, attitudes and discourses are challenged in the texts</li> <li>■ Uses language that is generally appropriate to audience, purpose and context.</li> </ul>                    | D:<br>6<br>5<br>4    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Composes a rudimentary response</li> <li>■ Demonstrates little or no understanding of how different values, attitudes and discourses are conveyed through different language forms in the texts</li> <li>■ Provides very limited discussion of how different values, attitudes and discourses are challenged in the texts</li> <li>■ Uses language that may not be appropriate to audience, purpose and context.</li> </ul>  | E:<br>3<br>2<br>1    |