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Thinking differently about thinking positive: a discursive approach to cancer patients' talk

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Abstract

There is an extensive social science and psycho-oncology literature on coping with cancer which claims that "thinking positive" is correlated with "and, by extension, causally implicated in " individuals' morbidity and mortality rates, and their overall level of mental health. Drawing on our own data, in which groups of women with breast cancer talk about "thinking positive", this paper interrogates the basis of such claims from a discursive perspective, by challenging the data analyses upon which they are based. We show that previous literature overwhelmingly relies on self-report data, which are taken as offering more or less accurate depictions of speakers' psychological states (i.e. their mental adjustment or coping style). A discursive approach, by contrast, explores talk as a form of action designed for its local interactional context, and pays detailed attention to what statements about "thinking positive" actually mean for speakers in the contexts in which they occur. We show that "thinking positive"

functions not as an accurate report of a internal cognitive state, but rather as a conversational idiom, characterised by vagueness and generality, and summarising a socially normative moral requirement; we also show that even those breast cancer patients who report “thinking positive” can also actively resist its moral prescriptions. Finally, we sketch out the implications of our analysis for analyses of cancer patients’ talk more generally and for future research on coping with cancer.



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Keywords

Breast cancer; Coping; Discursive analysis; Thinking positive

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