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Unpacking the Worlds in Our Words: Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Work

Inquiry

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Abstract

Critical discourse analysis is a rapidly growing, interdisciplinary field of inquiry that combines linguistic analysis and social theory to address the way power and dominance are enacted and reproduced in text. Critical discourse analysis is primarily concerned with the construction of social phenomena and involves a focus on the wider social, political, and historical contexts in which talk and text occur, exploring the way in which theories of reality and relations of power are encoded and enacted in language. Critical discourse analysis moves beyond considering what the text *says* to examining what the text *does*. As an interdisciplinary and eclectic field of inquiry, critical discourse analysis has no unifying theoretical perspective, standard formula, or essential methods. As such, there is much confusion around what critical discourse analysis is, what it is not, and the types of projects for which it can be fruitfully employed. This article seeks to provide clarity on critical discourse analysis as an approach to research and to highlight its relevance to social work scholarship, particularly in relation to its vital role in identifying and analyzing how discursive practices establish, maintain, and promote dominance and inequality.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; social work inquiry; post-structuralism; discourse; critical social work; ideology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that combines linguistic and social theories to address the way power and inequality are enacted and reproduced in text (van Dijk, 2001). Critical discourse analysis differs from traditional forms of discourse analysis, in that analysis moves beyond simply dissecting the details of linguistic units, toward problematizing the construction of larger social phenomena. Critical discourse analysis moves beyond considering what the text *says* to questioning what the text *does*. Critical discourse analysts argue that we not only say things, but we do things by saying things (Gee, 2011) and it is through this doing that we continuously build and rebuild our social worlds and our own identities. Above all, CDA is concerned with a critical analysis of social practices and the reproduction of dominant belief systems in discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Though nuance exists among differing conceptualizations of discourse, in a broad sense, discourse can be defined as context specific frameworks of meaning-making that inform action and (re)create the limits of what can be known (Fairclough, 2009). Hall (1997:5) elaborates and describes discourse as, ‘a way of knowing or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: A cluster of ideas, images, or practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society.’ Critical discourse analysis examines naturally occurring *language*, both written and

spoken. Language is understood as an act of meaning-making which contributes to, ‘reproducing and/or transforming society and culture, including power relations’ (Fairclough et al., 2011: 370).

As an interdisciplinary and eclectic field of inquiry, CDA has no unifying theoretical perspective, standard formula, or essential methods. As such, there is much confusion around what CDA is, what it is not, and the types of projects for which it can be usefully employed. This article seeks to provide clarity on critical discourse analysis as an approach to research and to highlight its relevance to social work scholarship. It is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of critical discourse analysis methods, and it is not meant to be an endorsement of one approach over another. Rather, it is meant as a call to social work researchers to deepen their understanding of what critical discourse analysis can offer to social work research.

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

Critical discourse analysis makes up a diverse range of methodological perspectives emblematic of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences which gives prominence to language as a meaning making process. As such, CDA examines how theories of reality and relations of power are encoded and enacted in language (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Specifically, critical discourse analysis is concerned with how ‘language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge’ (Roger et al, 2005: 376). Critical discourse analysis, itself, is so varied and eclectic that it is best conceptualized as a school or program of research with shared ontological and epistemological assumptions (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In this section, we outline these ontological and epistemological foundations and discuss how they ground critical discourse analysis.

Ontology raises questions about the nature of reality, the nature of human beings in the world, and what constitutes truth. To illustrate the ontological foundations grounding CDA, we borrow the words of Susan Strega (2005: 206), ‘reality is about the meaning that people create in the course of their social interactions; the world is not about facts but about the meaning attached to facts, and people negotiate and create meaning.’ In other words, reality is understood as subjective and contextual, changing according to time and place. Social reality, then, exists in a discursive sense: it means something only because we attach meaning to it. As Potts and Brown (2005: 261) say, ‘truth does not exist, it is made. Therefore, we are not looking for a “truth”; we are looking for meaning, for understanding, for the power to change.’

Epistemology is concerned with how we know what we know. Strega (2005: 211) makes the case that, ‘the epistemological foundation of methodology prescribes what good research involves, justifies why research is done, gives a value base to research, and provides ethical principles for conducting research.’ Thus, all vital aspects of a research endeavor are forged from epistemological assumptions and commitments (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The epistemological allegiances of CDA rest in both post-structuralism and critical theories.

Post-structuralism, as an umbrella theoretical perspective, has a variety of conceptualizations and is informed by the work of many scholars. There exist a range of applications for post-structural analyses, from apolitical deconstruction to the examination of the discursive dimensions of power and inequality. A common element of post-structural analysis is language (Meyer and Wodak, 2016). Language, in post-structuralism, is the place where reality is created, and also the place where reality may be deconstructed and challenged. The deconstructive strategies associated with post-structuralism are helpful in naming power relations and debunking the taken-for-granted assumptions of dominant discourses. Foucault (1972), for

instance, explored discourses in order to unsettle disciplines and disciplinary knowledge and practices. In doing so he exposed the historical and discursive processes through which social practices come to be seen as natural. Through such exploration, aspects of social life, which are typically seen as stable and enduring (that which is taken to be ‘truth’), can be disrupted.

Whereas post-structuralism may not necessarily be political, critical theories are explicitly political and have a specific agenda toward social change (Fonow and Cook, 2005; Gringeri, Wahab, and Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Olesen, 2005). Post-structural understandings of power as diffuse and discursive can complement and deepen critical theory’s critiques of structural power and dominance. A critical, post-structural epistemology therefore can be seen as, ‘a mode of knowledge production which uses post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change’ (Weedon, 1997: 40-41). Simply put, critical post-structuralism provides a lens through which to problematize taken-for-granted truths.

Key Concepts: Context, Critique, and Discourse

The ontological and epistemological commitments discussed above ground critical discourse analysis in three primary ways. First, researchers engaged in critical discourse analysis make no claims as to the absolute truth or objectivity of their findings. Critical discourse analysis starts from the assumption that reality is socially constructed; it rejects assumptions of ahistorical “truths” and acknowledges that sociopolitical conditions and contexts shape truths. Critical discourse analysis, therefore, grounds analysis in the wider social, political, and historical contexts in which talk and text occur (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Furthermore, the historical and contextual knowledge the researcher brings to their topic helps shape the lens through which analysis is approached and serves as an important analytic tool.

Second, issues concerning oppression, power, and social inequality are central in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2013). As such, critical discourse analysis is driven by what Wodak and Meyer (2016) refer to as the ‘critical impetus.’ The purpose being to not only understand and explain social phenomena, but to actively critique and challenge it. Critical discourse analysis scrutinizes the force of language for its ability to reinforce or disrupt the status quo. Critical discourse analysis is a methodology in which the researcher takes an explicit political position for the purpose of exposing and, ultimately, resisting dominance and inequality.

Third, the interpretation of texts stems from the theoretical assumption that social practices are discursive. For critical discourse analysis, discourse is viewed not simply as a part of reality, but as actively shaping reality. Critical discourse analysis understands the relationship between discourse and social life to be a dialectical one (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In short, discourses construct, as well as reflect, reality (subjectivities, social practices, and institutions). To claim that discourse constructs reality does not deny the material world, rather it recognizes that the meanings we give to material reality are not innate or natural, but instead arise through discourse (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2011; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). For instance, becoming “the client” in social work means that one becomes an object of interest to social workers and may thus be identified and formed in the process of intervention as part of the practice of social work (van Dijk, 2001).

Critical Discourse Analysis as Method and Methodology

The terms ‘methods’ and ‘methodology’ are too often used interchangeably (Leotti and Muthanna, 2014). The eclectic nature of critical discourse analysis requires a distinct differentiation of the terms. Harding (cited in Jayaratne and Stewart, 2008: 48) provides a helpful

distinction and defines ‘methods’ as, ‘particular procedures used in the course of research.’ In this way, methods refer to tools or techniques used during the course of research such as interviews, archival reviews, participant observation, and focus groups. Methodology, in contrast, refers to the, ‘theory of how research is carried out or the broad principles about how to conduct research and how theory is applied’ (Jayaratne and Stewart, 2008: 48). It is important to stress that CDA is methodologically diverse, and that a variety of methods can be utilized to enact varied methodological goals. For example, while many critical discourse analysts rely solely on existing texts, such as media communication or institutional documents, others incorporate fieldwork, such as interviews or ethnography (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). As such, CDA does not consist of specific formulas or methods that can be applied across the board to research projects (Fairclough, 2009; Jäger and Maier, 2009; Wood and Kroger, 2000).

Though there are a variety of ways to approach CDA, all approaches have goals aimed toward unmasking constructions of power and dominance in texts, uncovering assumptions, and debunking claims to authority (Fairclough, et al., 2013; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Critical discourse analysts engage these goals differently depending on their theoretical entry point, and their specific research interests and questions. For instance, Jäger and Maier’s (2009) approach draws on Foucault’s conceptualizations of power and provides a concrete platform for attending to the linguistic expressions of issues concerning discourse, power, and knowledge. This method of CDA focuses heavily on collective symbolism and helps reveal contradictions between and within discourses, the limits of what can be said and done, and the means by which discourse makes particular statements seem rational and beyond all doubt. Similarly, Fairclough (2009) proposes an analytic framework, which he dubs a “dialectical relational approach,” to examine institutionalized expressions of power and ideology. His approach is organized around four

stages: 1) identification of a social problem and its semiotic¹ aspects; 2) identification of obstacles to addressing the social problem; 3) consideration of whether the social order ‘needs’ the social problem to serve some wider purpose; and 4) identification of possibilities and ways past the obstacles. He views the elements of each stage as being dialectically related (hence dialectical relational) in the sense that they are not discreet but exist together in a mutually informing relationship. Fairclough’s approach seeks to explain how social injustices are (re)produced and legitimized and looks for contradictions that can help disrupt the status quo.

While researchers, like those above, focus on institutional power and politics, others focus on cognition and identity. van Dijk (2016), for example, developed his ‘socio-cognitive approach’ examining how prejudice and inequality are produced and reproduced through ideology. His methodology is characterized by what he calls the ‘discourse-cognition-society triangle’ and assumes that the relationship between discourse and society is mediated by cognition. This approach focuses heavily on theoretical understandings of cognitive structures and processes drawn from social-psychology. Similar to vanDijk, Gee’s (2011; 2014) approach focuses on the use of discourse to actively construct identity and social relationships, actions that he defines as inherently political. Gee (2014) created his “seven building tasks of discourse” and “tools of inquiry” as methods and theoretical devices for guiding discourse analyses. Gee’s devices supply researchers with tools to examine how institutional, social, and political issues are enacted through language and thus serve to shape identity and meaning.

Though not exhaustive, this sampling of approaches paints a picture of the methodological diversity available to researchers within the purview of CDA. Researchers can use critical discourse analysis to examine a wide range of topics including political discourse,

¹ Semiotics is the study of how meaning is constructed and communicated.

media communications, racism, gender, education, institutional policies and practices, and economic discourse, to name a few. In our own scholarship, we have each used a variety of methods and methodologies to address issues of pressing concern to social work, including: the enactment of racism within school settings, the construction of risk as a dominant framework for understanding criminalized women, and the perpetuation of dominant beliefs regarding intellectual disability embedded within person-centered practice frameworks. In the next section, we illustrate more fully how critical discourse analysis has been used in social work research.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Work Inquiry

Though not widely used in social work, CDA has gained traction in recent years and holds innovative potential for social work research, education, and practice. As a research endeavor, it is particularly well-suited to identifying and analyzing how discursive practices establish, maintain, and promote power and oppression (Wodak, 2013), an area of inquiry deeply aligned with concerns of social work (National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Sherraden et al., 2015). In this section, we illustrate how CDA can be useful in three areas of social work research: research on direct social work practice and practice contexts, policy analysis, and research on social work as a discipline and a profession.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Direct Social Work Practice Contexts

Much of direct social work practice takes place among marginalized populations in contexts characterized by altruism and social care -- e.g. hospitals, schools, mental health clinics, child protection systems, homeless shelters, and community centers. However, in addition to social care, these contexts also include practices of surveillance and social control. Applying CDA to these contexts allows for a deeper examination of how hegemonic ideas of power and dominance are produced and reproduced through discursive practices within these contexts. In

the public education context, Sugrue (2019) used Gee's (2014) identity-focused approach to critical discourse analysis to examine a parent-authored petition opposing a new recess program at a predominantly White and upper-middle class suburban school. After multiple close readings of the petition and examination of other related sources (e.g. recordings of school board meetings, articles about the recess program from local news outlets) to provide context, Sugrue (2019) went line-by-line through the recess petition and noted words and phrases that manifested Gee's (2014) 'seven building tasks of discourse' (significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems). She then applied Gee's (2014) 'tools of inquiry and discourse,' including situated meanings, figured worlds, and 'Big C' conversations, to further investigate what the building tasks were enacting through the petition.

The analysis revealed how the parents who authored and signed the petition engaged in a process of political and identity building to make strong claims about who belonged in the community, whose children had the right to have school programming align with their needs, and whose voices should dictate the distribution of social goods within the context of public education (Sugrue, 2019). The use of CDA in this study allowed for an unmasking of what appears on the surface to be a relatively mundane issue (i.e. elementary school recess programming) but is in fact the enactment of race- and class-based power and privilege.

Using a Foucauldian approach (Garrity, 2010), Wings-Yanez (2014) analyzed the discourses at play in a sexuality curriculum for students labeled as having an intellectual/developmental disability. Wings-Yanez examined how the content and language of sexuality education curriculum designated as "special education" compared to the same curriculum for general education populations. Through her analysis, Wings-Yanez found that the emergent discourse of the "special education" curriculum was not about sexual health or

sexuality education, but intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) as understood through limitation. In other words, the curriculum worked to reinforce historically entrenched notions of people labeled with IDD as asexual, victims, and perpetual children with an inability to understand. This analysis found that the discourse of intellectual disability was prioritized over a sexuality discourse throughout the curriculum, reinforcing notions of ‘protectionism and paternalism’ (Winges-Yanez, 2014: 489) and limiting, ‘opportunities for those labeled with intellectual/developmental disabilities to explore, express, and/or participate in their sexuality’ (2014: 497). In this study the use of CDA illuminates a discourse that stands in direct conflict with the NASW Code of Ethics and is therefore useful in highlighting an ethical obligation for social work advocacy.

By attempting to unearth how/if discourses are normalized, reinforced, or disrupted, CDA brings to light an understanding of how power relations play out to shape professional practices. Mancini (2011) used CDA within a participatory action research (PAR) project that examined how a community mental health agency could best serve individuals with severe and persistent mental illnesses and addictive disorders. As one component of the larger PAR, Mancini (2011) formed a committee with agency staff whose goal was to ‘critically examine agency texts and practices from a recovery orientation’ (p. 650). The committee began by examining a treatment planning document and identifying which practices and text they wanted to transform. Then the committee used CDA to transform via Fairclough’s (1995) ‘orders of discourse’ framework. ‘Orders of discourse’ refers to the ways that social actors “develop their social reality” (Mancini, 2011: 649), through ‘ways of interacting’ (genres) ‘ways of being,’ (styles), and ‘ways of representing’ (discourses). Fairclough (1995) asserts that ‘orders of discourse’ represent the often hidden power relations that are reflected and reproduced in social practices. Using this approach,

the committee members discovered how the intake forms were worded to elicit information from those seeking mental health support in a way that highlighted the individual's 'pathology, deficits...and symptoms' (Mancini, 2011: 657) and positioned the practitioner as 'expert, healer, caretaker' (647), erasing the possibility of self-determination. The committee then used this analysis to inform the process of creating new treatment planning documents that focused on strengths and possibility rather than disease and limitations.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Policy Analysis

The development and implementation of social policies are particularly powerful discursive practices, due to the large-scale influence of social policy on the lives of citizens. Critical discourse analysis is a particularly powerful tool for examining the social and political forces that shape public policy development and implementation, as well as understanding the impacts of social policies. Fairclough's (1992;1995; 2009) approach to CDA centers on the reflection, reproduction, and transformation of power relations in discourse, making his work a natural fit for policy analysis. Marston (2000) used Fairclough's (1992) three-level analysis approach (textual, discursive, and sociocultural), to examine public housing policy in Queensland, Australia. Using samples of policy texts and interviews with key policy makers, Marston (2000) applied Fairclough's (1992) concepts of 'metaphor' and 'word meaning' to analyze how social and political struggle was enacted through the policy. The analysis revealed how discourses of 'customers' and 'bad tenants,' were used to support the government's move towards a market-oriented approach. If public housing residents are conceptualized as customers, then the state is seen as being less responsible for providing long-term housing support; if the tenants are conceptualized as 'bad' or 'irresponsible,' then problems with the public housing

system can be attributed to individuals rather than to larger economic and political forces (Marston, 2000).

In the United States, Toft (2010) used CDA to examine the welfare reform debate of the 1990's and exposed the gendered nature in which definitions of citizenship shaped the debate. Primarily informed by Wilson's (2003) and van Dijk's (2003) approaches to the analysis of power in political discourse, Toft employed CDA within the context of traditional qualitative analysis methods, including analytic induction, grounded theory, and content analysis. Her analysis illustrated how paid work was privileged as a marker of responsible citizenship whereas parenting, and other forms of care work (which is often the responsibility of women) was minimized as an important and valuable duty of citizenship. Using CDA, Toft identified how legislators used "potent linguistic devices" (2010: 587) to justify welfare reforms that limited 'citizenship rights that were previously accessible to welfare recipients (financial assistance to children and parents) and justify strict work requirements for poor mothers.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Social Work Profession

In addition to examining direct practice and social policy, CDA is an important framework and tool for critically examining the dominant discourses of the social work profession as a whole. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) asserts that the profession of social work should uphold the values of social justice and work toward dismantling unjust and oppressive social structures. However, despite embracing these values, dominant cultural narratives are likely to seep into the work that social work performs. As Tsang (2001: 229) states, 'the profession is not totally immune to the influences of the dominant discourses of society.' Critical discourse analysis can be productive in exploring the places in which dominant

discourses seep into practice. Unless we acknowledge this seepage, supports, interventions, and services risk being based on a history of accepted - read 'natural' - inequity.

For example, Leotti (2020) used CDA to examine how prominent social work journals discursively construct criminalized women and how those constructions support and shape certain practices with criminalized women. Using Jäger & Maier's (2009) framework, her analysis consisted of two phases: a structural analysis and a detailed analysis. The structural analysis looked at what was represented, what was missing, and helped the author identify overarching discursive themes and patterns. The detailed analysis involved a close in-depth reading of how meaning was constructed in the texts and was organized around five main facets: context; surface; rhetorical means; content; ideological statements; and discourse positions. These two levels of analysis led to an overall synoptic analysis, or final assessment of the discourse. Leotti (2020) found that while claiming social justice values, social work passively accepts the dominant logic of punishment and thus inadvertently upholds the use of carceral institutions as an appropriate response to social exclusion. In conjunction with insights from critical feminist scholarship and the analytic of governmentality, the author highlights the relationship between criminalization, structural inequality, and neoliberal globalization and shows how the role of social work(er) is reconfigured in a neoliberal climate to function as a part of the widening net of carceral control.

A social work scholar who has used CDA extensively to examine the social work profession is Yoosun Park. Most recently, Park, Crath, and Jeffery (2020) examined the use of the concept of 'resilience' in the social work literature using the poststructuralist lenses of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Rather than attempting to better define, measure, or evaluate 'resilience,' the authors used CDA to ask what the concept of resilience *does* in social

work. The authors began their analytic process by reading the text for evidence of binaries, specifically resilience and its ‘functional opposites’ (Park et al., 2020). Second, they searched the texts for ‘contradictions and ambiguities that undermine the intended meanings and arguments’ (Park et al., 2020: 14). Finally, the authors employed Derrida’s approach of ‘reading at the margins’ (Park et al., 2020: 14) to look for ‘literal and figurative margins of the text’ (14). Through their analysis, the authors identified how social work literature constructs resilience as a signifier of individuals’ capacity to accommodate to, rather than change or challenge, oppressive social structures. In this way, the deployment of resilience functions as a neoliberal form of governance reinforcing a dominant ‘pull yourself up’ ideology and thus discourse that celebrates or promotes resilience directly contradicts social work’s stated aim of social justice.

These studies and their findings have profound consequences for how social workers work with people who inhabit liminal spaces. Researchers using CDA are able to expose the taken for granted assumptions driving social work knowledge production and practice and in so doing stretch the discursive limits within which social work functions, creating space for possibility, resistance, and new directions in practice.

Assessing Rigor in Critical Discourse Analysis

Amongst critical discourse analysts, there is a marked lack of conversation around rigor and quality criteria (Breeze, 2011; Verschueren, 2011; Woodowson, 1998). The reasons for this absence are twofold. First, the diversity of methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and methods used within critical discourse analysis creates challenges for assessing the quality and trustworthiness of studies and their results. Second, naming standards for assessment while simultaneously, and explicitly, engaging in work that rejects notions of truth and objectivity creates an epistemological tension for critical discourse analysts that is not easily overcome and

presents a key challenge to those engaged in the work of critical discourse analysis. Despite this challenge, we believe it is possible undertake rigorous and systematic studies in a manner that is consistent with CDA's epistemological assumptions. Further, it is necessary to provide readers with some criteria for evaluating the merits of any given CDA study. Of course, generic markers of evaluative criteria in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000) could be used but, as many qualitative scholars note, researchers should utilize evaluative criteria that are consistent with the epistemological assumptions of their study. Here, without being overly prescriptive, we note some general markers for evaluative criteria that we consider useful and relevant to a broad range of critical discourse analysis projects.

First, the researcher should display evidence of a tight and cohesive methodological and theoretical framework. Like all research, CDA should be undertaken in relation to a declared set of theoretical presuppositions and specific research questions that build on those theoretical orientations. The research should clearly articulate why the analysis is being done, and why it is worth doing. Furthermore, to make the analysis coherent, a critical selection of actual examples from the material being analyzed alongside the theoretical interpretation should be displayed. Most qualitative researchers will be familiar with the use of "thick description" when reporting results. Such a strategy allows readers to assess the researcher's interpretations and follow the analytic process. As such, thick description can certainly be useful in illustrating a critical discourse analysis. However, extensive use of material from the data, in and of itself, is insufficient. Critical discourse analysis looks beyond what is obvious or manifest in a text and involves questioning what is implied, what may be left unsaid, and the subtle forms of persuasion embedded in a text. A close analysis of rhetoric, or how something is said, can signal certain value orientations that serve to shape the ideological implications present in a text. For

example, looking specifically at the use of evidentialities² can help illuminate how a text naturalizes certain statements as common sense. Therefore, to illustrate the reasoning behind a researcher's analytic claims, it is vital that the broad discursive patterns *as well as* the connections between language form, function, and context be thoroughly explained.

Strega (2005) outlines two additional standards for assessing post-structural research that we find compatible with critical discourse analysis: attention to dissemination and reflexivity. She contends that the research should consider dissemination that is rooted in an, 'ethic of caring and personal responsibility' (Strega, 2005: 229). Along these lines, van Dijk (2016) proposes accessibility as a quality criterion for CDA. Gilgun and Abrams (2002) further highlight the ethical nature of dissemination. In their view, attention to audience includes considerations regarding *who needs to hear* the results as well as accessibility. We acknowledge that findings from critical discourse analyses tend to be filled with heady theoretical jargon and are primarily disseminated through academic venues (i.e. journals and conferences). However, these venues have an important pedagogical function and serve the 'broader epistemological task of shaping' disciplines (Luke, 2004: 149). In social work specifically, academic journals serve to shape the professional practice landscape. In this sense, social work researchers, educators, and practitioners would certainly fall into the category of *who needs to hear* the results of studies that seek to disrupt oppressive social processes (Chase, 2005).

Finally, Strega asserts that evaluation can be determined through the extent of critical reflexivity. This is particularly salient for CDA as its most ardent critics proclaim that the process is too subjective, relying almost exclusively on one scholar's interpretation of a text

² Evidentialities are phrases that suggest factuality (e.g. "of course"). Such discursive moves have the effect of naturalizing certain statements as common sense.

(Hammersly, 1997; Widdowson, 1998). However, the ontological and epistemological anchors of CDA, which we have previously outlined, render such criticisms misplaced. Researchers versed in CDA do not claim nor do they seek detached objectivity and they openly acknowledge that interpretation is open to constant negotiation. To this end, CDA requires that researchers make their positions and interests explicit and visible through the process of reflexivity (Wodak and Meyer, 2016).

Here, we will speak to power and reflexivity as it is central to ethical research as well as *quality* research and, we believe, crucial to the political project of CDA. Strega (2005: 231) asserts that, ‘a critical measure by which our work needs to be assessed is the extent to which we are complicit with or challenging of dominant discourses.’ Daley (2010) distinguished reflexivity, as reflecting in action, from reflection, as reflection on action. In Daley’s assessment, the former considers power relations in the research process and the latter considers the effects of structural arrangements on the research. Thus, reflexivity, as we understand it, goes beyond reflection and simply locating oneself in their research. It stretches us to consider seriously the ways in which we are complicit in systems of oppression. As social workers and academics, we are deeply implicated in (re)creating the institutional power dynamics and relations which we seek to unsettle and critique. We do not sit outside of dominant institutions; indeed, we have been intimately shaped by their discourses, perhaps in ways outside of our conscious understanding. Dowling (2012: 748) states that some researchers use reflexivity to not only journal about the process, but also to examine the, ‘...political and social issues that inform the research process.’ Reflexivity, then, is crucial throughout critical discourse analysis in order to recognize our subject positions and how they play out in analysis, to either uphold or challenge dominant structures and power relations.

Discussion

As we have shown, critical discourse analysis can be a powerful tool for social work researchers concerned with questioning social, economic and political power. Critical discourse analysis assumes that knowledge should be produced to provide social critique and to create social change. As such, CDA involves more than simply thematic observation. It includes a critical dimension that focusses on identifying and challenging cultural hegemony. Its epistemological assumptions allow scholars to make links between everyday texts and larger social and institutional power relations. Through revealing taken for granted truths and knowledge, CDA may then challenge the status quo. As researchers move from text analysis to social analysis, the analytic tools of CDA help us think through how changes in discourse could then produce changes in material realities.

While the primary criticisms of critical discourse analysis emerge from a positivist paradigm, and surface around questions of objectivity, validity, and rigor (which we have addressed in the previous section) there are other key challenges CDA faces in its quest to move beyond social critique and toward social change. For instance, we observe that many scholars utilizing CDA, while quite versed in critique and deconstruction, are less skilled in the analytic moves required to envision possibilities for change. In a review of CDA studies in educational research, Rogers et al (2005) found that most studies in their sample tended to ‘use CDA as a tool of critique than as a tool for re-imagining the social world’ (376). Likewise, Luke (2004) notes that much scholarship in CDA ‘struggles to move coherently from linguistic and text description to preferred social scenarios, featuring a “bolt on” social agenda rather than one built into analytic vocabulary and epistemic stance from the onset’ (150). He contends that the complexity of the social world requires a “flexible analytic toolkit” comprising not just critique

and deconstruction but also intentional social reconstruction, or the ability to name and author new discourses. In this way, Luke calls for critical discourse studies to embrace “a reconstructive agenda, one designed towards redress, reconciliation and the rebuilding of social structure, institutional lives and identities” (151). We concur and believe that such a reconstructive agenda is not only possible, but urgently necessary, within social work.

For example, social work organizations in the United States have recently taken up claims for racial justice and purport commitments to dismantling systemic racism. However, if one looks closely at the materials published and sent to constituents, we can see the subtle ways in which these materials disqualify or undermine their commitment to racial justice (ASWB, CSWE, & NASW, 2020; McClain, 2020). The ideology expressed in these documents testifies to an investment in professionalization at the expense of dismantling systemic racism. A critical discourse analyst invested in a reconstructive agenda would call attention to this dynamic, and then propose new possibilities.

Like the “critical impetus” within CDA, social work scholars have an ethical mandate to take seriously the usefulness and political implications of their research. Therefore, CDA researchers must demonstrate the usefulness of their study both theoretically (i.e. producing new insights, adding to existing research, and generating new and unique questions) and in terms of social justice applications. To that end, we must consider engaging in projects that document and explain not just dominant discourses, but also the places of rupture from those dominant discourses - the counter discourses. Turning our attention to ‘affirmative, emancipating and redressive texts and discourse practices’ (Luke, 2004: 151) has much to teach us about how to build and sustain policies and practices built on values of sustainability, solidarity, and equity.

Conclusion

Discourse is a powerful, institutionalized form of meaning making. Discourse enables and constrains what can be known, what can be said and done, and how people move through the world. Multiple dominant discourses of gender, race, and poverty, to name a few, shape the lives of social work clientele. In turn, analyses that seek to expose how these discourses are normalized, reinforced, or disrupted are useful for social workers interested in studying pressing social problems. The political orientation of critical discourse analysis and its theoretical acumen are particularly germane to social work's mission of enhancing human well-being with particular attention to the most vulnerable and oppressed among us (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

We argue that a key component of social work's future research agenda should include the analysis of discourse as it relates to social justice concerns. Critical discourse analysis is a useful way of understanding the underlying assumptions inherent in social worker's communication with and about their clients, the messages about the issues their clients face which get disseminated in social policy, and the unconscious (and dominant) beliefs social workers hold about their clients. Though not widely utilized in social work research, CDA can expand methodological innovation within the discipline and provide new insights into numerous areas of concern to social workers. Further, we hold, that in line with profession's code of ethics, social work research can and should have an explicit agenda toward social justice. Whether openly acknowledged or not, our research is intimately linked to politics. How our work is used matters. It can be used to support or disrupt the status quo. It can be used to bolster the agendas of powerful elites or to stand in solidarity with the most marginalized among us.

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