WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

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Abstract: This article focuses on discourse analysis. It provides background information for those who will encounter this approach in their reading, rather than instructions for conducting such research.

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What is discourse analysis?

Discourse analysis is about studying and analysing the uses of language. Because the term is used in many different ways, we have simplified approaches to discourse analysis into three clusters and illustrated how each of these approaches might be used to study a single domain: doctor-patient communication about diabetes management. Regardless of approach, a vast array of data sources is available to the discourse analyst, including transcripts from interviews, focus groups, samples of conversations, published literature, media, and web based materials.

What is formal linguistic discourse analysis?

The first approach, formal linguistic discourse analysis, involves a structured analysis of text in order to find general underlying rules of linguistic or communicative function behind the text. For example, Lacson and colleagues compared human-human and machine-human dialogues in order to study the possibility of using computers to compress human conversations about patients in a dialysis unit into a form that physicians could use to make clinical decisions. They transcribed phone conversations between nurses and 25 adult dialysis patients over a three month period and coded all 17 385 words by semantic type (categories of meaning) and structure (for example, sentence length, word position). They presented their work as a "first step towards an automatic analysis of spoken medical dialogue" that would allow physicians to "answer questions related to patient care by looking at (computer generated)summaries alone."

What is empirical discourse analysis?

Researchers using empirical discourse analysis do not use highly structured methods to code individual words and utterances in detail. Rather, they look for broad themes and functions of language in action using approaches called conversation analysis (the study of "talk-in-interaction") and genre analysis (the study of recurrent patterns, or genres of language that share similar structure and context—such as the case report, the scientific article).

Conversation analysis and genre analysis give more prominence to sociological uses of language than to grammatical or linguistic structures of words and

sentences and are used to study human conversations or other forms of communication in order to elucidate the ways in which meaning and action are created by individuals producing the language. Lingard and colleagues, for example, studied communication between nurses and surgeons during 128 hours of observing 35 different procedures in the operating room and categorised recurrent patterns of communication. They then used their findings to draw links between interpersonal tensions, the use of language, and the occurrence of errors in the operating room.

What is critical discourse analysis?

Researchers in cultural studies, sociology, and philosophy use the term critical discourse analysis to encompass an even wider sphere that includes all of the social practices, individuals, and institutions that make it possible or legitimate to understand phenomena in a particular way, and to make certain statements about what is "true." Critical discourse analysis is particularly concerned with power and is rooted in "constructivism." Thus the discourse analyses of Michel Foucault, for example, illustrated how particular discourses "systematically construct versions of the social world." Discourse analysis at this level involves not only the examination of text and the social uses of language but also the study of the ways in which the very existence of specific institutions and of roles for individuals to play are made possible by ways of thinking and speaking.

Foucault's study of madness, for example, uncovered three distinct discourses that have constructed what madness is in different historical periods and in different places: madness as spiritual possession, madness as social deviancy, and madness as mental illness. In a similarly oriented study, Speed showed how different discourses about mental health service in use today construct individuals' identities as "patients," "consumers," or "survivors" and are made possible by specific institutional practices and ways for individuals to "be."

In a different context, Stone contrasted the specific discourses used in the education literature for diabetes patients ("patient self care" and "autonomy") with the medical literature's use of doctor centred discourses ("compliance" and "adherence"). Stone related the resulting tension (and the important implications for patients' behaviours) to the ways in which the roles that physicians and patients play are historically determined by different and conflicting models of what disease and healing are.

Finally, Shaw and colleagues used a discourse analysis to illustrate the many ways in which research itself can be defined (for example, by a lay person, a medical editor, the World Medical Association, a hospital, the taxman) and how these various definitions are linked to the power and objectives of particular institutions.

In these examples of critical discourse analysis, the language and practices of healthcare professionals and institutions are examined with the aim of understanding how these practices shape and limit the ways that individuals and institutions can think, speak, and conduct themselves illustrates how a critical discourse approach to diabetes education would compare with discourse analyses using other linguistic and empirical approaches to research.

Although our categorisation emphasises the distinctions between these approaches to discourse analysis, in practice researchers often use more than one of the approaches together in a study. For example, genre analysis may invoke critical theorists in order to study the origins of the sanctioned methods of communication, asking, for example, "What historical and contextual factors led to the adoption of the scientific journal article as a legitimate form of expression of medical 'truth' rather than the adoption of another format?"

What should we be looking for in a discourse analysis?

Given the wide variety of approaches to discourse analysis, the elements that constitute a high quality study vary. Rogers has argued that some discourse analysis research suffers from scanty explanation of the analytical method used. Thus one should expect clear documentation of the sources of information used and delimitation of data sources (including a description of decisions made with regard to selection of groups or individuals for interviews, focus groups, or observation) and, importantly, a description of the context of the study. The method of analysis should be clearly explained, including assumptions made and methods used to code and synthesise data. Finally, given that the goal of critical discourse analysis is to illuminate and critical structures of power, it is especially important that researchers describe the ways in which their own individual sociocultural roles may influence their perspectives.

Conclusion

Discourse analysis is an effective method to approach a wide range of research questions in health care and the health professions. What underpins all variants of discourse analysis is the idea of examining segments, or frames of communication, and using this to understand meaning at a "meta" level, rather than simply at the level of actual semantic meaning. In this way, all of the various methods of discourse analysis provide rigorous and powerful approaches to understanding complex phenomena, ranging from the nature of on-the-ground human communication to the inner workings of systems of power that construct what is "true" about health and health care. While these methods are gaining popularity, much remains to be done to develop a widespread appreciation for the use, funding, and publication of discourse analyses. As a start, we hope this article will help readers who encounter these approaches to understand the basic premises of discourse analysis. Box 2 offers further reading for those interested in learning more or undertaking discourse analytical research.

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