Critical discourse analysis: A primer

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This issue of Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM is about using the critical science approach and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as tools to help members of the profession understand the messages they are sending to themselves and others and to understand the meanings of the words spoken and written by others. I ask that you not be "put off" by the theoretical jargon of critical science and critical discourse; instead, ask yourself if you ever read something or listened to someone’s words and asked yourself, "How can they even think that way? What are they really saying? Do all people believe this? What else could have been said?"

This paper was written in an attempt to help you figure out the real meaning behind the spoken and written word in hopes that the insight gained can be used to bring about more equity, justice, freedom, peace, and hope—the betterment of the human family.

Before getting into the deeper theory of CDA and its methodology, I need to convince you that this is a legitimate aspect of your practice. To do that, I will share an example of a discourse (written words with overt and hidden meaning) to illustrate how unmasking the written word can bring about a different perspective and deeper understanding of whose interest is being served. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) (February, 2003) reported a study on student violence in Nova Scotia schools—"teachers facing fists, threats." To report the findings, the author cited the numbers, not the statistics (see Figure 1). At first glance, these numbers paint the exact picture the author wanted them to paint—that "student" violence in school is a workplace issue and that teachers need support to work in a difficult and dangerous environment. Converting the numbers into statistics paints a less compelling picture, and revealing the statistics paints a totally different scenario, much less likely to incite people to see this as a workplace issue instead of perceiving it as a response from lonely, frustrated, bored, neglected, isolated children seeking any kind of love and attention (my words). From a percentage perspective, 15% said a student had hit them, 9.8% had been kicked, 19% had been shoved, and 4% had been threatened or assaulted with a weapon.

Better yet, a simple twist of the statistics paints a totally different picture sending a very different message: 85% of...
Discourse analysis challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition. Even more significant, our words (written or oral) are used to convey a broad sense of meanings and the meaning we convey with those words is identified by our immediate social, political, and historical conditions. Our words are never neutral (Fiske, 1994)! This is a powerful insight for home economists and family and consumer scientists (We could have a whole discussion about the meaning that these two labels convey!). We should never again speak, or read/hear others’ words, without being conscious of the underlying meaning of the words. Our words are politicized, even if we are not aware of it, because they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak. Opinion leaders, courts, government, editors, even family and consumer scientists, play a crucial role in shaping issues and in setting the boundaries of legitimate discourse (what is talked about and how) (Henry & Tator, 2002). The words of those in power are taken as “self-evident truths” and the words of those not in power are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate, or without substance (van Dijk, 2000).

One of the central attributes of dominant discourse is its power to interpret conditions, issues, and events in favor of the elite. The discourse of the marginalized is seen as a threat to the propaganda efforts of the elite. It is for this reason that home economists must engage in critical discourse analysis—to make the voice of the marginalized legitimate and heard and to take the voice of those in power into question to reveal hidden agendas and motives that serve self-interests, maintain superiority, and ensure others’ subjugation (Henry & Tator, 2002). CDA helps make clear the connections between the use of language and the exercise of power (Thompson, 2002).

Understanding the Theory of Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse refers to expressing oneself using words. Discourses are ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing, and experiencing the world. Discourses can be used for an assertion of power and knowledge, and they can be used for resistance and critique. Discourses are used in everyday contexts for building power and knowledge, for regulation and normalization, for the development of new knowledge and power relations, and for hegemony (excess influence or authority of one nation over another). Given the power of the written and spoken word, CDA is necessary for describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life reflected in text (Luke, 1997). CDA is concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1988). It tries to illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favor their interests. By unmasking such practices, CDA scholars aim to support the victims of such oppression and encourage them to resist and transform their lives (Foucault, 2000), the central tenet of critical theory and the critical science approach (McGregor, 2003).

Stemming from Habermas’s (1973) critical theory, CDA aims to help the analyst understand social problems that are mediated by mainstream ideology and power relationships, all perpetuated by the use of written texts in our daily and
professional lives. The objective of CDA is to uncover the ideological assumptions that are hidden in the words of our written text or oral speech in order to resist and overcome various forms of power over or to gain an appreciation that we are exercising "power over," unbeknownst to us (Fairclough, 1989). CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. It strives to explore how these non-transparent relationships are a factor in securing power and hegemony, and it draws attention to power imbalances, social inequities, non-democratic practices, and other injustices in hopes of spurring people to corrective actions (Fairclough, 1993).

There are three central tenets of CDA (Fairclough, 2000). Discourse is shaped and constrained by (a) social structure (class, status, age, ethnic identity, and gender) and by (b) culture. Home economics, comprising members from across the social structure (but mainly white, middle class, women), has a professional culture, which shapes and constrains its discourse. What we say as home economists, is shaped by our professional culture, socialization, and member profile (social structure). (c) Discourse (the words and language we use) helps shape and constrain our identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge and beliefs. As home economists, our identities, the nature of our social relationships, and our knowledge and belief systems are shaped and constrained by the language and words espoused by us and by others.

Furthermore, CDA tries to unite, and determine the relationship between, three levels of analysis: (a) the actual text; (b) the discursive practices (that is the process involved in creating, writing, speaking, reading, and hearing); and (c) the larger social context that bears upon the text and the discursive practices (Fairclough, 2000). In more detail, the text is a record of an event where something was communicated and involves the presentation of facts and beliefs (often ideological), the construction of identities of participants discussed in the communication, and strategies to frame the content of the message (to be discussed later). Discursive practice refers to rules, norms, and mental models of socially acceptable behavior in specific roles or relationships used to produce, receive, and interpret the message. They are the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals learn to think, act, and speak in all the social positions they occupy in life (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1977). Gee (1990) clarifies that discursive practices involve ways of being in the world that signify specific and recognizable social identities. We have learned to "be" home economists, students, daughters, mothers, members of an ethnic group or gender, entrepreneurs, and volunteers. Finally, the social context comprises distinct settings where discourse occurs (marketplace, classroom, playground, church, conferences), each with a set of conventions that determine rights and obligations—what each is allowed and expected to do. Simply put, the text becomes more than just words on a page—it discloses how those words are used in a particular social context (Huckin, 1997).

As might be expected, a critical approach to discourse seeks to link the text (micro level) with the underlying power structures in society (macro sociocultural practice level) through discursive practices upon which the text was drawn (meso level) (Thompson, 2002). Said another way, a text, a description of something that is happening in a larger social context replete with a complex set of power relations, is interpreted and acted upon by readers or listeners depending on their rules, norms, and mental models of socially acceptable behavior. Oppression, repression, and
marginalization go unchallenged if the text is not critically analyzed to reveal power relations and dominance. CDA focuses on how social relations, identity, knowledge, and power are constructed through written and spoken texts in communities, schools, the media, and the political arena (Luke, 1997). Discourse always involves power and ideologies, is connected to the past and the current context (is historical), and can be interpreted differently by people because they have different backgrounds, knowledge, and power positions—therefore, the “right” interpretation does not exist whereas a more or less plausible or adequate interpretation is likely (Fairclough, 2002; Wodak & Ludwig, 1999).

Discourse and language can be used to make unbalanced power relations and portrayals of social groups appear to be commonsense, normal, and natural when in fact the reality is prejudice, injustice, and inequities. Using just words, those in power, or wishing to be so, can misdirect our concerns for persistent, larger systemic issues of class, gender, age, religion, and culture seem petty or nonexistent. Unless we begin to debunk their words, we can be misled and duped into embracing the dominant worldview (ideology) at our expense and their gain. Although the term discourse is slippery, elusive, and difficult to define (Henry & Tator, 2002), we must try. When discourse is effective in practice, evidenced by its ability to organize and regulate relations of power, it is called a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1980). It is this regime, a system by which a political system is controlled, that is revealed when we engage in critical discourse analysis. How can we say we “empower individuals and families” if we do not teach ourselves, and them, how to debunk and unveil the truth behind the regime?

How to Conduct Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to do this, we need some skills to conduct a critical analysis of our own and other’s discourse. van Dijk (2000) acknowledges that CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework or methodology because it is best viewed as a shared perspective encompassing a range of approaches instead of one school. The remainder of this primer will draw from these many approaches as it focuses on setting out some useful skills in critically analyzing written text. One key principle of CDA is that the way we write, and what we say, is not arbitrary—it is purposeful whether or not the choices are conscious or unconscious (Sheyholislami, 2001). Also, while CDA can also focus on body language, utterances, symbols, visual images, and other forms of semiosis (signs and symbols) as means of discourse (Fairclough, 2002), this paper will be limited to analyzing written language.

Huckin (1997) recommends that one first approach a text in an uncritical manner, like an ordinary, undiscerning reader, and then come at it again in a critical manner. Price (2002) said it well when she noted that engagement without estrangement is to submit to the power of the text, regardless on one’s own position, thereby accepting the reading and offering unquestioning support of the status quo. To offset this “take,” coming at it a second time with a critical eye involves revisiting the text at different levels, raising questions about it, imagining how it could have been constructed differently, mentally comparing it to related texts. Also, it is important that one does not start to decipher the text word by word; rather, one should place the text in its genre (type of text including a journal article, media piece, government position paper, public speech, manual, textbooks, conference paper). Each genre-orientation has a style of its own set of characteristics that identify it—a
template of sorts. We can all recognize an advertisement (well—it used to be easy until infomercials were invented), a journal article, a technical manual, a curriculum document, a government position paper—they all have different building blocks that make them unique from other types of documents. One simple example is a scientific journal article that typically includes a problem statement, hypotheses, literature review, theoretical underpinnings, sampling and method, results, analysis and discussion, and conclusions plus recommendations. Because these rules, for how to structure the genre, belong to the institution that owns the genre, the genre becomes a means through which the institution extends power.

Still looking at the text as a whole, Huckin (1997) recommends, next, checking out what sort of perspective is being presented—what angle, slant, or point of view. This is called framing the details into a coherent whole and can be accomplished by several techniques, which, if understood, are incredibly revealing:

1) choosing and placing specific photographs, diagrams, sketches, and other embellishments to get the reader’s attention;

2) using headings and keywords to emphasize certain concepts by giving them textual prominence (called foregrounding if the text is emphasized and backgrounding if text is there but de-emphasized or minimized);

3) leaving certain things out completely, counting on if it is not mentioned, the average reader will not notice its absence, and thereby not scrutinize it;

4) using certain words that take certain ideas for granted, as if there is no alternative (presupposition), begging the question, “What could have been said that wasn’t, and why not”; and,

5) manipulating the reader by using selective voices to convey the message that certain points of view are more correct, legitimate, reliable, and significant while leaving out other voices (referred to as register and relates to who the voice belongs to, such as elected politicians, corporation presidents, union leaders, bureaucrats, laborers, criminals).

Having noticed the genre of text and how the message is framed, the analyst is ready to move onto the more minute levels of analysis: sentence, phrases, and words. Several CDA techniques have been developed to facilitate this level of analysis. Examples are drawn from Huckin (1997):

1) Just as text can be framed, so can a sentence, called topicalization. In choosing what to put in the topic position, the writer creates a perspective or slant that influences the reader’s perception. For example, in a media piece about peace protestors, if 11 sentences refer to protestors and three refer to the officials, the text is clearly about the protestors’ actions but not about the issue that prompted the rally.

2) Sentences can also convey information about power relations! Who is depicted as in power and over whom? Who is depicted as powerless and passive? Who is exerting power and why? This property of the text is referred to as agency and can remain at the subconscious level unless made visible by the analyst or critical reader.

3) Again, as with the text in general, omission of
information about agents of power can occur at the sentence level and is most often achieved by nominalization (converting a verb into a noun) and the use of passive verbs. A headline like “Massacre of 25 villagers reported” does not say who did the killing, thanks to the nominalization of massacre. A headline like “25 villagers massacred” is an example of a passive verb conveying agentlessness. Both headlines are about the victims and not about who did the killing—a major omission of fact, done on purpose.

4) Many readers are reluctant to question statements that the author appears to be taking for granted; presupposition can also occur at the sentence level in the form of persuasive rhetoric that can be used to convey the impression that what an agent of power says carries more weight. Still with the peace/conflict example, a demonstrator sign that reads “give peace a chance” presupposes that the government is presently not doing so. A government spokesperson who says, “some of the demonstrators were a bit more aggressive” conveys the impression that all demonstrators are aggressive to some degree.

5) Insinuations, another tool, are slyly suggestive, carrying double meanings. When the facts, or the way the facts are presented, are challenged, the originator of the discourse can readily deny any culpability. This ability to deny any intention to mislead gives the originator of the discourse a lot of power. For example, imagine that a reporter writes that the turnout for the rally (2000 people) failed to match a former, larger turnout a few years earlier (5000). This wording conveys the message that the current rally failed somehow because the numbers are lower. This insinuation, suspicion, and unsuccessful undertone takes power away from those at the rally, when in fact the rally met all expectations of those who organized it, a success that could undermine the position of those they are demonstrating against.

6) Even one word can convey strong meaning—connotations! These connotations are not always, or seldom, in the dictionary, but often assigned on the basis of the cultural knowledge of the participants. Connotations associated with one word, or through metaphors and figures of speech, can turn the uncritical viewer’s mind. As an example, the use of the word protestor instead of a demonstrator conveys a message. A protestor is against something while a demonstrator is trying to make something evident. The media conveys a negative image of those advocating for peace when it paints them as protesting against the government and corporate establishment.

7) The tone of the text is set with the use of specific words to convey the degree of certainty and authority (called modality). The tone of doubt or surety is introduced by using words such as may, might, could, will, can, must, it seems to me, without a doubt, it’s possible that, maybe, or probably. Moods of heavy-handed authority (don’t challenge me) or deference can be created simply by choice of verb or modal phrases, which assert or deny the possibility, impossibility, contingency, or necessity of something.

8) Finally, as with the full body of the text, single words can convey register—do the words spoken ring true? Writers can deceive readers by affecting a phony register, one that induces mistrust and skepticism. Register can be affected by choice of person—first person (I, me, my, we,
our), second (you and your), and third (he, she, they, their, his, hers, him, her). For example, quoting directly from university spokesperson using first person, while using third person to refer to a student challenging university policy, can convey the message that the university is more objective than the student, hence more legitimate.

The critical science approach holds that people need to think about improving their living conditions rather than accepting and coping with their present conditions. That improvement is contingent upon people being conscious of social realities that exploit or dominate them and then demanding liberation from these forces. A critical science perspective helps us gain: (a) personal freedom from internal constraints such as biases or lack of a skill or point of view and (b) social freedom from external constraints such as oppression, exclusion, and abuse of power relations (Gentzler, 1999; McGregor, 2003). This paper has illustrated that there is a method that can be applied to debunk the hidden ideological meanings behind the written and oral word—it is critical discourse analysis. CDA does not provide answers to the problems but does enable one to understand the conditions behind the specific problem—the deep, ideological roots of the issue (Palmquist, 1999). It can be carried out in various institutional settings or on various social, political, and critical issues by paying attention to the details of what social members actually say and do (van Dijk, 1999). Starting with the full text, working down to the individual word level, one can peel back the layers to reveal the “truth behind the regime”—the profoundly insidious, invisible power of the written and spoken word.

My Challenge To You

In plain language, CDA makes visible the way in which institutions and their discourse shape us! FSC professionals work in, and for, institutions including business, government, the media, education, health, and social welfare institutions. Most especially, we work with and for the family as a social institution. All of this discourse shapes us, and we shape it. CD analysts ask the question, “How are we made in our culture?” (Foucault, 2000). As family and consumer scientists, we can approach this two ways: (a) how are we made family and consumer scientists/home economists and (b) how do FCS/home economists affect the way others are made in the culture? CD analysts assume that discourses articulate ideological interests, social formations, and movements within a field (Luke, 1997). It stands to reason, then, that discourse within the field of family and consumer sciences is indicative of prevailing ideologies in the profession. As we examine what our language reflects about our community’s practice and beliefs, we inevitably discover how and why these practices and beliefs are (re)produced, resisted, changed, and transformed (Remlinger, 2002). Brown (1995, 1993) discussed the notion of whether home economics is a community of practice, raised some doubts about this, and then challenged us to critically examine the concepts, beliefs, and values that guide our action (1993, p.193).

Indeed, our journals, newsletters, e-lists, online material, editorials, conference proceedings, textbooks, book reviews, and lecture material constitute an order of discourse, a network of diverse genres and discourse styles (Fairclough, 2002) that make up the FCS social practice. What would we find if we examined the words flowing from this home economics professional order of discourse? What would we find about our professional mission, values, beliefs, and
philosophy relative to power relations, social conditions, equity, and justice as these impact family well-being? Are we really part of the solution, or as Brown (1993) so uncomfortably alleged, part of the problem? The power of the meanings attached to our, and others’, words merits our analysis of our genre. Fairclough (1995) and Wadok and Ludwig (1999) caution that different readers may interpret text differently. At this stage of the game, this difference can be our strength to help us expose the deep meanings behind our words, codified practices, and habits of language. Remember—our words are never neutral. Our words convey how we see ourselves as a profession, our identity, knowledge, values, beliefs, and our truths—our discourse permeates everything we do. We know ourselves (and others know us) by the positions we construe through our particular discourses and the kinds of practices they support (Rupert, 1997).

The question arises, what sort of reality and identity does FCS practice seek to construct and maintain? We have an ethical obligation for our practice to be honest and mature—something that is possible through transparency and integrity via critical analysis of our, and others’, language. Discourses include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries—representations of how things might or should or could be. Most significantly, discourse can come to inculcate a new way of being, a new identity through ownership of the discourse (Fairclough, 2002). Language is central to creating our reality as opposed to merely reflecting reality in a certain way (Bergquist & Szepanska, 2002; Borch, 2000; Peskett, 2001).

It is amazing that something as simple as looking closely at our language can be so liberating!

References


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Endnotes

1 I was prompted to examine this aspect of our practice by a challenge put to us by Marjorie Brown (1993). She berated us for not challenging capitalism and the free market ideology and chastised us for becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution to what it means to live in a consumer society. She literally says, “home economists”
intentions and hopes to promote the economic...well-being of families are commendable. But by interpreting this goal as achievable by individual persons or families independent of the structure and conditions of the larger society reflects a naivety that makes our efforts ineffectual” (p. 57). Let me tell you, as a consumer studies major for 25 years, this statement hit me like a ton of bricks! Never once had I considered what I did as ineffectual. Never once had I given any consideration to the reality that I was perpetuating social, economic, and political conditions that keep consumers oppressed all over the world, even here at home. If I had taken the time to question the assumptions, values, and principles behind the market ideology, economic theory, and capitalistic economic systems—to critically analyze the mainstream discourse—I would have seen the error of my ways. If I had stopped for a moment to examine the rhetoric flowing from home economics professional journals, conference proceedings, textbooks, and lecture material, I would have seen that I was complicit in marginalizing consumers and preventing them from being responsible global citizens mostly because of the way I was socialized to be a home economist—to be non-critical.

An incredibly detailed account of this process is provided in a 55-page document by van Dijk (2000), notably the section, “categories of ideological analysis—alphabetical” wherein he outlines 40 different discourse practices that can be used in written text. As well, Lemke (1988) shares a good discussion of the principles, methods, and problems inherent in conducting CDA.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis Critical discourse is concerned with the ways in which language influences political speeches, reinforces ideologies, and continues or defies the tradition of inequality in societies throughout the world. Fairclough (1993) states that the “critical” element of discourse analysis can reveal hidden connections and causes within texts and can provide opportunities and resources to those who may be disadvantaged. He goes so far as to say McGregor, S. (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis: A Primer; Kappa Omicron Honor Society; Accessed July 10, 2010; http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/151/mcgregorcda.html. Murdoch, Y. November, (2000) Centre for English Language Studies; Unpublished Paper. Understanding the Theory of Critical Discourse Analysis. Discourse refers to expressing oneself using words. Discourses are ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing, and experiencing the world. The remainder of this primer will draw from these many approaches as it focuses on setting out some useful skills in critically analyzing written text. One key principle of CDA is that the way we write, and what we say, is not arbitrary—”it is purposeful whether or not the choices are conscious or unconscious (Sheyholislami, 2001).