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Discovering Discourse Analysis: Uncovering the 'Hidden' in youth work research

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Abstract

Purpose: Discourse can be regarded as established ways of talking that people adopt at certain points of time that help to inform their understanding of the world and how they should behave in it. Foucault (1998) explains discourse as both an instrument and an effect of power, transmitting and producing power, but also undermining and exposing it. Tilsen (2018) argues that prevailing discourses can marginalise young people through imposing specifications on what constitutes normal behaviour, as well as framing problems within totalising accounts. Often these are hidden and unacknowledged discourses that young people and youth work practitioners are not aware of; especially in terms of their role in contributing to their creation and maintenance. This paper explores the concept of discourse and subsequently discourse analysis as a methodology.

Approach: The paper examines how discourse analysis fits with youth work values and principles; providing a unique perspective to research with young people. There is also critical discussion on ethical concerns in discourse analysis; especially around ensuring young people's authentic voice is heard above the researcher's own analysis.

Practical Implications: The paper presents examples of how discourse analysis has been, and could be used in research with young people.

Originality: There is limited research that currently explores discourse analysis methodology in youth work research. The article concludes that discourse analysis is not an easy approach to research, but one that can give voice to young people to create counter discourse.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Youth Work, Youth Voice, Methodology, Covid-19

What is Discourse?

According to Mills (1997, p.1) the term discourse 'has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literacy and cultural theory, and yet is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined'. It is therefore pertinent to develop an understanding of what is meant by discourse, as for Howarth (2000) the scope, meaning and application of discourse are relative to the theoretical system within which its use is embedded. Fairclough et al. (2011) for example, argue that discourse can be explained as both an analytical category describing a vast array of meaning making resources, or as a category for identifying particular ways of representing some sort of social life.

For this paper, the notion of discourse derives from the work of Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault (1972) argued that discourses are the rules, systems and procedures in which knowledge is formed and produced, and that language or discursive practices, form the means by which discourse is created, reinforced and challenged. Foucault (1972, pg.49) explains discourses as "bodies of knowledge that systematically form the objects of which they speak". Language is important here, as discourse can be regarded as established ways of talking that people adopt at certain points of time that help to inform their understanding of the world and how they should behave in it. Hardy & Phillips (2004) explain Foucault's concept asserting that:

discourses do not simply describe the social world; they constitute it by bringing certain phenomena into being through the way in which they categorize and make sense of an otherwise meaningless reality (Hardy & Philips, 2004, pg.31)

Armstrong (2015) explains Foucault's (2002) theory of how discourse comes into being; outlining a self-referential system of the discursive formation of constitutive statements. These statements and the language within them create reality; outlining what counts as reality within a particular discursive formation. The statements of a discourse connect together through their inter-relationships to form a historical *priori*, which in turn establishes the conditions of the reality of the constitutive statements (Foucault, 2002). Hence, the cyclical nature of discourse is established. Through Foucault's (ibid.) theory, language and specifically discourse, blurs the lines between the philosophical concepts of ontology and epistemology.

In discussion about ontology Foucault (1989) outlines how discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of 'truth' within the social world, whilst other alternative discourses are marginalised and subjugated (Foucault, 1989). According to Hekman (2013) 'truth' therefore also becomes a metaphor that changes with the prevailing discourse. Epistemologically, Foucault (1970) challenges the implicit rules of formation that determine what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge from a particular cultural period. Woermann (2012) points out that Foucault changes the discussion on epistemology from questioning *what* the foundations of our knowledge are, to '*how* have we come to accept the types of knowledge that we presume to be legitimate, valid and true?' (Woermann, 2012, pg. 112). Therefore what can be known is inextricably linked to particular individuals, objects or groups and created into being through interaction and discussion.

Discourses however, are often hidden as things that are just assumed to be known. Weedon (1987) for example highlights that discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning, 'they constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern' (Weedon, 1987, pg. 108). It can often be that discourses remain hidden until they are specifically analysed, and conscious thought directed at them. Finding out the ways that people talk about their world can reveal the hidden discourse.

The word 'govern' is important in Weedon's (1987) quotation, as Foucault (1998) explains discourse as both an instrument and an effect of power; transmitting and producing power, but also undermining and exposing it. Thus, for Foucault, language can be both productive and inhibitive (Hook, 2001). Thompson (2017, pg. 202) describes discourse as 'the way forms of language come to be associated with patterns of behaviour, that in turn, construct and maintain acts of power relations'. Tilsen (2018) supports this view stating that discourse plays a defining role in how power flows through society and, like power, language is productive constructing the worlds in which individuals live as well as their own identity (Armstrong, 2015). Van Dijk (2011) argues that whilst discourse can be regarded as a social interaction (the sharing of language that defines social order), discourse should also be regarded as a means of installing power and domination in society; where language is used to construct and reproduce power that leads to preferential access to, and control over, public discourse for example.

Foucault (1979) has argued that power circulates in all human beings as a feature of social relations, and has the potential to be both destructive and productive as a point of resistance. Discourse and language have a role in reinforcing and reconstructing both dominant and marginalised versions of reality. Some critics of Foucault's account of discourse argue that this interpretation can lead to the pessimistic conclusion that people are often rendered powerless in the face of discourse, and any individual agency is denied through their subjectification (Caldwell, 2007). The role of research needs to be further reflected upon here in terms of the extent to which its findings and conclusions are used to reinforce the dominant discourse, especially from an epistemological perspective, rather than exposing the hidden discourse that may be reinforcing inequality and oppression. Discourse therefore, remains a useful concept for analysing aspects of professional practice, such as youth work and other forms of work with young people, provided these dangers are kept in mind (Thompson, 2017); especially as there is scope through practice and research to create alternative narratives and counter discourse. Within research, discourse therefore can become the primary site for analysis (Gannon & Davies, 2012). After all as Foucault (1998), states

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (pg. 100-1)

Discourse and Youth Work

Wood et al, (2015) argue that youth work in the United Kingdom is a people-centred profession, focussed on young people aged 11-25 and which espouses a commitment to diversity, anti-oppressive practice and the provision of relational spaces in which individuals and groups can think critically about their lives and worlds. The definition is founded on a particular view of society and the assumption that young people, by dint of their age, but also factors such as class, religion, sexuality, gender, disability face oppression in their everyday lives. From this perspective youth work would be described as practice that gives young people a voice and the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Moreover,

it can be regarded as practice that seeks to address the social, political and economic factors that oppress young people (Sapin, 2013). Other forms of youth work, social pedagogy and work with young people exist throughout the world, and there are similarities with other disciplines within the helping professions; especially those that are underpinned by the principle of anti-oppressive practice.

Nicholls (2012, pg.11) adds a further element to youth work that involves 'speaking truth to power'; where the purpose of youth work is to move from the individual, to group transformation, to social change. This focus on social change is also inherent in how youth work is understood by Bright (2015 pg. xvii), for whom youth work is an educational and emancipatory praxis 'which embodies social, ethical and professional commitment to young people'. An analysis of discourse therefore may help to reveal previously unacknowledged oppression operating at the personal, cultural and structural levels of power (Thompson, 2006) that maintains the status quo. More optimistically, Tilsen (2018) focuses on the relationship between discourse, power and identity; arguing that this provides the conceptual groundwork for encouraging 'generative, honouring, and hope-filled engagements with young people' (pg.20). To this end, an analysis of discourse can be a useful and revealing starting point, that can give voice to marginalised groups and alternative discourses.

With power located in discourse and inherent in social relations, social practices can either lead to discursive production or resistance. Burr (2003) supports this view by arguing that 'language is the crucible of change, both personal and social' (pg. 56). The challenge in terms of creating more positive identities for young people, as outlined by Fontana (2003), is that socially constructed truths or discourses become deeply embedded hegemonic behaviour. Youth work itself is shaped in line with dominant discourses, hence critical reflection is needed on part of the practitioner and the profession, to ensure that the focus of youth work remains the social contexts and structures that impact on young people (Sercombe, 2018). Stuart et al. (2015) assert that youth workers should question assumptions or taken for granted notions of truth, and this includes the discourse of youth and youth work that influence practice. For Buchroth (2010, p.82) 'questioning the 'taken for granted' is an essential starting point for those who want to develop youth work initiatives with a social justice agenda at its core'. A research methodology that focuses on the analysis of discourse and ways of talking about the world experienced by, or affecting young people, can highlight

how current discourses impact on young people in society and how they, or others, construct their collective and individual identity. Discourse analysis can subject the profession and practice of youth work to critical scrutiny and debate (Ballinger & Payne, 2000).

Locating Discourse Analysis within Research Paradigms

Stuart et al. (2015) assert that the approach adopted towards research will reflect certain beliefs and assumptions about the world, and about the nature and acquisition of knowledge. Birks (2014) emphasises the need to be philosophically conscious so that research is methodologically congruent. For those adopting discourse analysis as a research methodology, an essential starting point is to locate it within an appropriate research paradigm. Discussion above in relation to ontology, epistemology and discourse, as well as the axiology of youth work practice, assist with this process. Whilst there are many different paradigmatic classifications, the work of Guba & Lincoln (1994) will be used here. That said, discourse analysis does not sit easily within one paradigm, and can draw on sympathies from both constructivism and critical theory.

Guba & Lincoln's (1994) paradigm of constructivism focuses on the importance of language from both an ontological and epistemological perspective. Constructivism is informed by a relativist ontology where realities are regarded as multiple, social and experientially based on an individual's (constructivist) or groups' (constructivism) active and instantaneous construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Relativism asserts that reality is socially constructed, created, and talked into being and therefore does not exist prior to conversation. Gergen (2015) argues that what is taken to be 'truth' about the world depends on the social relationships of which human beings are a part, and which are shaped by language, and as people communicate with each other they construct the world in which they live. These constructions are multiple and alterable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and because the groups and individuals that construct them are interchangeable the realities become relative to each other (Howell, 2013).

Youth work as a practice draws on the use of conversation and dialogue as a method of building relationships to foster experiential and associative learning (Jefferies & Smith, 2005). Considering issues of epistemology therefore, Tilsen (2018) asserts that as a social and relational activity or practice, youth work knowledge is created through social interaction,

and that people act together to create social reality, and individuals seek to make sense of the world through social interaction. Stuart et al. (2015) state that as knowledge is constructed with and by all social actors, young people and youth workers have constructed their own views of the world, and these therefore need to be recognised, described and understood. The methodology of discourse analysis can be one way in which this is achieved; offering the researcher the opportunity to ask not what is the 'truth', but how 'truth' is constructed, what is achieved by constructing the world in a certain way, and what implicit values that are being silenced in the construction (Gegen, 2015)?

Albeit sympathies with constructivism are declared, discourse analysis methodology also draws on Guba & Lincoln's (1994) critical theory paradigm. Critical theory adopts a philosophy based on linguistic structuralism. Smith (2020) explains structuralism as a philosophy developed from the insights of linguistics into the study of underlying patterns of social life. Structuralism moves beyond simply identifying visible structures or relationships, to explore underlying causes and hidden mechanisms that are universal and impact on the beliefs, ideas and behaviours of human subjects (ibid.). For Sturrock (2008, pg.31) 'language is one such structure which is realised only partially and imperfectly in those who use it'. Critical theory adopts an epistemology that is transactional and subjectivist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Here, 'truth' and knowledge arises when people come together to 'uncover' relations of domination and oppression, however knowledge is value mediated and value dependent (ibid.) Cohen et al. (2009, pg.27) further add that for critical theory 'what counts as knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge'. Dialectical interactions help to inform transformations and new knowledge through challenging 'ignorance or misapprehensions' about the topic of study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) .

The critical theory paradigm and discourse analysis methodology is cognisant of Gormally & Coburn's (2014) argument that four key characteristics ought to inform research and youth work. These are: that research places central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups; that research analyses how and why inequality exists and is reflected in power relationships; that research examines the results of social enquiry on equality and are linked to social and political action; and lastly that research uses transformative theories to develop a research approach and a theoretical framework for analysis (Mertens, 2005). From a youth work perspective the notion of transformation is paramount. Young (2006) for

example reasons that youth work is transformative in its practice through the shaping of young people and their identities. Freire's (1972) argument for a critical pedagogy that leads to critical consciousness, also applies to research. Through engaging in the research process, research participants (e.g. young people) may start to question their everyday reality and make connections between their personal lives and the political structures of society that influence their reality (Ledwith, 2015).

Discovering discourse analysis as a research methodology can be an approach to research that combines a focus on the immediate conversation as per constructivism, with the critical social stance of critical theory without moving the focus away from the data itself. Andersen (2003) synthesises discourse analysis as a practical means to deconstruct the normative understandings of any subject under scrutiny; where possibilities emerge for arriving at more meaningful insights into alternative ways of being (Cooper, 2011). Andersen's (2003) framework suggests youth workers, researchers, and academics need to: unravel and scrutinise dominant discourses; appraise notions of 'truth' and whose interests are being served, generate counter-discourses and alternative 'truths', identify counter-hegemonic projects and the potential sites for engaging in these, and develop strategies for exposing the limited assumptions underpinning the activities of social institutions to call these institutions to account. Discourse Analysis is one methodology that can allow for the questioning of dominant discourse, the taken for granted, and create a counter discourse.

What is Discourse Analysis?

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide step-by-step instruction into how to 'do' discourse analysis (see the work of Gee (2011a) for a comprehensive overview), an outline of discourse analysis methodology and differing approaches is provided here. As a qualitative methodology, discourse analysis is a general term for a variety of approaches that analyse language such as conversation or texts (Schwandt, 2007). Korobov (2020) supports this stating that discourse analysis is a wide range of language focused methods which broadly draw on constructivist approaches that examine language in use, as opposed to the psychological processes that lie behind it. Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) expand further to state that discourse analysis regards access to reality as always through language; where language creates representations of reality, but also contributes to constructing reality through the social world. Language can be studied as both construction and function, and examines ways in

which people use it to position themselves for, or against, problematic aspects of culture and society (Korobov, 2020). Specifically it is 'an examination of language use or the study of actually occurring language in specific communicative contexts' (Schwandt, 2007, pg. 72).

Antaki (2008) asserts that whilst there are a wide array of discourse analysis methods and researchers do not have to commit to a specific approach, there are however four key features that are common throughout. These include the view that talk/text is naturally occurring, that words can be understood in both their co-text and their wider context, that the analyst needs to be aware of the non-literal meaning and power behind the words use, and that 'the analyst should reveal the social actions and consequences achieved by the words used' (Antaki, 2008, pg. 431). Adopting an approach to research based on discourse analysis methodology therefore assumes that language is constitutive; meanings are socially derived and also situated, negotiated and co-constructed; and the use of language is a functional social practice.

Gee (2011b) regards discourse analysis therefore as a resource that makes ways of talking (communication), acting (activity) and being (identity) available. Taylor (2013) asserts that there is no 'right way' to analyse discourse, instead the approach is based on a number of factors including the philosophical perspectives, the topic being examined, and the interpretation of 'discourse' adopted. Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) argue that it is both permissible and valuable in discourse analysis to combine elements from different discourse analytical perspectives to create a multi-perspective approach. Below is a summary of three approaches to discourse analysis, each with differing views on discourse, and the objective and method of analysis.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

One approach that could be adopted to discourse analysis is that of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Foucauldian Discourse Analysis is the examination of systematic bodies of knowledge, which emphasises the analysis of power inherent in social relations (Powers, 2007). Khan & MacEachen (2021) state that it is concerned with understanding how the construction of 'meaning' is connected to the power imbalance in society, and how a particular version of reality comes to be regarded as 'truth', whilst other versions are marginalised. In FDA, Foucault's notions of power form the basis for the analysis of discourse,

with the aim to provide insight into, and generate interpretative claims, with regards to the power effects of a discourse on groups of people (Cheek, 1997). FDA focuses on analysing the historical and genealogical contexts of language, in addition to the present (Powers, 2007); exploring the origins of taken-for granted ideas that underpin established institutions and positions of authority (Taylor, 2013). For Harper (2006), FDA is an opportunity to analyse the macro level of interaction in discourse, where ways of talking are located in historical and institutional contexts and are embedded in sets of power relations. Therefore FDA has particular strength in its ability to be critical of social policy, and how its 'formation and reformation are intertwined with broader social changes and stakeholders' (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, pg. 6.).

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis can therefore have particular strengths in research with young people; specifically in helping to gain an external view of the discourse being researched by taking a position outside of current regimes of truth, and to recognise hidden assumptions and practice that form the rules of discourse formation (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). A methodology based on FDA provides an opportunity to not only analyse what youth workers or young people experiences are, but also 'how their talk about these experiences reproduce and/or disrupt dominant discourse around the problem' (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 7). However, FDA is not without critique. For example, a Foucauldian perspective is theoretical as opposed to practical (Woermann, 2012). Houston (2002) argues that there is a danger of reducing analysis to linguistic narratives, signs and disembodied discourses. A Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis may lead to pure description of discursive events as a method of investigation (Armstrong, 2015). These arguments are echoed by Kahn & MacEachen, (2021) who highlight that FDA is more concerned with theory rather than method, and that there is an absence of an explicit technique that it is embedded within 'cryptic philosophies' (ibid, p.7). Gee (2011b), for example, argues that discourse analysis of any form should have a point to it, and not just be about describing data. With this in mind an alternative approach to discourse analysis may be more aligned to the emancipatory and transformative agenda of youth work. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) could provide this focus.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Within CDA discourse is regarded as a form of social practice where there is a 'dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and all the diverse elements of the

situations, institutions and social structures which frame it' (Fairclough et al., 2011, pg. 357). Discourse is both socially constituted as well as socially shaped; maintaining and transforming the status quo, and so CDA aims to make 'more visible the opaque aspects of discourse as social practice' (ibid.), openly positioning itself on the side of oppressed groups against dominant groups. Therefore CDA is a top-down approach to critique issues of social injustice, dominance and power, and the role discourse has to play in the production and reproduction of this (Van Dijk, 1993). There is a shared interest in the relationship between power injustice and political, economic and social change (ibid.). At its heart CDA uses critique as a mechanism for explaining the perceived social world, and also changing it through an emancipatory agenda. Taylor (2013) argues that the approach adopted by CDA is to investigate versions of knowledge that have been accepted as truth, and to explore how these advance the interests of particular groups in society. Mullet (2018) highlights CDA as having the potential to critically describe, interpret and explain ways in which discourse maintains, controls and legitimises inequalities. CDA is regarded as having a problem orientated focus; where an analytical process that is systematic, interpretive, descriptive and explanatory is needed (Mullet, 2018).

Critical Discourse Analysis provides an opportunity to reveal valuable insights into the political and social contexts in which discourse about young people, youth work and other experiences of young people occur (Cooper, 2011). It can expose aspects of youth work practice that have been previously accepted without question, as well as revealing discursive constructions. As Van Dijk (1993) argues the success of CDA is measured by its contribution to change, and that acts of resistance through academia and research itself are effective change agents. However, to assume a critical stance against hegemonic norms presupposes an applied ethics on the topic under analysis; this requires an explicit normative stance (Van Dijk, 1993), and a questioning of the researcher's own position with regards to power (Herzog, 2016). CDA's focus on the ideological mediation between discourse and social practice is problematic, as it requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher to account for their positioning in terms of ideology, which can sometimes be lacking in CDA research (Lee & Otsuji, 2009), and hence lead to a replication of the particular norms and values which are contextual to a Eurocentric view of the world (Herzog, 2016).

Discursive Psychology

What is noted is that both FDA and CDA are regarded as macro approaches to Discourse Analysis. Discursive Psychology (DP) takes a more micro approach to explore 'how people use available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of the world and identities' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pg. 7). Discursive Psychology is a form of discourse analysis that aims to explore the ways in which people's selves, thoughts and emotions are formed and transformed through social interaction, and to cast light on the role of these processes in social and cultural reproduction and change. Individuals are regarded both as producers and products of discourse in specific contexts of interaction (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Gergen (1985) states that from a DP perspective people understand themselves and the world through situated contexts. This includes their relationships with others and historically situated interchanges, and therefore the meaning of language is social and derived from larger discourses, rather than reflecting cognitive activities of the speaker (Potter & Whetherall, 1987). According to Wiggins (2017) the focus on discourse in DP is not the psychology of language, but on the action, understanding and inter-subjectivity of discourse. This can include a focus on institutional settings and people's practices within them, but more specifically DP investigates how social interaction with others produces and makes relevant certain 'realities' or discourses (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005). Discursive Psychology does accept that whilst people do have agency, they are inseparable from the contexts in which they function and their relationships with others, therefore impacting on individual and group identity in terms of how people are positioned by society and others (Taylor, 2013).

Taylor (2013) explores culture, identity and discourse further; arguing that culture is social knowledge which is unique to a specific society or groups within it. This can create a shared world view which are created through and reinforced by discourse, and their use identifies people as members of the group (ibid.). Gee (2004) expands on this by stating that discourses are a resource which makes available ways of talking linked to the performance of identity associated with a particular group. Issues of power and equality come into play in terms of who is included or not. Conventions of language are therefore used to reinforce and communicate culture and identity. For Gee (2011) how people use language and how people respond are consequential, it can lead to acceptance within groups or the gain of social good. An approach to discourse analysis influenced by DP could therefore help to explore not only how youth workers or young people understand the discourse being researched, but how a

focus on the discourse is incorporated into practice, or the personal and professional identity of the research participants and any associated groups of which they are a part.

Gee (2011b) concludes that

all language is political and all language is part of the way we build and sustain our world, cultures and institutions. So, then too, all Discourse Analysis is 'practical' or 'applied', since it uncovers the workings- for good or ill- of this world building. (Gee, 2011, p.10).

The latter sections of this paper will therefore look at examples of how discourse analysis can be applied to research with young people and within the field of youth work, as well as some of the criticisms of adopting a methodology based on discourse and discourse analysis.

Discourse Analysis in Practice

From a youth work perspective there are a multitude of discourses that impact on, and are experienced by, young people that can be analysed. Often the focus is on marginalised or oppressed groups of young people. Chase (2017) for example analysed marginalised discourses around teenage pregnancy in literature on schooling; exposing the normalising discourse that position young mothers at risk of failure in the education system. Macfarlane et al. (2010) analysed discourse through the decades around education and young people experiencing behavioural differences. McAlister & Carr (2014) explored young people's experiences of youth justice; demonstrating how different discourses might influence the same youth justice intervention and perception on the notion of justice. Wrigley (2019) argues that the language of the *Bridging the Gap* report (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) talked into being a label that became synonymous with, and framed young people not engaged in the labour market, as lacking in self-action and self-management, being socially excluded, associated with crime and lacking in moral character (Wrigley, 2019). The subsequent language of, 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training) has created a discourse around youth unemployment, with this now becoming part of a wider political discourse of social mobility and neoliberalism (Reay, 2017).

Perhaps the most pertinent discourse for analysis in our current age is the discourse of Covid-19. The impact of the global pandemic has been felt by all (United Nations, 2020). Research has already identified negative outcomes for young people specifically in terms of physical

health, mental health, educational outcomes, and employment for example (ibid.). This research has focused on the physical implications of the disease, and *what* the experiences of young people during the pandemic have been. However, there is now a call to analyse *how* language has shaped these experiences especially in relation to socially excluded communities, and other marginalised groups, such as young people (Jen et al., 2021). Jen et al. (2021) argue that discourse analysis would allow for a necessary examination of the impact of language, and provide a critical lens for reflection on practice. An example here may be at a micro level deconstructing *with* young people pandemic related discourses, especially those which may frame young people in a negative light or pertain to 'fake news'; or the challenging of policy makers at the macro level in terms of oppressive discourse in the media or policy documents, and championing empowering alternatives.

Bengtsson et al. (2021) highlight how deficit discourses of young people have been accompanied by new tensions as a result of Covid-19, 'with young people simultaneously being accused of being irresponsible virus super-spreaders at the same time being relied upon to engage in a range of frontline position in tackling the pandemic' (ibid, pg. 327). Young people are framed as a danger to society in terms of perceived behaviours such as a lack of mask wearing, social distancing, and refusal to get vaccinated (Bengtsson et al., 2021). Tilsen (2018) argues that prevailing discourses such as these further marginalise those whom they seek to help through imposing specifications on what constitutes normal behaviour, and framing problems within totalising accounts. What is notable, however, is that in the analysis of the diverging presence of youth in public discourse, young people are not necessarily actively involved in raising their own voice within the public sphere (Lahussen & Keiss, 2020). This 'gives cause for concern about the representation of youth in public discourses and thus in democratic opinion formation' (ibid. p. 574). Further research is therefore needed in this area, especially around how young people talk about their experiences of the pandemic, how others talk about young people within the context of the pandemic, and how the discourse of Covid-19 has shaped young peoples' own language, behaviour, and identity during the pandemic. Consequently, discourse analysis could further allow for critical reflection around the delivery of youth work to best meet the needs of young people, but also how to respond to oppressive Covid-19 discourse.

Criticisms of Discourse and Discourse Analysis

Before undertaking discourse analysis it is important to note and mitigate for criticisms of discourse and subsequently discourse analysis. Antaki (2008) asserts that there are methodological and ethical issues from whatever discourse approach is adopted. Hammersley (2014) however, states that this does not lead to the conclusion that discourse analysis should not be undertaken, but rather a more considered approach is needed.

In discussion about discourse itself, Taylor (1986) raises issues around ontology stating that in order for power to exist as a meaningful construct the idea of truth (viewed as a necessary condition of liberation) must in principle be possible. Armstrong (2015) also raises further questions about whether discourse exists and in what contexts; stating that 'there is no evidence that discourse is the exclusive constituent agent of objects, persons or discourse itself' (pg. 34.). They argue further that it cannot be shown that discursive formation is self-generating within self-regulatory systems, but it can be made to appear as such in an account in which human agency is deliberately excluded (Armstrong, 2015: 34). The likes of Tew (2002) and Sibeon (2004) for example, state that too much emphasis is given to the power of language and not enough on human agency and choice (Thompson, 2017). This needs to be navigated in terms of youth work practice, which is underpinned by the principle of youth empowerment and choice; valuing the autonomy of young people to make their own informed decisions (Ord, 2016; Seal & Frost, 2014). As noted by Sercombe (2018), this is not just in terms of the young person's own agency for personal development, but for encouraging agency and action on the social context (Sercombe, 2018).

Hook (2001) argues that discourse analysis is a growth industry, which often sees a misapplication of the work of Foucault. They argue that on the one hand discourse analysis could be regarded as "a powerful means of enabling forms of critique and resistance" (pg. 522), or on the other hand a means to characterise the culture and society and a variety of social discourses, thus becoming a purely academic exercise (Ballinger & Payne, 2000). Whilst we can perhaps see the latter in the likes of Foucauldian discourse analysis and Discursive Psychology, Nonhoff (2017) argues that all discourse analysis is critique. This is echoed by Gee (2011) who states that all discourse analysis is critical because language in itself is political, therefore no matter the approach to discourse analysis taken it can 'illuminate problems and controversies in the world' (ibid. pg.10). Discourse analysis that goes no further than characterising and identifying a discourse also has value for youth workers and those working

as anti-oppressive practitioners. The identification of a discourse raises the critical consciousness (Freire, 1972) of the existence of the discourse. For Taylor (2013) discourse analysis provides an essential starting point for identifying what has previously been invisible and unacknowledged, which is a necessary step that can then lead to critical action (Watts et al. 2011). This further addresses the issues regarding agency outlined above, as once the discourse is identified and people are aware of it they have a choice to continue to talk, behave and act in ways that maintains it, or they can choose to challenge (Graham, 2018). Ethical concerns would arise however if an oppressive discourse was revealed but then not challenged; especially by those committed to the promotion of social justice and transformation through research and practice (Gormally & Coburn, 2014).

For Nonhoff (2017) discourse analysis is a form of intervention, in that it will always contribute to the discourse it seeks to analyse by reconstructing it one way or another; creating its own discursive statements that intervene in the field of available knowledge and the power associated with it. For some, however the intervention and criticality of discourse analysis proves to be an issue. Herzog (2016) for one argues that discourse analysis could be regarded as normative, making statements about how reality 'should' be and that proposed recommendations from research are 'better' than the current reality. Tyrwhitt-Drake (1999) goes so far as to assert that discourse analysis attempts to establish its own hegemony and there may be danger, therefore, that the analysis does not represent the voice of young people but the researcher's own. Graham (2018) however counters that discourse analysis is unavoidably moralistic. Mullet (2018) also rejects a neutral and objective stance by the researcher, stating that this would not be possible as knowledge is socially constructed and based on values. Youth work practice is based on ethical values that underpin not only how youth workers should act in practice, but how they view the world 'ought' to be (Sercombe, 2018; Rogers, 2010; Sercombe, 2010).

The professional values of youth work are such that those practicing as youth workers have a duty to question and be critical of all assumptions, including their own, in a systematic and analytical way, otherwise there is the danger of reinforcing the oppressions that some forms of youth work sets out to challenge (Seal & Frost, 2014). Therefore, the trustworthiness of research that involves the analysis of discourse rests on the transparency of the researcher in considering their own positionality in political and economic motives for example, or what

Given (2008) terms their own ideological baggage; acknowledging the power inherent in their position as researcher and their subsequent analysis (Mullet, 2018). Gormally & Coburn (2014) highlight the importance of acknowledging reflexivity and positionality of researchers, as 'our work as researchers and youth work practitioners becomes an act of constructo-interpretive epistemology in transforming ourselves as social activists and the social world in which we take action' (pg. 883). Birks (2014) argues that that this can be achieved through the process of reflexivity, or the 'active process of systematically developing insight into your own work as a researcher' and thus shaping future actions. As with youth work practice, a commitment to critical reflection in youth work research is also essential when engaging in discourse analysis.

Taylor (2013) highlights the challenge for the researcher in deciding what data is analysed and the ethical implications of this; whether this be data that already exists (such as policy documents, newspaper articles, social media posts etc.), or data that is generated specifically for the research through interviews and focus groups for example. One of the principles of discourse analysis is that discourse occurs as a result of natural language use (Van Dijk, 2011), and therefore text and 'talk' analysed should be naturally occurring. Hammersley (2014) raises ethical considerations, especially in terms of when the method of data collection, and discourse analysis is derived from interviews with participants. They highlight possible issues of deception as participants usually assume that researchers are aiming to document their experiences, perspectives, and feelings on a topic, rather than understanding that the research will focus on the discursive practice that the participant employs and how they talk about the subject (ibid.). Taylor (2013) adds that, for research participants, this may mean that they feel that their experiences have been trivialised to focus on words, and that their emotions and views have been disregarded. Conversely, if participants are aware that the aim is to analyse how people talk about the topic of research, they may become self-conscious in how they talk and their contribution may not be naturally occurring. Doing research with young people, and gaining their informed consent will need to be navigated by the researcher in terms of young people understanding the purposes of the research, managing expectations of the outcome of the research, and still generating naturally occurring talk to analyse (Stuart et al., 2015). Taylor (2013) argues that this is possible where talk is prompted by the questions and not produced by them, where the analysis is not presented as the only true analysis, and

where there is also scope for readers of the research to judge the interpretation for themselves (Harper, 2006). For Riley et al. (2007) a range of methods and approaches to discourse analysis should be valued.

Conclusion

Discourse analysis is therefore not a simple technique (Harper, 2006). Aligning with the social justice principles of youth work, discourse analysis methodology has the potential to uncover oppressive discourse that is used to reinforce norms, provide legitimacy to existing social structures, and obscure and rationalise inequalities (Taylor, 2013). Although some have stated that discourse analysis is a purely theoretical endeavour (Armstrong, 2015), engaging in discourse analysis can, and should, be emancipatory; leading to increased critical consciousness (Freire, 1972) of hidden oppressive discourse and subsequent intervention for the researcher, participants and reader (Nonhoff, 2017). The challenge for the researcher is in choosing the approach to discourse analysis that relates best to their own philosophy of practice and research objectives. Hopefully, this paper has gone some way in helping the reader to discover what discourse analysis is, and how this can be used in research with young people. By reframing the research questions from *what* to *how*, discourse analysis is an alternative approach to doing qualitative research that enhances our understanding of young people's experiences, by revealing unchallenged perceptions created by discourse. The process of discourse analysis should lead to critical reflection on, and recommendations for, future youth work practice by giving voice to young people through the creation of their own counter discourse.

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