

Discourse Theory and Peace

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The term *discourse theory* encompasses a diverse set of insights, assumptions, and concepts that have emerged across a range of disciplines in recent decades. Discourse theory generally derives from the “linguistic turn” in the humanities and social sciences that traces back to the work of influential figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michel Foucault (Rorty, 1992). Most approaches to discourse theory rest on the underlying premise that language, and language use, do not merely reflect or represent our social and mental realities, but they actually help construct or constitute these realities.

The idea that language, or discourse, can shape or structure human thought and action, and that language use therefore warrants study as a structuring agent, was initially a departure from mainstream Western science and philosophy which, until then, had tended to view language merely as a neutral or transparent medium of thought and communication. However, the view that discourse is a structuring agent is now accepted within diverse schools of thought that span the humanities and social sciences. Although debates carry on regarding the relative influence of discourse, the nature of that influence, and how best to study discourse, discourse theory has established itself as a highly influential framework for inquiry, analysis, and even activism. As such, it has much to contribute to the field of peace and conflict studies (Karlberg, 2005).

OVERVIEW OF DISCOURSE THEORY

Variations on the theme of discourse theory can be found in the disciplines of anthropology, communication, linguistics, literary studies, political science, social psychology, and sociology, as well as in interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies. In general, discourse theory tends to be associated with qualitative, interpretive methodologies that focus on the social construction and exchange of meaning through *texts*, defined broadly to include not only written texts but also records of spoken words, gestures, symbols, images, film, and other expressive cultural artifacts. However, as Phillips and Hardy (2002) explain, “Discourse analysis does not simply comprise a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts; it also involves a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language” (p. 5).

Foremost among these is the assumption that discourses are characterized by structural and functional properties. In this regard, “researchers do not view discourse merely as a medium through which the researcher can discover something about research participants’ inner mental worlds. Instead, discourse is viewed as a phenomenon which has its own properties, properties which have an impact on people and their social interactions” (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008, p.8). These properties include systems of categorization, metaphors, narratives, frames, and other interpretative schema that can influence cognition, perception, and action within communities of shared discourse. (See NARRATIVE ANALYSIS; NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY.)

Within this broad conceptual framework, diverse approaches to inquiry can be identified. Some discourse theorists focus on the analysis of discrete or isolated texts while others focus on the analysis of bodies or systems of texts. Some expand their focus to include contextual factors such as the institutional arrangements and historical circumstances surrounding the production, dissemination, and reception of texts. Among those who examine contextual factors, some focus on proximate contexts (i.e., the immediate setting in which the texts were produced or exchanged), whereas others focus on distal contexts (i.e., broader social, political, economic, and historical factors). Other distinctions that can be drawn between diverse approaches to discourse analysis include the relative emphasis on: micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis; structural or functional analysis; descriptive and explanatory analysis versus prescriptive and change-oriented analysis; data-driven versus theory-driven analysis; the analysis of consensual discourses versus contested discourses; synchronic analysis (i.e., a snapshot in time) versus diachronic analysis (i.e., changes across time); and neutral or apolitical processes of social construction versus a critical focus on the dynamics of power and ideology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001).

Among these diverse approaches to discourse analysis, the approach that is arguably the most relevant to the field of peace and conflict studies is often referred to as *critical discourse analysis* (van Dijk, 2001). Critical discourse analysis tends to adopt a macro focus on bodies or systems of text in their broad social and historical context. It also tends to be change-oriented and critical in its focus. It is concerned with the ways that power dynamics produce and are reproduced by dominant or hegemonic discourses through the construction of meaning, knowledge, and ideology. Within

critical discourse analysis, discourses tend to be conceptualized as widely shared and patterned ways of thinking and talking about some aspect of reality such as gender, race, human rights, the environment, war, or peace. (See CRITICAL AND RADICAL PSYCHOLOGY; CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES.)

Critical discourse analysis rests on the premise that widely shared ways of thinking and talking about a given aspect of reality influence social practices pertaining to that aspect of reality. For example, if one is raised in a social environment in which people think and talk about gender in highly patriarchal and oppressive terms, then one is more likely to enact and perpetuate gendered practices that are patriarchal and oppressive. Of course, as this example suggests, the direction of influence between discourse and social practices is not one-way. Gendered practices can also clearly influence the way people think and talk about gender. Thus it is generally recognized that the relationship between discourse and social practice is dialectical – each influences the other. Within this dialectical relationship, discourse can act as an agent that structures, to some degree, our “commonsense” views and assumptions about reality and thereby influences respective social practices, even as those social practices also influence the discourses associated with them. (See POSITIONING THEORY.)

Discourses, thus conceived, can also embody and perpetuate the perspectives, values, and interests of privileged segments of society who, by virtue of their social positions, exert disproportionate influence on the articulation of discourses. Such influence need not be consciously exerted. Rather, many people have a natural, unconscious affinity for ideas that align with their own interests. Accordingly, segments of society who have disproportionate access to the means of cultural production tend, to some extent, consciously or unconsciously, to shape dominant discourses

according to self-interested ideas and perspectives. This can include dominant educational discourses, religious discourses, media discourses, political discourses, and so forth.

In turn, members of subordinate social groups sometimes internalize, as their own common sense, the ideas and perspectives embedded in these dominant discourses, even when such ideas may not align with their own interests. A commonly cited example is the women's anti-suffrage movement in the United States, in which numerous women organized to prevent themselves and other women from getting the vote. This was done on the "commonsense" assumption, promulgated through discourses on gender, that getting the vote would move women into the world of politics and thereby corrupt their moral purity, which would result in an unraveling of the entire social fabric. Thus discourses can help to construct "a social reality that is taken for granted and that advantages some participants at the expense of others" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p.15). Accordingly, critical discourse analysis "focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353).

CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

According to discourse theory, the patterned ways that communities of people think and talk about a given aspect of reality – such as ingroup and outgroup distinctions – can influence perceptions, behaviors, social practices, and public policies leading to peace, conflict, war, or even genocide. Moreover, as critical discourse theory points out, these patterned ways of thinking and talking sometimes align with the narrow self-interests of privileged social groups who can

play a role in cultivating these patterns of thought and talk within broad segments of the public. Numerous examples of this can be found, from Nazi propaganda against Jews in Germany, to anti-Tutsi rhetoric in Rwanda, to the Islamic Republic of Iran's campaign to vilify and scapegoat the Bahá'í minority in that country.

The analysis of pathological discourses on identity are not, however, the only contribution discourse theory can make to peace and conflict studies. To further unpack these contributions, it is worth considering how concepts such as *langue* and *parole*, which are often employed in critical discourse analysis, shed light on concepts such as *direct violence* and *structural violence*, which are often employed in peace studies. In the field of peace studies, *direct violence* refers to physical, observable, episodic expressions of violence – as in war, genocide, terrorism, and similar phenomena. *Structural violence*, on the other hand, refers to the gradual deprivation of basic human needs or the violation of basic human rights, as a result of unjust and inequitable social structures. (See PEACE PSYCHOLOGY: DEFINITIONS, SCOPE, AND IMPACT.) In the field of discourse analysis, *langue* refers to the underlying structure or internal "grammar" of a given discourse – the implicit rules or codes that make a discourse intelligible within a given discourse community. *Parole* refers to the countless creative expressions or "speech acts" that can be derived from the underlying structure or internal grammar of the discourse.

Direct violence is often precipitated by speech acts, or parole that invoke mistrust, fear, division, polarization, hatred, and conflict. Such rhetoric is often invoked at critical historical moments by ambitious, self-interested, or ideologically driven leaders, and it is often aligned with the perceived self-interests of the groups they represent. The examples cited above, from Germany, Rwanda, and Iran, all fit this pattern. Critical discourse analysis offers a conceptual and

methodological framework that enables people to recognize and analyze these episodic discourses of dehumanization and violence.

Structural violence, in turn, is often sustained by the underlying structure, or language, of relevant discourses. In this regard, discourses have internal properties and implicit rules that can be analyzed like other social structures. Discourses, thus conceived, can contribute to structural violence when they perpetuate patterns of thought and talk that foster injustice, inequity, and oppression. For example, the system of race-based slavery that existed for several centuries in the United States was in part sustained by a discourse on race that rationalized and normalized slavery for many generations.

The internal structure of a given discourse can also set the stage for episodic violence when the discourse is characterized by properties that can be exploited to articulate speech acts leading to direct violence. For instance, some would argue that the US invasion of Iraq following the events of September 11, 2001, was rationalized by war rhetoric that successfully exploited a set of well-established elements in American public discourse, including key historical narratives (e.g., the development of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction coupled with the apparent spread of Middle Eastern terrorism), influential foreign policy metaphors (e.g., the “clash of civilizations” thesis coupled with the War on Terror) and resonant national identity constructs (e.g., American exceptionalism coupled with Iraqi defiance) – all of which arguably aligned with the interests of powerful segments of American society. (See SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY.)

In these and other ways, discourse theory can shed light on the role that language and language use play in both direct and structural violence. As Wenden and Schäffner (1995) explain, “Language is a factor that

must be considered, together with political and economic factors, in seeking to understand the structural causes of conflict, i.e., economic despair, social injustice, and political oppression, and the acceptance and use of war as a viable alternative for settling intergroup and international differences” (p. xvi).

Finally, critical discourse analysis also offers a social-change orientation that is consistent with peace and conflict studies. As van Dijk (2001) notes, “Crucial for critical discourse analysts is their explicit awareness of their role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a ‘value-free’ science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction . . . Theory formation, description, and explanation . . . are sociopolitically ‘situated,’ whether we like it or not” (pp. 352–353).

SEE ALSO: Critical and Radical Psychology; Critical Security Studies; Narrative Analysis; Narrative Psychology; Peace Psychology: Definitions, Scope, and Impact; Positioning Theory; Social Representations of History.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Critical Discourse Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Sciences* (Routledge): <http://www.cds-web.net>
- Research in critical discourse studies: <http://www.discourses.org>
- Research portal in discourse analysis: <http://www.discourseanalysis.net>