

# Discursive Constructions During COVID-19: Calling for the Critical Analysis of Discourse in Social Work During and After the Pandemic

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At the Society for Social Work and Research 2021 Annual Conference, the authors of this commentary presented at or attended a roundtable discussion to critically examine discourses around age, race, and gender that had emerged or been impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspired by the richness of their discussion and diverse areas of interest, they coauthored this commentary to argue for the utility and relevance of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in shaping the role of social work and our pursuit of social justice during and beyond the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** discourse analysis, social work profession, COVID-19 pandemic

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As the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded, its ongoing impacts on society and the discipline of social work have been substantial. The multilevel contexts in which we work—schools, health and mental health care systems, skilled nursing, residential treatment, prisons, shelters, and many more—have struggled to overcome urgent and extraordinary challenges while frontline social workers have navigated new barriers to providing effective and empowering services. Due to its far-reaching nature and depth of impact, this global crisis has shed light on existing sources of inequity in health and resources, which have manifested with

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great poignancy in public and scholarly discourse. By revealing extant and emerging discourses infused with dynamics of power (such as the ageist hashtag #BoomerRemover and the racist construction of the phrase “Chinese virus”), the pandemic has not only forced us to think critically about the delivery and sustainability of social work but has also highlighted the discursive ways in which our field might respond to these ongoing challenges and narratives.

As we assess the state of social work and the field’s potential contributions during the pandemic, our examinations within research, practice, and policy can benefit from the intentional analysis of discourse. Discourse analysis attends to the ways in which language, as a social tool, reflects, reinforces, and maintains certain representations of reality (Hall, 2001). Further, critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines the relationship between language and power to assess how discourses maintain or resist existing power structures (Fairclough, 2015; Gee, 2014). From a critical theory perspective, how populations are discursively constructed influences our ability to recognize people’s subjectivity, agency, and humanity, laying bare our taken-for-granted notions and valuations of their lives (Fairclough, 2015; Willig, 2008). By attending to the “how” of language use, CDA aligns with the goals of social work research, “linking micro, mezzo, and macro environments, examining the impacts of language on socially excluded communities, and providing a lens for critical reflection” (Willey-Sthapit et al., 2020, p. 1). Similarly, insights from CDA approaches span multilevel research and practice settings. In micro settings, a social worker may deconstruct oppressive language or foster creative counternarratives with a client to help them interrogate how systemic factors influence their pandemic-related mental health stressors. At macro levels, social workers may include critical discussions of language in their media interviews to help educate the public and policymakers on the power of antioppressive discourse and provide empowering alternatives.

At the Society for Social Work and Research 2021 Annual Conference (Storer et al., 2021), we came together as presenters and attendees at a roundtable to discuss the potential of CDA to better inform our work as practitioners, researchers, and advocates during the pandemic. We were struck by how public and scholarly discourses differentially affected our respective research populations. Inspired by the richness of our discussion and connections across our wide-ranging areas of expertise, we come together again here to share a call-to-action to engage in discursive critique within our scholarly community. We call attention to key discourses surrounding intersectional identities—across age, ability, race, education, immigration status, and gender—that intersect with social work across all practice and policy contexts to provide examples of discursive constructions in need of critique, dismantling, and reshaping, particularly in light of the current pandemic. Although these identities provide the basis for our discussion, our analysis also attends to varied contexts—ranging from specific service settings to popular media to policy

construction—thus allowing our analysis to explore constructions and their implications within the varied systems of health, education, migration, labor, and care. We also offer examples of what the disruption of these discourses might achieve in areas of social work research, practice, and policy to further the pursuit of social welfare and justice during and after the pandemic.

### **Constructions of Age, Ability, and Health**

Ageism is reflected in explicit actions (e.g., viewing and treating older people as frail, dependent, and out of touch) and discriminatory practices and policies, such as mandatory retirement or age-related health care rationing (World Health Organization, 2016). Discursively and implicitly, older individuals are often constructed as a homogenous population, and the terms we use to define them (e.g., elders, the elderly, seniors, older adults, retirees) invoke different images of what later life is or can be, ranging from a life stage commanding respect and honor to one defined by vulnerability or stagnancy. Those we consider to be older adults span an extremely wide age range that includes individuals from 60 to over 100 years old who represent varying abilities, identities, capabilities, and roles. Despite this diversity, media portrayals of later life foster shallow depictions of declining health and lack of productivity, if older adults are depicted at all (Edstrom, 2018). The achievement of agelessness or defying aging is constructed as a badge of honor, which maintains the subtle belief that to age is undesirable (Edstrom, 2018).

In the context of the pandemic, age was centered in early debates and discourses, revealing societal ageism and intersections with ability. Long-term care facilities were repeatedly described as “breeding grounds” for the virus, politicians called for prioritizing the stability of the economy over the safety of elders (Jen et al., 2021), narratives of intergenerational conflict were stoked and exacerbated (Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020), and triage policies came under fire for their implicit messaging around the relative “worth” of our lives according to age (Berridge & Hooyman, 2020; Miller et al., 2020). Such messaging instilled a sense of being forgotten, devalued, and cast aside among older members of our communities (Jen et al., 2021). Similarly, overlapping ableist discourses perpetuated the social exclusion of those living with disabilities and chronic illnesses at all ages. The repetition of associations between aging and disability with vulnerability to COVID-19 and the “burden” of protection of these populations may have long-lasting impacts on public perception, requiring ongoing critical advocacy and intervention to create resistive narratives capturing the full complexity of aging and ability.

Ageism has substantial consequences for the physical and mental health of older adults. According to the World Health Organization (2016), older people who hold negative views about their own aging recover more slowly from disability and live on average 7.5 years less than individuals with positive attitudes. Constant exposure to negative messaging may also create a sense of fear or dread around one’s own

aging future among individuals of any age. Considering that by 2025 the number of people ages 60 and over will double (World Health Organization, 2016), ageism and its impact on older adults will continue to grow if unchecked. AARP's #DisruptAging movement (2020) and the Reframing Aging Initiative (2021) offer examples of a multipronged antiageist strategy in which representations of aging and later life are intentionally disrupted by promoting antioppressive messaging and targeting advocacy around policies within economic, social, and political realms. Through their emphasis on societal framings of aging, both efforts illustrate ways in which discursive critique might be centered within social-justice-oriented advocacy efforts, such that older individuals are not further marginalized by disparity- or deficit-focused representations but are instead empowered through creative reimagining and reinventing of what diverse and positive aging experiences might look like. Such discursive reimaginings, in conjunction with intentionally framed advocacy efforts, are needed if we are to disrupt ageist pandemic discourses and reconstruct aging in ways that reflect the value of the lives and experience of our older community members.

### **Constructions of Race, Education, and Migration**

The framing of the pandemic also exemplified racism, evidenced by constructions of the "Chinese virus," blame placed on Asian populations for its "uncontrolled" origins (Budhwani & Sun, 2020), and a staggering rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans within the United States (Gover et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020). The pandemic has also exacerbated preexisting racial health inequities alongside the co-occurring pandemic of societal racism and racial violence (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). Black Lives Matter protesters were labeled dangerous and violent (Jean, 2020; Mohammed et al., 2021) as the media amplified false narratives linking protesters to viral spread (Neyman & Dalsey, 2021; Treisman, 2020). Further, stay-at-home orders have disproportionately benefited white, affluent communities where the ability to work safely from home was skewed in the direction of wealth and racial privilege.

Such orders also shifted education online, leading to unequal access driven by financial constraints, lack of sufficient Wi-Fi and computing devices in the home, and usability barriers (Correia, 2020). Disproportionate educational barriers gave rise to the discourse of "learning loss," a well-intentioned yet pathologizing narrative that may label an entire generation of students as deficient (Dorn et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2021). The deficit-based lens is reinforced and extended by the disproportionate labeling and exclusion of students of color, evidenced by rates of school discipline and special education referrals (Diem & Welton, 2020; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Such discourses bolster hegemonic whiteness and an oppressive and punitive school structure (Dixson et al., 2016). Within schools as a practice setting, CDA can make such discourses visible, creating space for a more holistic, strengths-based portrayal of students that values and supports their social and emotional well-being through antiracist pedagogies (Diem & Welton, 2020; Radd et al., 2021).

Race has also been implicated within public discourse around immigration during the pandemic, revealing the contradictions inherent in constructions of the racialized immigrant as a citizen and subject (Gonzalez Benson, 2021). Historically, renderings of immigrants in public and political discourse have been vilifying and othering (Chavez, 2001; Mehan, 1997); such portrayals were emboldened in the years of the Trump administration. However, COVID-19 suddenly introduced a counternarrative, as immigrants were reimagined as essential workers, particularly those who sustain the food industry (Honig, 2021; Luckstead et al., 2021), as well as those working in health care (Fasani & Mazza, 2020). These shifts in discourse reveal our ambivalence with the immigrant—the othered neighbor who is unwanted in social life but simultaneously the laborer who is vital to economic life (Gonzalez Benson, 2021). CDA offers means for illuminating the oppressive nature of discourses and policies surrounding labor and citizenship, which are infused with the ideological language of neoliberalism (Gonzalez Benson, 2016).

### **Constructions of Gender, Labor, and Care**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars highlighted the presumed supremacy of the interlocking political, economic, and social discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Gill, 2017). With its emphasis on self-sufficiency, privatization, and the centrality of the free market, neoliberalism minimizes the state's role in promoting social equality (Steger & Roy, 2010), whereas a postfeminist sensibility “operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism” (Gill, 2017, p. 609), asserting that women “can make it” with personal grit and hard work (we use “women” to capture the disproportionate unpaid or low-paid care expectations placed on women-identifying individuals and/or those assigned female gender roles by society; Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Gill, 2017). Social policies rooted in neoliberalism and postfeminism, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996), have eroded the already beleaguered U.S. social safety net while low-wage work has not lifted families out of poverty or provided adequate support for care work (Breitkreuz & Williamson, 2012; Schram et al., 2019; Stokes & Patterson, 2020).

The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the collision of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and care work—exposing the inherent limitations of a neoliberal discursive worldview. The support structures (e.g., childcare, public schooling, domestic help, kinship networks) caregivers had put in place to maintain their postfeminist workplace identities quickly eroded, shattering long-held social narratives that women can seamlessly balance work and caretaking responsibilities (Greenberg, et al., 2020; Grose, 2021). The pandemic also illuminated the stratification of paid care work as teachers' unions and school boards nationwide, in their effort to advocate for sustained school closures to protect their workers, stated that “schools are not daycares” (Shapiro, 2021, para. 3). Even as this statement elevates

the important work of grade-school educators, it denigrates the societal contributions of early childcare workers, who largely work in private industries that are predominantly staffed by ununionized lower-income women (Rho et al., 2020). CDA can illuminate the contradictions inherent in neoliberalism, exposing long-standing histories of how care work provided disproportionately by BIPOC women has subsidized white, middle- and upper-class women's actualization of postfeminist identities as unconstrained contributors in the labor market (Graham, 1991).

We are now seeing shifts in the broader understanding of what supports should be in place for care work, including the development and implementation of policies such as the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided time-limited economic relief. The increased visibility of care work is encouraging; however, the tangible material support offered by employers and labor unions for care work during COVID-19 has been unevenly distributed, often insufficient, and is projected to reproduce long-term gender, racial, and economic inequities (Stokes & Patterson, 2020). The reenvisioning of our society, therefore, must include the question of how we, as a society, can discursively recognize and structurally redistribute and support the work of caring.

### Implications and Conclusions

In analyzing the discursive meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic for social work, we see the pandemic as a focusing or framing event that briefly centers public attention on specific social and cultural issues and may also leave a lasting impression due to the repetition, poignancy, and politicization of its discourses (Scheufele & Tweksbury, 2007). As discourses play a crucial role in driving how we gain information, adopt ideological stances, and alter our behaviors (Foucault, 1978), social workers have a responsibility to critique, resist, and shape discourses with intention. Specifically, because of the wide-reaching nature of the pandemic and its ability to reveal new and ongoing inequities, we have an opportunity to work toward a cultural shift around systems of care, control, labor, and service provision (Gonzalez Benson, 2021; Rodriguez, 2021). These actions are particularly critical in an era when misinformation or "fake news" is a major public concern and the basic epistemologies of scientific inquiry have been politicized and come under question, creating the need for critical engagement with the construction of language and knowledge.

One of the primary strengths of CDA approaches is how they render visible oppressive societal discourses, which are often implicit, accepted, or ignored. The contemporary focus on the trustworthiness of media and other public messaging (e.g., "fake news") offers a unique opportunity for social workers to apply CDA approaches in their multilevel practice settings. For instance, social workers in clinical practice may use CDA tools to help clients deconstruct how pandemic-magnified

societal discourses surrounding their identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, immigration status, ability status, age, weight, socioeconomic status, etc.) may have impacted their health, education, employment, and well-being. Similarly, narrative- and discourse-based clinical approaches (e.g., narrative therapy, internal family systems therapy) may be particularly useful for clients experiencing pandemic-related mental health struggles. At the mezzo level, social workers can use CDA approaches to examine their agency's policies to assess ways in which long-accepted institutional norms may reinforce societal inequities through discourse and prevent certain communities from accessing needed services. How might policies be rewritten, or language shifted, to support more strengths-based or empowering narratives? At the macro level, social workers can directly address problematic language in media interviews, write op-eds on behalf of the populations they serve addressing harmful discourse and public misconceptions, and advocate around matters of discourse in policymaking at local, national, and international levels.

As a field, discursive analysis has helped us analyze our own histories, narratives, and practice approaches and to periodically take stock (Cote, 2013; Curran, 2002; Park & Kemp, 2006; Rossiter, 2005). In this moment, we must continue this work with intention, harnessing the power of critical discursive analysis to inform our societal role during and after the pandemic. Illuminating and critiquing oppressive discourses offers opportunities for social workers to contribute to micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level change. We can participate in the reconstruction of discourse by critically examining and reframing language use to serve antioppressive and justice-oriented goals and to imagine new ways of being and doing as practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers.

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