

# Discourse analysis: theoretical and historical overview and review of papers in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 1996–2004

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**Discourse analysis: theoretical and historical overview and review of papers in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 1996–2004**

**Aim.** The aim of the paper is (1) to offer an overview of different theoretical approaches to discourse analysis and (2) to review papers published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* from 1996–2004 in which discourse analysis is identified as a method of data analysis.

**Background.** Discourse analysis offers rigorous approaches to analysing naturally occurring talk and texts. Forms of discourse analysis have developed across broad theoretical bases. Such development has created challenges for researchers wishing to adopt this methodology and readers wishing to evaluate the quality of discourse analytic work.

**Methods.** First, key documents which describe the theoretical range of discourse analysis are used to provide (i) a comprehensive overview of the approach, (ii) the identification of categories of discourse analysis and (iii) minimum criteria for determining if an individual paper can realistically claim to be adopting discourse analysis. Secondly, an electronic search followed by hand search of the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* full- contents between 1996 and 2004 was undertaken. The papers were grouped into the types of approach identified in i, and evaluated to see whether they met the ‘minimum criteria’ also identified in i.

**Findings.** The search of *Journal of Advanced Nursing* revealed 24 papers where the authors stated that discourse analysis was among the methods or was the sole method of data analysis. The majority of the papers cluster around critical approaches to discourse analysis. Only a few approach discourse analysis primarily as analysis of conversation. Some papers are excellent, while others offer analysis that bears little resemblance to any form of discourse analysis.

**Conclusions.** A strategy for improvement could include more rigorous attention on the part of those practising discourse analysis to methodology and the key features that differentiate the different approaches to discourse analysis from other qualitative methods. Authors should include sufficient detail of their approach.

**Keywords:** conversation analysis, discourse analysis, literature review, methodology, nursing, qualitative research

## Background

A number of scholars in nursing have been attracted by discourse analysis (DA) as a research approach. It offers rigorous methods for analysing naturally occurring talk and

texts, both of which are important sources of data within nursing practice and policy. For researchers who are concerned about the danger of adopting actors’ accounts of situations and presenting this as analysis (Silverman 1998b), DA offers a focus on *how* speakers (or writers)

attempt to persuade, perform certain actions, or present themselves or others. For some analysts this counter-hegemonic potential becomes an explicit technique to expose the otherwise covert operation of power, for example, that of professionals over patients or of one professional group over another.

The theoretical aspects of DA are complex, particularly as they have been developed in different ways in different disciplines. Although the practices of analysts within these different disciplines sometimes appear similar, they can be based on different theoretical assumptions. Some authors make claims about a theoretical position which are not supported by their account of their analytic practice. Some papers claim to use DA but do not appear to adopt any recognized form of the practice. Without the active employment of a developed theoretical framework, researchers risk lapsing into 'common-sense' interpretations and adopting the normative categories that are created within the discourses they are studying (Silverman 1998b). This paper is an attempt to set out the range of theoretical foundations of DA as a contribution to future scholarship in this and other nursing journals. The paper is a critical review and not itself an example of DA.

## Summary of theoretical approaches to discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is the close study of talk and texts. It offers ways of investigating meanings whether in conversation or in 'patterns of signification and representation which constitute culture' (Wetherell *et al.* 2001, p. i). Because of the broad focus of DA, it is important to be able to differentiate between the theoretical underpinnings of those different groups who practise it.

Basic approaches to DA have been usefully represented on two dimensions by Alvesson and Karreman (2000). Figure 1 is an elaboration of their representation with another schema devised by Taylor (2001) superimposed in appropriate positions in order both to give additional detail and examples to Alvesson and Karreman's scheme and to contextualize Taylor's.

Axis A–D represents underlying theoretical positions regarding the relationship between individuals and language. A characterizes a broadly Enlightenment view of human individuals as having autonomous control over language which they employ to represent their thoughts (Harding 1990). D represents a more poststructuralist position which would claim that even what we understand as human individuality is always a result of available ways of thinking and talking about human subjects, i.e. of discourse itself.

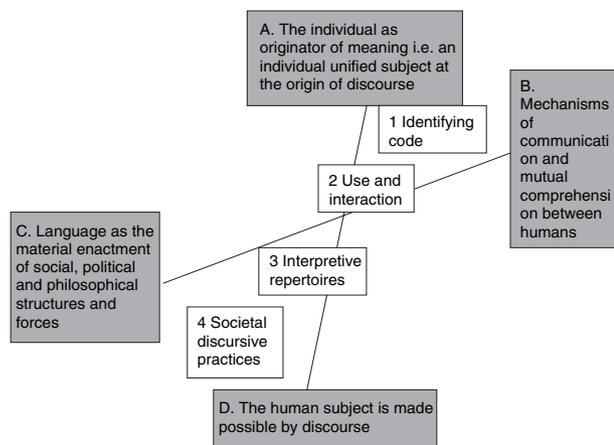


Figure 1 Dimensions of discourse analysis and categories of practice superimposed. Based on Alvesson and Karreman (2000) and Taylor (2001).

For example, Foucault understands 'the homosexual' as an identity invented by 19th century discursive practices (Foucault 1972). Axis C–B sets out a continuum of foci of discourse analytic studies, from a concern with the techniques and competencies involved in successful and unsuccessful conversation at B, to an interest in language as a mechanism of ideology at C. The two axes are not orthogonal because analysts who are concerned to foreground linguistic structures and their constraints on the possibilities of identity tend also to emphasize political and other social structures within their analyses (Lupton 1995, Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). Similarly, practice focussing on the characteristics of successful communication tends the not to question Enlightenment understandings of the autonomous self and its mastery over language (Brown 1998).

To add detail to this overall conceptualization four boxes numbered 1–4, which are based on and expand Taylor's (2001) four broad models of DA, are superimposed upon the first schema in appropriate positions:

### 1. 'Identifying code': language properties and linguistics

In this approach, analysts focus on the properties and structures of language. To investigate these, they tend to set up formal experiments rather than work with 'naturally occurring data'. An example of this particular type of analysis, focussing on the comprehension process, can be found in the work of Gillian Brown. She, for example, asked one set of research participants to explain features and routes on a map to a second set of participants and tape recorded and analysed the techniques of explanation (Brown 1998). Within this category there may be some study of the interrelationship between language and social situation.

## 2. 'Use and interaction': conversation analysis and ethnomethodology

This approach describes an examination that foregrounds language use in interaction which includes an understanding that any speaker is constrained by conventional conversational practices. This area of work is populated by conversation analysts such as Sacks *et al.* (1974). Sacks's intention was to build up a model of social life from an empirical understanding of actual linguistic events (Silverman 1998a). Although there are differences between his approach and the ethnomethodology developed by Garfinkel (1967) from which conversation analysis (CA) emerged (Silverman 2001), like his contemporary, Sacks was concerned to investigate how people accomplish 'being ordinary' and the rules that speakers attend to in actual examples of talk. He studied the local production of social order in great detail, building a 'cumulative science of conversation' (Silverman 1998a, p. 41). Such an approach brings an increasing social context to the previous focus on language use.

## 3. 'Interpretive repertoires': studies of occupation

Studies of occupation overlap with the previous category because one of their aspects is the analysis of how individuals enact and maintain their membership of occupational groups in their talk and documentation and their 'interpretive repertoires'. Such studies may focus on the interaction between a professional and their client (Atkinson & Heath 1981, Garfinkel 1986, Drew & Heritage 1992, Marshall 1994) or between different classes of professional (Hughes 1996, Svensson 1996, Traynor 1996a). Their characteristic focus is on talk-in-interaction 'through which the daily working activities of many professionals and organizational representatives are conducted' (Drew & Heritage 1992, p. 3). In such studies, language is analysed in particular social and cultural contexts rather than the context of particular interactions. Because of this focus on social and cultural contexts, studies of occupation, in turn, overlap with the fourth approach.

## 4. 'Societal discursive practices': studies of discourse and power

Taylor's fourth approach, societal discursive practices, describes analysis which investigates language use in the broadest of the four contexts. It describes analyses which identify patterns of language and related practices and demonstrates how they constitute aspects of society and people within it. Such analysis submits 'taken-for-granted' aspects of the social

and natural world to historical and sociological analysis. Within this category we can include the following:

### *Critical discourse analysis*

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has developed both in France and English-speaking countries including, notably, Australia. One of its United Kingdom (UK)-based proponents offers the following description:

CDA is analysis of the dialectical relationships between discourse (including language but also other forms of semiosis, e.g. body language or visual images) and other elements of social practices. (Fairclough 2001, p. 231)

Fairclough's influential approach features the linking of close textual *and* sociological analysis (Fairclough 2003). CDA foregrounds issues of power, resistance and identity. For example, Lupton looks to CDA to answer questions such as:

...how do individuals take up, negotiate, or resist discourse and how is resistance generated and sustained? What are the constraints to taking up subject positions? How are the individuals interpellated, or 'hailed' by discourses – how do they recognise themselves within? (Lupton 1995, p. 302)

One particular strand of politically committed DA has been developed in France dating from the radical period of the late 1960s. French discourse analysts tend to argue that language has come to be structured in a way that closely corresponds to social structures; hence the study of language can give authoritative insights into its ideological effects. The most notable name in this field is that of Michel Pêcheau, who set out to investigate empirically ideological practices that were theorized by the Marxist Louis Althusser (Pêcheau 1995).

Also in France in the same period, Michel Foucault developed an influential approach to DA in investigations of institutions and practices of modern European government. For him, different institutions, for example those concerned with penal and medical arrangements, became associated with systems of thought and practice that set out the boundaries of knowledge development at different points in history. Foucault linked these to their practices for controlling and ordering populations (Foucault 1973, 1977). At particular points during the 18th and 19th centuries, various discursive rules, he argues, determined what could be said and by whom. Foucault's use of the term discourse involves a denial that there is an essential, unchanging core to human nature. He argues that various liberal humanist political systems valorize the uniqueness of the individual as part of a process of ordering and controlling populations. Part of his project was to investigate the points

in history when it became possible to talk about 'the individual' in this way (Foucault 1973).

### *Discourse analysis and poststructuralism*

Discourse analysis interacts with poststructuralist – or deconstructive – examinations of meaning, text and identity in stimulating and productive ways. Deconstruction has been influential within literary theory, legal studies, psychoanalysis and other disciplines (Culler 1997). Most contemporary literary criticism, for example, includes discussion of the possibility that (i) language constitutes the world that it purports merely to describe, (ii) the meaning of a text cannot be fixed, even by reference to the intention of its author and (iii) a text can be deconstructed by identifying the hierarchical oppositions upon which it relies (e.g. reason/emotion, serious/non-serious, central/peripheral) and that it is possible to reverse this hierarchy to produce a reading 'against the grain' of a text's face-value reading (Derrida 1976, Norris 1991, Barry 2002). In the context of DA, this has the potential to destabilize particular ideologies by showing that alternatives are equally plausible. For example, recent work on managerialism demonstrated managers and nurses constructing such hierarchical pairs to denigrate each other's activities (and identities) and enhance the value of their own (Traynor 1999). Some writers influenced by poststructuralism have argued that identities are made possible by the structures of language and thought available at any point in history. Foucault has presented discourses of madness (Foucault 1965) and sexuality (Foucault 1984) in this way. Others have proposed the term 'subjectivity' in place of 'identity', as an acknowledgement that people are subject to the constraints of language and are not autonomous (Kristeva 1989, Barthes 1996).

It is important to emphasize that any attempt, like this one, to categorize approaches to DA will be confounded by some specific examples which combine elements from a number of 'different' approaches. However, I suggest that the attempt to do so remains a useful way of gaining an overview of the practice.

### **Discourse analysis in *Journal of Advanced Nursing***

I would now like to use this representation of different theoretical approaches to DA to describe how papers published in *Journal of Advanced Nursing* (JAN) can be placed across its dimensions. This will tell us how nurse scholars have taken up the different approaches to DA. I will also comment on apparent weaknesses in some of

the identified papers. Such weaknesses have been identified by establishing, from the above literature, some minimal characteristics of DA which are common across the different approaches taken to it. These will be detailed later.

### **Search strategy**

Using 'discourse analysis' as a keyword, 41 papers were identified from the Blackwell Synergy electronic database which runs from 1996 to the latest issue at time of writing (October 2004). A brief check of the title, then abstract, followed by reading the full text of each paper eliminated 17 items which were book reviews, replies, editorials or research papers which did not state that they used DA. Apart from five published in 2003 and four in 2000, the number appearing in any one year was between one and three. Fifteen were from authors with a UK or Ireland address, seven from Australasia and one from the United States of America.

Five authors acknowledge that the work was done as part of a research degree, but it was not possible to be sure about the remainder. Eleven authors used interviews as a source of data, three used conversation, 10 documents only and two a mixture of sources (also included in the above).

Table 1 identifies the papers found, along with brief quotations summarizing the authors' descriptions of their methods and a commentary on the content of each paper. Papers are numbered for ease of reference in the following discussion.

### **Results**

All authors looked to DA as a way of revealing and exploring influences on the character of nursing or of its practices or education. The range of approaches was wide, from a focus on individual nurse–patient interaction [1] to 'nursing discourse' or 'contemporary discourse' at the most general level [23]. This range corresponds to boxes 2–4 in Figure 1. However, as detailed below, most authors declared an orientation to CDA or a slightly differently worded description of a critical project. All but one [22] of the papers described some aspect of the theoretical foundations of DA, although this varied greatly in length and emphasis, some providing little detail. Six authors stated that they used Foucauldian DA [7, 11, 14, 15, 24], or referred to his ideas about discourse [17], five that they used DA along with another method [5, 8, 16, 18, 22] and three said they used 'critical discourse analysis' [5, 7, 24].

**Table 1** Description of papers included in review

Paper number	Reference	Title	Authors' description of form of discourse analysis (DA)	Commentary
1	Adams (2000)	The discursive construction of identity by community psychiatric nurses and family members caring for people with dementia.	Insights regarding the interaction between the CPN and family carer are made through the use of techniques taken from conversation and discourse analysis.	One lengthy interaction between nurse and a carer of a woman with dementia, analysed explicitly in the light of understandings of identity through talk of the theoretical backgrounds provided.
2	Ashworth <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Whither nursing? Discourses underlying the attribution of master's level performance in nursing.	Research on discourse aims to uncover for critical scrutiny the ways in which the speech, writing and action of individuals and collectivities embodies distinct versions of the world. Speakers unknowingly import assumptions far beyond their direct knowledge.	Use of passages that exemplify the effect of 'underlying discourses' on nurse lecturers' interview descriptions of Master's level characteristics.
3	Barclay and Lupton (1999)	The experiences of new fatherhood: a socio-cultural analysis.	Discourse analysis, a qualitative method of investigation focused on the representation and creation of meaning through language and visual imagery...The analytical process focused on the structure of the participants' explanations and the words, phrases, concepts and belief systems they used to describe phenomena and beliefs and represent their experiences.	Refers to broad discourses such as 'the nurturer and carer discourses of 'new' fatherhood' and discourses relating to 'traditional' fatherhood, also 'the discourse of motherhood'. Analysis as a commentary in the context of these 'discourses', which are never defined in detail.
4	Carr (1996)	Themes relating to sexuality that emerged from a discourse analysis of the Nursing Times during 1980–1990.	Discourse analysis starts from the assumption that every utterance has a specific meaning and is said with a certain performative force. Both meaning and force will have effects or consequences, these, however, are independent of the truth and general validity of what is said.	Analysis conforms to 'Framework' approach, with its own set of questions, a broad concern with the rhetorical and argumentative force of documents dealing with sexuality in Nursing Times magazine.
5	Fealy (2004)	'The good nurse': visions and values in images of the nurse.	A framework of critical discourse analysis within the method of historical research...critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal connections between language and the less transparent elements in social life, including the way that language works ideologically and is used to establish power and/or social identity (Taylor 2001).	Uses extracts from historical documents with commentary to show how nurses were represented in Ireland from c. 1920 to c. 1980.
6	Froggatt (1998)	The place of metaphor and language in exploring nurses' emotional work.	[The] approach involved taking 'discourse' to mean, all forms of spoken interaction, either formal or informal, and all types of written text...We are concerned primarily with how people understand their experiences. We view language as providing data that can lead to general principles of understanding.	Commentary on some metaphors used by nurses in palliative care with the argument that they can give insight into 'containment' and 'distancing' of distressing emotions.

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper number	Reference	Title	Authors' description of form of discourse analysis (DA)	Commentary
7	Gilmour (2002)	Dis/integrated care: family caregivers and in-hospital respite care.	...texts were analysed using a critical discourse analysis approach drawing on the work of Foucault. This focuses on the productive role of discourse in creating and maintaining dominant forms of power in the field of respite care.	Finds three types of response to respite care and illustrates these. Commentary does not show how the informants are performing their identity as carers and focussing on what they mean. The Foucauldian awareness of the power effects of discourse does not reappear in analysis or discussion.
8	Halford and Leonard (2003)	Space and place in the construction and performance of gendered nursing identities.	Interviews were transcribed and analysed using techniques drawn from narrative methodology...and discourse analysis...to explore the expressions of identity embedded within them.	Extracts 'describe their feelings'. No demonstration of how interview text is working. Interprets deportment in space as discursive, a performance of identity, describes this as 'narratives which can be read'.
9	Hallett <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Community nurses' perceptions of patient 'compliance' in wound care: a discourse analysis.	Discourse analysis is an approach to studying both patterns of meaning and modes of communication...to gain insights into the perspectives of research participants, by interpreting their use of language and their means of expressing themselves...the researcher is searching a linguistic text for evidence of the social and ideological power structures that influenced the author. The originator of the text is seen as unconsciously directed by social norms and mores which have their basis in the structure of society.	62 nurses interviewed about compliance in wound care. Summarizes respondents' ideas about non-compliance in a number of themes. Discussion is about professionals' expectations of compliance.
10	Hardin (2003)	Constructing experience in individual interviews, autobiographies and on-line accounts: a poststructuralist approach.	A poststructuralist orientation to language contends that individuals inherit the language they present to others...discourse/s refers to broad, socially constructed systems of language. Different discourses give rise to different objects.	Sophisticated summary of post structuralist ideas of language and identity. Analysis gives examples of anorexics learning their identity from others, magazines etc. Then analysis of turn-taking in an interview showing how the interviewee offers 'preferred' responses. Conclusion is a challenge to conventional qualitative research to understand talk as social performance.
11	Heartfield (1996)	Nursing documentation and nursing practice: a discourse analysis.	DA focuses on the sociocultural and political context of talk. The elements of Foucault's archaeology guided the actual analysis of the case notes.	Analysis of patient case notes. The author says a number of discourses were identified, e.g. patient as object and each is discussed but no example of actual text is shown.

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper number	Reference	Title	Authors' description of form of discourse analysis (DA)	Commentary
12	Henery (2003)	Constructions of spirituality in contemporary nursing theory.	This paper uses discourse analysis to identify the formal properties of scientific and religious discourses in constructions of spirituality in nursing theory.	'Religious' and 'scientific' 'discourses' are defined in very general terms. The analysis identifies the influence of these 'discourses' within certain nursing texts.
13	Horsfall and Cleary (2000)	Discourse analysis of an 'observation levels' nursing policy.	...discourse is used by Lupton...to refer 'to the manner in which individuals and institutions communicate through written texts and spoken interaction'...the current study set out to discern the overt and covert psychiatric ideologies within the special observation policy.	Study of policy documents about 'special observation' of mental health patients. Categories of ideas and practices are described. Very few quotations from the document, mostly discussion of themes.
14	Irving (2002)	Governing the conduct of conduct: are restraints inevitable?	...a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis [of] staff accounts of restraint of patients. Language is not transparent but directed towards social ends. The interviews were aimed at generating discourse.	The talk of the healthcare professionals is seen as 'discourse' that constructs the patient in a particular way. Foucault's contribution is the awareness that discourses can have hegemonic effects. No further reference to Foucault's ideas. Short examples of interview and notes are given pointing to, e.g. infantilizing talk.
15	Kotecha (2002)	Exploring nurse learner wastage/persistence using a discursive approach: towards a theoretical understanding of the subject.	The study uses the themes of identity and discourses, as conceptualized by Foucault. Discourses are historically and culturally specific statements and ways of thinking and speaking about the world that exist outside of the individual. This (gives rise to) discursive formation of self...The analysis utilized a qualitative technique called Meaning Orientated Discourse Analysis (MODA). MODA, a type of discourse analysis that drew on discursive psychology.	Analysis 'uncovers' two distinct ways of conceptualizing and describing the learner. There is no textual support for these 'discourses'. These 'position' the learner as different types of subject. Uses quotes from interviews with leaver and stayer students to show how they respond to the two discourses. Analysis at the level of their meaning. Argument is that successful stayers could negotiate the two subjectivities.
16	Lugton (1997)	The nature of social support as experienced by women treated for breast cancer.	Grounded theory adapted and DA used to retrospectively analyse data. Discourse analysis was employed to analyse patients' statements about social support.	Topic is the meaning of social support in women with breast cancer. Very brief sentence about discourse analysis. No analysis or detail about the 'core theme' that was identified. Identification of themes with quotations as examples.

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper number	Reference	Title	Authors' description of form of discourse analysis (DA)	Commentary
17	Nairn (2004)	Emergency care and narrative knowledge.	A discourse analysis of nursing narratives in their natural settings was carried out. This involved exploration of stories that were not produced for the purposes of research.	'Contemporary discourse', 'nursing discourse' and work of Foucault referred to. A series of narratives is presented. Narrative is said to be outside modernist discourse.
18	Pill <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Can nurses learn to let go? Issues arising from an intervention designed to improve patients' involvement in their own care.	Tapes were...analysed in a number of ways: quantitatively...and qualitatively, using discourse analysis techniques.	Description (no extracts from tapes) of the kind of conversational interactions between practice nurses and diabetic patients commenting on their directive approach when they were instructed in a patient-led approach.
19	Pulsford <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Woodlands therapy: an ethnographic analysis of a small-group therapeutic activity for people with moderate or severe dementia.	'Discourse analysis was used to identify the kinds of verbal interventions made by staff, and also to find clues about the patients' experience of the [intervention]'	Compares two examples of conversational interaction between patient and experienced and inexperienced nurse. No theoretical background or citation to DA.
20	Quested and Rudge (2003)	Nursing care of dead bodies: a discursive analysis of last offices.	Discourse analysis involves questioning the actual language of the procedure manual. Why was this word used instead of another?...Discourse analysis is concerned with the reproduction of dominant ideologies and knowledge/power interactions, by focusing on the socio-cultural and political context in which texts occur.	Uses extracts from a procedure manual to show how the different words used for the body reflect institutional and professional views and values.
21	Redwood (1999)	Caring control: methodological issues in a discourse analysis of waterbirth texts.	DA enables an exposure of how oppression and inequality of power relations, which are inherent in many forms of health care provision, are created and sustained. Texts construct various versions of the social world for us.	Full review of the origins of DA and definitions of discourse. An analysis of texts in professional journals and newspapers about waterbirth. No basis given for which texts were used. Examples of themes of an ambivalent 'caring control' with quotations: 'discourses' roughly equivalent to themes.
22	Taylor (2003)	Narrating practice: reflective accounts and the textual construction of reality.	Drawing on analytical approaches of micro sociologies and discourse analysis. The paper explores the way in which reflective accounts are constructed and to what purpose.	Passages from reflective practice accounts given and extracts from those who promote RP. Then it is argued that reflective narratives are not privileged authenticity. No return to discourse analysis. Discourse used very broadly.

Table 1 (Continued)

Paper number	Reference	Title	Authors' description of form of discourse analysis (DA)	Commentary
23	Traynor (1996b)	Looking at discourse in a literature review of nursing texts.	'a discourse analysis approach' Discourse analysis attempts to explore the practice of language as it is used to construct a reality that often serves to support particular institutions or political ideologies.	Talks of a range of broad 'discourses' that are said to be identified in certain nursing texts.
24	Wilson (2001)	Power and partnership: a critical analysis of the surveillance discourses of child health nurses.	Interviews were analysed using a Foucauldian approach to critical discourse analysis...The role of language in the creation and maintenance of social and political inequalities can be exposed, high lighting (rather than ignoring) power relations.	Analysing interviews with child care nurses from the perspective of benign surveillance 'disguised as friendship'. Discussion in relation to Foucault's ideas about state power and surveillance.

## Discussion

### Limitations of this study

Any classification of the theoretical foundations of DA and their associated practices is bound to oversimplify the range of works; nevertheless, it is offered as a heuristic device to facilitate an initial grasp of a wide field. Describing the DA papers in *JAN* in terms of the same classification compounds this limitation. Offering possible reasons for the take-up of different approaches within these papers is bound to involve speculation. A similar review of papers in, for example, a medical sociology journal could have provided a comparison. A risk in critiquing DA work is that of partisanship, evaluating work from one theoretical position by the criteria of another. In any evaluative comments, I have adopted minimal assumptions about what makes good DA; these assumptions are (i) that examples i.e. quotations of text are included in any analysis and (ii) that authors do something *further than* summarize themes in the texts or talk under analysis. Finally, in a research paper that lists DA as *one of* the approaches to language analysis informing its overall investigation (as did some papers included in this review), it is conceivable that the author chose not to foreground the practice of DA in their account of their analysis.

The interest shown by nurses in DA in its various forms is welcome, because the approach is powerful in bringing to light the operation of taken-for-granted practices in health-care delivery that sometimes work to the disadvantage of patients or of professionals themselves (Freidson 1994). The delivery of health care in most developed societies involves status differentials between professional and patient. DA

offers rigorous methods for providing evidence of how different groups achieve and maintain their status, perhaps through their control of conversational encounters (Silverman 1997) or by shaping hegemonic systems of knowledge that give definitions of others as either normal or deviant (Foucault 1973). DA can also show the operation of resistance to this power, either by patients (Horton-Salway 2004) or by rival groups of professionals (Traynor 1999).

Perhaps a commitment to emancipatory projects explains a good deal of this interest on the part of nurse scholars and the popularity of Foucauldian approaches, with their concern to investigate the operation of power – even if Foucault himself was sceptical about the notion of emancipation as such (Foucault 1980, Hartsock 1990). Humanist assumptions form the basis of some research approaches which centre on the subjectivity of the individual and their experiences, beliefs and accounts. They are, arguably, also influential in nursing (Watson 1985). However, they are not influential in some of the theoretical foundations of DA, including those elaborated by Foucault and proponents of deconstruction. Unacknowledged humanist tendencies could explain an inclination to foreground respondents' meanings and intentions rather than linguistic structure in some analyses.

Another possible reason for this foregrounding is that a popular – or 'natural' – hermeneutic tendency is to engage with the meaning of a text rather than attend to its structures, particularly if the text is powerfully persuasive, emotive or apparently banal, or if the analyst has humanist inclinations, as just discussed. Some of the papers reviewed showed this tendency (see Table 1). A different tendency was to present analysis as a search within the words of the research participants for the influence of sometimes highly underspec-

### What is already known about this topic

- Discourse analysis has been used in healthcare research and can help explain patient-professional and inter-professional interactions.
- Discourse analysis can uncover the operation of power by investigating how concepts and linguistic categories are developed and used at institutional and societal level.

### What this paper adds

- In studies using discourse analysis published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* between 1996 and 2004, critical approaches were the most popular and only a few studies focused on detailed analysis of conversational interactions.
- Some papers claimed to use discourse analysis, but exhibited generic thematic analysis rather than analysis that revealed the operation of language.

ified 'discourses'. While often informative about social influence, such work would benefit from a fuller setting out of the influential 'discourses' in question: how and when an object of discourse has appeared and what social and political conditions made such an emergence possible, for example. This would make a stronger connection between the social practice referred to and the individual text under analysis.

Without attending to both of these tendencies, what we are left with is a generic account of themes which are discussed in the context of some of the theoretical issues that have concerned discourse analysts, such as power.

### Conclusion

Discourse analysis can help us gain understanding of patient-professional and inter-professional interactions and relations. CDA can reveal the operation of power in apparently innocent or technical talk and text. It is difficult to suggest ways to improve the standard of subsequent published DA, because it is not possible to know the reasons for the weaknesses discovered in some papers reviewed here. I have speculated about the influence of humanism. Possible strategies for future improvement could include more careful attention on the part of those practising DA to methodology and to the key features that differentiate the various approaches to DA from other qualitative methods, some of which have more humanistic foundations.

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