

# Selecting Approaches for Discourse Analysis: Thoughts on Nursing Research


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## Abstract

Discourse analysis is a commonly used research methodology in the social and human sciences. In this paper, we highlight two different approaches to discourse analysis and discuss critical elements of each approach. As researchers new to discourse analysis, two Masters of Nursing students reflect on the process of making careful choices when deciding on using an approach developed by Fairclough or Foucault. The decision making must consider the substantive focus, methodological knowledge, and positionality and interest of the researcher. We illustrate key components of the two different discourse analysis approaches, the decision making involved in selecting a particular approach, and the shortcomings and limitations that each approach holds in relation to a particular research focus.

## Keywords

qualitative, methodology, methods, discourse, Foucault, Fairclough, critical

## Introduction

Discourse analysis is a common research methodology used across diverse disciplines. It is a broad approach that pays attention to the social meaning and context of language. Through examining language in texts, discourse analysis aims to illuminate underlying discourses and make visible how dominant ideologies are woven into the fabric of everyday life and institutions (Lupton, 1992; Springer & Clinton, 2015). Within nursing research, discourse analysis is commonly concerned with issues of power (Crowe, 2005). Discourse analysis often aims to uncover where power relations can be seen and analyzed, and how power shapes which discourses are constructed as dominant and which are marginalized or excluded (Allen & Hardin, 2001). In doing so, discourse analysis within a practice-based discipline, such as nursing, has the potential to build upon presently marginalized discourses to identify opportunities for operationalizing counter-discourses to challenge power structures (Cheek, 2004). Yet, methodological approaches to discourse analysis vary greatly. Despite robust theoretical analysis of discourses within the nursing literature, methodological guidance on choosing an approach from within the many possibilities remains limited and often convoluted (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014), hindering emerging researchers in taking up discourse analysis as

a powerful tool for exploring current practice-based challenges.

In this paper, we explore two primary approaches to discourse analysis espoused by Fairclough (1985) and Foucault (1972). It is important to understand the differences between methodological approaches when selecting discourse analysis. The selection is shaped by the aim of research, the intentions of the researchers, as well as the practical and social/theoretical implications of the work. We draw on the experiences of the first two authors, who are engaged in discourse analysis for their Master of Nursing thesis research. Using a conversational structure, we highlight some of the lived experiences:

Su Han: As a Registered Nurse, I have been working with the hemodialysis patient community for several years. Given risk factors such as exposure to bloodborne diseases and being immunocompromised, I have been interested in examining how nurses speak of and about these patients within their community.

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Allie: This is such an interesting topic to explore, and I can see that your work is very much informed by practice. Although theoretical approaches are at times dismissed as irrelevant to practice-based disciplines such as nursing, your research focus calls forth a need to understand issues of power and how they shape discourses.

Vera: As you speak about power, Allie, I wonder if it might be helpful to explore some key differences between approaches to discourse analysis. I echo the focus on issues of power and wonder about how we make decisions about the design of a study. Is the text the focus, or is it perhaps the social meaning and context of the text that provides us with insights?

Maddie: I think we also need to think about the broader aims of our work. In my research about social housing policies, it is critical to analyze how social norms shape the enforcement of these policies and the impacts on tenants.

In this paper, we aim to show how we make decisions about which discourse analysis approach to use in nursing research, to make visible the process through which these decisions were made and how this impacts the development of the studies. We use two examples, one focused on a microcosm of larger power structures (blood-borne diseases) and another on complex issues created by societal power structures (social housing). No ethical clearance was obtained in relation to this work, as it did not involve research participants.

## Historical Unfolding

Discourse analysis is a research methodology that unfolded from Foucault's landmark writings on how dominant discourses constructed distinct historical eras of philosophical and social thought around topics such as mental illness, disciplinary structures, social governance, and sexuality (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1988, 1990). Extending from these texts, discourse can be understood as the ideologies and assumptions that order the social world, shape social and institutional structures, and govern how and what knowledge is reflected in language (Cheek, 2004; Lupton, 1992). Discourses – though operating invisibly under the surface of everyday life – can be made visible through the analysis of language (Allen & Hardin, 2001). Discourse analysis therefore focuses its inquiry on *texts*, including written and verbal texts, to illuminate which discourses are present and how such discourses operate to construct social and institutional structures and processes (Parker, 1992; Powers, 1996). Yet, approaches to discourse analysis vary considerably in how texts are selected, language is analyzed, and discourses are examined. We summarize the historical unfolding of discourse analysis beginning with Foucault's writings on discourse, then considering Fairclough's methodological guidance for discourse analysis which builds on, and often cites, Foucault's work.

## Foucault

Foucault was a French philosopher best known for his theories on knowledge, discipline, and power. His writings emphasized the pervasive and dialectical nature of power and the importance of historicism in his “archeological” methods. Foucault is well known for his critical examination of medical and psychiatric discourses, most prominently his concept of the “medical gaze” (O'Callaghan, 2022).

Foucault obtained degrees in both philosophy and psychology and was additionally heavily influenced by historical and sociological concepts. He studied under Hyppolite in 1945, an existentialist who immersed him in theories of Hegel and Marx and impressed on him the significance of history (Muldoon, 2014). He was later also tutored by Althusser, a Marxist (Ryder, 2013), and in 1953 became partial to the philosophical works of Nietzsche (Dalglish, 2013). He later criticized Marxist universalism and was unafraid to discuss and critique topics deemed established in his day. Foucault was a professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the College de France (Gutting & Oksala, 2022). He became politically active in his later years, founding the Prisons Information Group in the 1970s that “gave a voice to political prisoners” (Catucci, 2018, p. 340) and published one of his key texts *Discipline and Punish* discussing penal institutions.

Foucault outlined the principles of discourse analysis in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), emphasizing the role of historical contextualization, power, truth, and knowledge, and situating his discourses in political and societal settings. Foucault's work is often regarded as a challenge to fully comprehend, and his approach to discourse analysis is certainly no exception. The details of how to do his analysis are vague and at times contradictory (Hook, 2001), resulting in many scholars adopting a more flexible approach to the methodology to avoid errors (Graham, 2005). Critical literature has consequently argued against an original, “pure” Foucauldian method, instead advocating for multiple “Foucauldian-inspired” approaches created by other academics (Hook, 2001).

## Fairclough

Fairclough (2013a), a pivotal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) figure, emerged as a prominent scholar in the late 20th century. Born in 1941, Fairclough's interdisciplinary exploration of language, sociology, and critical theory at Lancaster University positioned him as a distinguished linguistics professor, shaping decades of scholarly contributions. He helped define our modern understanding of the intricate interplay between language, power dynamics, and societal constructs.

The critical social science framework is central to Fairclough's (2013b) scholarship. His framework not only aims to describe societies and their systems, but also evaluates them against the notion of the “good society”

(Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 104). Moreover, it endeavours to comprehend avenues for societal change. Fairclough recognized discourse as integral to societal concerns, advocating for a more comprehensive examination of these concerns due to the pivotal role of ideas and concepts in social life.

Fairclough's CDA framework delves into pivotal semiotic categories, such as genres, discourses, and styles, significantly shaping societal contexts (Fairclough, 2013a). His analysis extends beyond written documents to encompass diverse multimodal expressions, broadening the understanding of text (Fairclough, 2013a; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Emphasizing the recontextualization of discourses across social fields, Fairclough scrutinized how discourses may be appropriated or colonized in a new context (Fairclough, 2013a; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Critical realism underpins this approach, highlighting the critical analysis of discourses in relation to societal perceptions and actions (Fairclough, 2013a; Liao & Markula, 2009).

Another fundamental aspect of Fairclough's CDA is the exploration of normative and explanatory critique (Fairclough, 2013a). This critique surpasses mere description, evaluating existing realities against fundamental societal values while endeavouring to explain them through underlying structures or mechanisms (Fairclough, 2013a; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Fairclough's scholarship underscores the reflexive nature of social phenomena, emphasizing how representations and conceptualizations significantly shape societal realities (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Liao & Markula, 2009). Overall, Fairclough's work highlights the crucial role of discourse intertwined with social practices, institutions, and societal change processes.

## Research Contexts

To ground the theoretical comparisons of Foucault's and Fairclough's approaches to discourse analysis in a practical context, we draw on the experiences of two Master of Nursing students conducting discourse analysis in their respective thesis research. We follow their process from uncertainty through to a final decision of methodological approach, starting with their positionality and a summary of their respective chosen topics.

### *A Focus on Nurses and Blood-Borne Diseases*

Blood-borne disease cases are prevalent within the hemodialysis patient community due to numerous risk factors such as frequent blood exposure and chronically compromised immune systems. As a registered nurse working in a dialysis clinic, Su Han is curious to explore how nurses speak of and about patients with these diseases within the nursing community. These discussions not only shape the way patients are viewed and treated by providers but may ultimately reinforce discourses and consequently decisions in the healthcare field. Her proposed study draws on a dataset from the r/nursing

forum on Reddit, currently one of the most popular social media websites comprised of over three million "subreddits", or community forums, dedicated to various topics. Data from the r/nursing subreddit was originally collated through the Telescope search tool for a larger research study exploring nursing representations of marginalized communities, with a data subset dedicated to discourses on bloodborne diseases. By examining these textual representations of rhetoric within a "safe space", Su Han hopes to offer insights into discourses circulating within global nursing communities that can support ongoing efforts to empower vulnerable populations.

### *A Focus on Social Housing Policies*

Maddie's research surrounds the discourses of social housing. Maddie is particularly interested in the discourse surrounding adequate housing from a human rights perspective, analyzing the language used in building health and safety inspection reports exchanged between the City of Vancouver (CoV) and a local not-for-profit property management group. These discourses seem to encapsulate power imbalances inherent to supportive housing and reflect societal norms influencing housing policies, as well as the enforcement of such policies. She is interested in the implicit power dynamics and hierarchies that shape decision-making, responsibilities, and the treatment of individuals living in supportive housing. Ultimately, she hopes that this work will offer a nuanced examination of how language constructs reality and reinforces or challenges the status quo in relation to social housing.

## Contemplating Methodological Choices

Throughout our contemplations we continued our conversations about the implications to the real-life work. Su Han focused on issues related to blood borne diseases and Maddie focused on issues related to housing.

Maddie: Even though I am still exploring my methodological options, Foucault's discourse analysis offers a compelling lens to understand how the CoV and the not-for-profit property management groups are positioned. Having been privy to some of these conversations as part of my nursing work, I want to be able to name how discourse constructs societal norms, inequalities, and power relations.

Allie: Yes, Foucault's approach would help you examine how language constructs and reinforces power relationships. I also wonder if Foucault's historical approach could offer another dimension of housing policy that will be beneficial in understanding the process of providing adequate housing for individuals who experience significant structural barriers in Vancouver's Downtown East Side.

Vera: Foucault's approach to discourse analysis may offer a more explicit focus on power dynamics in providing the right to adequate housing, though Fairclough's guidance might offer

nuanced analysis of the social context shaping power dynamics between the many actors bound up in housing policy construction and enforcement. Maddie, I wonder what approach to discourse analysis you might take to a data set that is publicly accessible.

Su Han: I am really interested in exposing overarching ideologies that participants in public dialogues may or may not be cognizant of themselves. Reddit provides nurses with a rare space to connect with each other on a global platform in a relatively anonymous manner.

Allie: Foucault and Fairclough each offer strengths and weaknesses in their approaches to discourse analysis. Foucauldian discourse analysis would work well with your topic, given strong influences of institutional power between marginalized communities and healthcare professionals. His theories of institutional power would help uncover flaws in the structure of healthcare in Canada today and look back at the history that brought it to life.

Su Han: However, his approach is vague and focuses more on “what” is said over “how,” which I feel is vital in a colloquial dataset like ours. Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis is focused on social justice, which lends itself brilliantly to the research topic as well, and contrasts Foucault by having specific steps and attention to linguistics. I have, however, a limited background in linguistics, which may preclude this form of analysis being done to adequate standards.

Maddie: It is so interesting to be at the point for having to make a decision about the kind of discourse analysis I should be using. I feel that a more detailed look at the nuances between Foucault and Fairclough’s approaches to discourse analysis can support the decision-making process in selecting a methodology.

Despite similarities and shared historical origins, there are defining characteristics of each approach that have conceptual, methodological, and practical implications. Scholars can better select an approach when prepared with comparative knowledge, as explained in the following sections.

## Comparing of Foucault and Fairclough

To support decision-making about approaches to discourse analysis for each respective research inquiry, we undertook a comprehensive comparison of Foucault and Fairclough’s theoretical and methodological approaches. Firstly, we explore the principle tenets of their work (see Table 1), examining their differing conceptualizations of power, discourse, and texts. We then compare orientations to three key analytic concepts: ideology, discursive practices, and social practices. Finally, we examine methodological tools for discourse analysis across Foucault and Fairclough’s approaches (see Table 2) and discuss the implications and relevance of each scholar’s discourse analysis orientation for nursing and the specific projects.

### Principle Tenets

Across Foucault and Fairclough’s work, *discourse* is a central tenet that undergirds discourse analysis as a methodological

approach. Foucault (1972) approaches this term from a linguistic perspective, articulating discourse as a “verbal performance” constituted by signs (language), which cluster together into a “group of statements that belong to a single system of formation” (p. 107). This grouping of statements becomes something more than simply a single utterance of language and becomes discourse: a pattern or system that can be dispersed, reproduced, and traced (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Foucault conceptualizes discourse as foundationally intersecting with *power*, which shapes which discourses become dominant across various historical time periods, genres, and societies.

In conceptualizing power, Foucault (1980) describes that at many points in history, “sovereign power” operated as the predominant power structure, in which a singular sovereign ruler held power “over” their subjects. He contrasts sovereign power with the operationalization of power in modern society, which he describes as “something which circulates” (p. 98). He emphasizes that power “is never in anybody’s hands” but rather operates through individuals as “the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p. 98). Discourses are therefore not constructed as dominant through one ruler’s domination, but instead through the intersections of “power, right, truth” (p. 93). In articulating this triangle, Foucault contends that power permeates society through the “rules of right” (power’s mechanisms), which in turn produce particular “discourses of truth” (p. 93). Discourses are therefore inseparable from power, and analysis of discourse must be concerned with *discursive power*: the intersections of power and discourse. Yet, Foucault recognizes that discursive power is often difficult to explicate within society, as dominant discourses are so deeply embedded within the social body that they are “neither hidden, nor visible” (1972, p. 112). *Texts* – language in written form – provide a window into these “quasi-invisible” discourses. Examining the language of texts allows for analysis of how power shapes which discourses are dominant, and which have been systematically excluded through the production of central “truth”. These excluded discourses, described as “subjugated knowledges”, exist outside of the “established régimes of thought” and may be employed to challenge discursive power (p. 81).

Though Fairclough draws on Foucault’s conceptualization of these principle tenets to inform his own methodological approach, there are key differences in how he articulates discourse, power, and texts. For Fairclough, *discourse* references “any spoken or written language use conceived as social practice” (2023, p. 71). While Foucault predominantly examines discourses across historical time periods, Fairclough locates his analysis of discourse within social institutions, in which “orders of discourse” form into “ideological-discursive formations” (IDFs) (2013a, p. 26–27). IDFs are produced by particular “orders of discourse” becoming dominant within a social institution and ultimately “naturalised” within the institution’s processes and structures (p. 31).

**Table 1.** Comparison of Principle Tenets of Foucault and Fairclough.

	Foucault	Fairclough
	Principle tenets	
Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A pattern or system of language</li> <li>• Reproduced within a particular society, historical period, or genre</li> <li>• Quasi-invisible in society, but not fully hidden</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any language that constitutes a “social practice”</li> <li>• Discourses within social institutions construct ideological-discursive formations (IDFs)</li> <li>• IDFs are “opaque” as they are naturalised within social institutions</li> </ul>
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power “circulates” and is not “held” by individuals</li> <li>• The triangle of power, right, truth produce and uphold discourses</li> <li>• Subjugated knowledges (excluded discourses) can challenge discursive power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power shapes and maintains IDFs</li> <li>• Differentiated from “status”</li> <li>• Resistance is framed as a disruption of the naturalisation of IDFs</li> </ul>
Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language in written form</li> <li>• Makes visible the quasi-invisible discourses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any excerpt of language produced within a social institution</li> <li>• Analysis of texts allows for identification of IDFs</li> </ul>
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideology is a manifestation of dominant power (although Foucault later objected to the idea of ideology, based on his opposition to the idea of truth)</li> <li>• Emphasis on practice, institutions, and the microphysics of power</li> <li>• Ideology is replaced by knowledge-producing apparatuses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideology is central to critical discourse analysis</li> <li>• Social institutions are not monolithic but pluralistic</li> <li>• Dominance of IDFs</li> <li>• Maintaining IDFs is crucial for the interests of the dominant class (power)</li> <li>• The concept of ideology is essential for a scientific understanding of discourse.</li> </ul>
Production and dissemination of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separates “discursive practices” and “non-discursive practices”. However, there are intersections of discursive and non-discursive practices: Contribute to the formation of subjectivities</li> <li>• Non-discursive: “Institutions, political events, economic practices and processes”, including surveillance mechanisms</li> <li>• Discursive: Power is asserted within relationships and rules to “create reality” through dominant discourses, including the institutional embeddedness of discourse and the construction of power relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzes a “discursive event”, which includes a text, discursive practices, and social practices</li> <li>• Discursive practices refer to how texts are produced, received and interpreted, and the effects they have. Focus is on vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical devices</li> <li>• Explores patterns of communication, the use of language, and the associated power relations within social interactions</li> <li>• Discourse is not neutral</li> <li>• Explores the broader social practices and processes in which language is used</li> <li>• Interested in how language functions in specific contexts, institutions, and social interactions</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Comparison of Methodological Tools Used by Foucault and Fairclough.

	Foucault	Fairclough
	Methodological tools	
Linguistic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach to discourse analysis is abstract without specific steps to a methodology</li> <li>• Focuses more on “what” is said rather than “how” it is said</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides steps to produce critical discourse analysis (CDA) that look at specific terms and phrases in detail</li> <li>• Pulls from field of linguistics: e.g., nominalization, rhetoric, and modality</li> </ul>
Discursive power & critical analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No formal structure; literature employing Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) are varied in their approach</li> <li>• Example: Using the four rules of formation (objects, subjects, concepts, strategies/theories) as guidelines (Pechtelidis &amp; Stamou, 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear structure in analysis: 3 levels of discourse (text, discursive practices, social practices; Fairclough, 2013)</li> <li>• Note: “Critical” discourse analysis must interpret beyond descriptions</li> </ul>
Performativity of the text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The said and the unsaid are both equally as important, as the dominant discourses make “rules” for what is appropriate</li> <li>• Tends to discuss and/or believe in one primary dominant discourse of a certain historical period, which suppresses other smaller discourses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both what is said and what is not said are significant – ideology often found in the “unsaid,” i.e., why are certain things not part of the conversation/discourse?</li> <li>• CDA presents a picture of multiple discourses existing at once that consequently create conflict</li> </ul>

For Fairclough, *power* both shapes and maintains IDFs, facilitating discourses to become dominant and remain naturalised. While Foucault differentiates sovereign power from circulating power, Fairclough contrasts power with “status”, noting a social group that has power to construct and maintain dominant IDFs may not be “status-marked” or necessarily appear to hold power (2013a, p. 44). Therefore, analysis of power may involve identifying “who” holds power and which discourses this group upholds. Echoing Foucault, Fairclough describes how naturalisation intersects with power to render IDFs “opaque” or “no longer visible as ideologies” (p. 44). Analysis of *texts* – excerpts of language within social institutions – disrupts this naturalisation of IDFs, allowing for identification of opaque discourses and recognition of their dominance within an institution. Fairclough recognizes this disruption as resistance, though he notes that individuals outside a particular institution may be best positioned and resourced to enact this resistance.

### Ideology

Fairclough and Foucault’s approaches to critical discourse analysis exhibits nuanced differences in their conceptual frameworks. Fairclough (2013a) aligns with a critical realist perspective, blending linguistics, sociology, and critical social theory; accordingly, Fairclough’s CDA is centered on language as a social practice and employs a three-dimensional model encompassing text analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. His view of ideology comes from a Marxist lens, emphasizing its role in legitimizing and exercising power. For Fairclough (2013b), ideology is a crucial element and central tenant of CDA, as ideology “requires reference outside the immediate situation to the social institution and the social formation in those ideologies [and] are by definition representations generated by social forces” (p. 47).

Fairclough (2013a) indicates that IDFs can be delineated as distinct ideological and discursive positions associated with different forces operating within a particular framework. Fairclough contends that institutions actively construct ideologies and discursive subjects by imposing constraints that individuals must adhere to qualify as subjects within these institutional contexts. Recognition of how power shapes and upholds dominant IDFs within an institution is central to understanding the broader class conflicts.

In contrast, Foucault’s (1980) CDA is firmly situated within poststructuralism and postmodernism, rejecting the stability of truths and highlighting the historicity and relativity of knowledge. Notably, Foucault challenges the conventional notion of ideology, objecting to its conceptualization as a unified and coherent set of ideas. Instead, Foucault contends that ideologies are immanent within discourses, intimately intertwined with power structures.

### Discursive Practices

Fairclough’s CDA is characterized by key discursive principles. He emphasizes the role of texts as reflections of IDFs

within social institutions, where texts, whether written or spoken, serve as tangible manifestations of prevailing power dynamics and contribute to the reproduction of specific ideologies (Fairclough, 2013a). His analyses delve into discursive practices, examining how texts are created, received, and interpreted, along with the profound effects they exert. Fairclough believes that there is no neutrality to discourse. In his view, information and knowledge are deeply intertwined with power dynamics and ideologies. Generally, CDA scrutinizes language use in various contexts to unveil the hidden structures of power and the ways in which language contributes to shaping and reinforcing societal norms. While Fairclough primarily focuses on the role of language in constructing and disseminating ideologies, Foucault’s framework includes a broader spectrum of practices, emphasizing the intertwining of discourse with non-discursive elements in the complex web of power relations.

### Methodological Tools

Many methodologies have a “toolkit” of rules and practices to help guide users through the research and analysis process. These tools may be shared between multiple methodologies or be distinct, depending on the theories and principles being selected and compared. The following sections compare the respective toolkits of Fairclough and Foucault as they guide methodological inquiry across three categories: linguistic analysis, discursive power, and performativity.

*Linguistic Analysis.* As outlined above, while Fairclough has an academic background in linguistics, Foucault’s scholarship was centered around history, philosophy, and sociology. Consequently, Fairclough’s approach to CDA greatly emphasizes its linguistic aspects despite a transdisciplinary approach. It involves taking scrutiny of the selected texts, and analyzing the words or phrases chosen to represent the corresponding discourse including parameters such as nominalization, rhetoric, and the modality used (Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). This allows CDA to offer significant insights into the discursive power of language through the author’s conscious or unconscious choices. Many scholars have criticized Foucault’s approach as difficult to follow due to a lack of structured analysis (Garrity, 2010). Foucault’s discourse analysis takes a bigger picture stance that performs without Fairclough’s focus on linguistics, instead favoring more in-depth forages into historical discourses and “what” is said, over “how”.

*Discursive Power & Critical Analysis (Structure).* The approach to structuring discourse analysis differs between Fairclough and Foucault in ways reminiscent of their linguistic analyses. Fairclough provides more structure in his methodology, with three levels of discourse used to guide his analyses: text, discursive practices, and social practices (Fairclough, 2013a). Whilst text refers to the written words and phrases being

interpreted, discursive practices explore how the text is initially and continually produced, and social practices speak to the context surrounding it. For each discursive event, or instance of discourse, all three levels must be addressed.

Foucault, however, provides much less structure to approach a discursive event. Perusal of “Foucauldian-inspired” discourse analyses show no uniform methodology or organization, unsurprising given his active resistance to more rigid methods (Garrity, 2010). Some scholars have opted to follow his four rules of formation - objects, subjects, concepts and strategies/theories - to structure Foucauldian analysis (Pechtelidis & Stamou, 2017).

We note that Fairclough contrasts a descriptive analytical approach of discourse with critical discourse analysis. While descriptive analysis supports identification of discourse in texts, CDA utilizes a macro/micro framework to illustrate “how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures” (Fairclough, 1985, p. 30). Scholars engaging in a critical analysis must commit to an earnest and extensive evaluation of discourse, ideology, and power to interpret their findings beyond the mere identification of discourses alone.

*Performativity.* The concept of performativity stems from the work of Judith Butler, who originally developed her theory for use in the field of gender studies. In Butler’s (2017) words, “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (p. 13); that is, through the repeated performative act of speech and text supporting a discourse, we create it into a socially constructed reality. It further suggests that absences can also be deafening by silencing discourses and preventing them from becoming real.

Butler’s concept of performativity is in alignment with both Foucault and Fairclough and supports the equal importance of what is and is not said within the text. In fact, Butler (2017) was reportedly inspired by Foucault when developing her theories. Foucault (1990) examines how discursive power is reproduced through language and social practices; for him, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). Therefore, through his discourse analysis, the enactment of discourse through language is inextricably intertwined with power, and with it, the social construction of reality. Fairclough’s approach is like Foucault, albeit with slightly different approaches and terminology. CDA emphasizes the notion of ideology, or a particular representation of the world. Dominant ideologies become naturalized through repetition in language and text, ultimately creating the reality that is the new “normal” (Fairclough, 2013a). Of note, the two analyses differ in their opinion on discourse plurality: while Foucault speaks mostly of a single discourse for each historical period, Fairclough acknowledges multiple discourses and the conflict that can occur when they collide or change in contextual power.

## Discussion

Understanding the similarities and differences between Foucault and Fairclough’s approach is critical when selecting methodologies to investigate problems or phenomena encountered in practice. We highlight the critical insights into the principle tenets, as well as the methodological approaches and tools that are called forth. We return to the two Master of Nursing students’ studies to show the application of this methodological understanding.

### Su Han

Having compared both approaches to discourse analysis, Foucault and Fairclough offer equally vital but clearly distinct insights into the discourses surrounding bloodborne diseases within nursing communities. Selecting one lens over the other may depend on what is foregrounded, much like the Gestalten psychological concept of figure-ground reversal: a figure and its background can be focused on separately, but they cannot be the focus of the individual at the same time (Wagemans et al., 2012). Similarly, we note it may not always be possible to select a singular framework for certain topics as each will highlight one facet while shadowing another.

Foucault’s approach to discourse analysis is entangled with his theories of power. Using his analytical framework would involve a focus on the circulation of power discourses and the overarching institutional “truths” that shape the actions at the bedside, as well as any subjugated discourses that may exist in conflict. There is an emphasis on knowledge, which includes a focus on nursing institutions and nurses’ training. Choosing this route would provide a perspective on how the history of nursing and medicine created discourses on bloodborne diseases, how this is disseminated to nursing students, and how hospitals reinforce certain discourses. This could highlight the role of institutions and long-standing traditions in how nurses speak of patients with bloodborne diseases. However, opting for Foucault comes with drawbacks. His methods are poorly defined, making it easy to miss the details in the words and phrases of the text.

Fairclough’s CDA offers a perspective framed by ideologies and their naturalization in society. Power still plays a vital role in his approach, but it is viewed through ideological-discursive formations and their reiterative maintenance through discursive texts. Furthermore, as a critical analysis, CDA heavily emphasizes the social and transformative implications and how these analyses can be used to create change. Selecting CDA explores the terms, phrases, and grammatical choices made in each post and their many implications in the discourse around patients with bloodborne diseases. Given the colloquial nature of the text and the power relations underlying interactions between posts and comments, CDA could be particularly beneficial in a study using social media datasets. We highlight the non-neutral nature of discourse that would lend itself well to encouraging change.

However, using CDA requires extensive linguistic knowledge and time. We note that care must also be taken due to its inherent subjectivity in the analysis process.

Overall, Su Han feels that Foucauldian discourse analysis is best suited for her approach, as she is interested in the overarching institutional power and historical events guiding current discourses within the healthcare field. These comparisons helped call attention to the different perspectives each analysis brings, their shortcomings, and perhaps ways to utilize aspects of both for a better-rounded research paper.

### *Maddie*

The process of selecting a methodology for CDA research aimed at revealing latent or normalized discourses regarding environmental and structural housing adequacy within Single Resident Occupancy hotels (SRO) in the City of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has been both illuminating and transformative.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her deliberations, Maddie found herself oscillating between Fairclough and Foucault, recognizing the immense value each offers in dissecting discourse. As a nurse deeply invested in promoting health equity and addressing the social determinants of health, Maddie understands the pivotal role that housing adequacy plays in shaping individual health. Thus, employing CDA in the supportive housing context is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial endeavor to unearth the ideologies perpetuating housing inequity and their profound effects on the health and wellness of populations who face structural inequities.

Both Foucault and Fairclough recognize the role power plays in shaping dominant discourses, particularly in the context of urban governance and property management. Foucauldian discourse analysis would examine the bylaw citations issued by the City of Vancouver for structural and environmental failures in SROs, focusing critically on power dynamics and how discourses contribute to the reinforcement of power systems. In the context of the SRO hotels, Foucault's approach would involve examining how discourses surrounding safety issues such as fire safety and infestations are used to exert power and control over the residents of these establishments. Our analysis would delve into the historical development of regulations and the discourses that surround them, exploring how these discourses serve to maintain and perpetuate existing power structures. Scrutiny of how the discourse surrounding safety issues in SRO hotels contributes to the normalization and enforcement of certain social norms and power relations is needed because we want to show how the discourse is used as a mechanism of control and surveillance, reinforcing the marginalization of the residents and legitimizing interventions by authorities.

Fairclough offers a more distinct methodology for uncovering hidden ideologies within the discourse surrounding housing adequacy and places a strong emphasis on ideology as a primary concept in CDA, arguing that ideologies are embedded within discourse and shape the ways in which social

reality is constructed and understood. In the context of SRO hotels, Fairclough's approach would involve examining how ideologies regarding housing, poverty, and marginalization are reflected and reinforced in the discourse surrounding safety issues. Fairclough would analyze the language used in the communication between the bylaw officers and the housing providers, as well as in the bylaw citations themselves, to uncover the underlying ideologies that inform attitudes towards housing adequacy in the Downtown Eastside. It would also include identifying linguistic features such as presuppositions, evaluations, and intextuality, which reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that underpin the discourse.

Fairclough would also explore how these ideologies shape the experiences and perceptions of the residents of the SROs. Ultimately, Fairclough's CDA is better suited for this type of discourse analysis as it offers a systemic and rigorous methodology for identifying naturalization and understanding the direct impact "common sense" has on populations who face housing inadequacies. Fairclough's CDA has critical goals of transformation and in the intricate tapestry of discourse analysis and has emerged as better suited to illuminate pathways toward equitable interventions and transformative change.

### *Shortcomings*

While Foucault and Fairclough's approaches to discourse analysis each offer useful and applicable methodological tools for nursing research, there are important shortcomings to consider. Foucauldian discourse analysis supports researchers in conducting philosophically-grounded discourse analysis studies that aim to illuminate and challenge power structures within institutions and in society (Cheek, 2004; Lupton, 1992). Yet, methodological guidance for "doing" Foucauldian discourse analysis is sparse, with Foucault's writings focused on theoretical conceptualizations of discourse, power, and knowledge (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Foucauldian discourse analysis has been lauded as a "powerful methodology for inquiring into nursing knowledge" (Springer & Clinton, 2015, p. 87), and has often been taken up as a methodological approach by nursing scholars. However, this lack of detailed technical direction for engaging in data collection and analysis presents a challenge for students and other emerging researchers in conducting studies using this approach (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Lopez-Deflory et al., 2023).

Conversely, Fairclough has offered extensive methodological support for conducting critical discourse analysis across various articles and books, offering researchers a comparatively clear guidebook for engaging with this methodology. As such, while his approach to discourse analysis may be particularly appealing to students, they may also find his methodological guidance less theoretically flexible. For example, while Fairclough invites researchers to specifically

examine the “different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors” (2009, p. 232) and positions power amongst a particular group, Foucault invites a broader philosophical orientation to power as circulating through social and institutional structures to construct and perpetuate dominant discourses. Some researchers may therefore find Fairclough’s discourse analysis to be a poor “fit” for certain research questions or areas of inquiry. We note that while Foucault and Fairclough’s approaches to discourse analysis are commonly used in nursing research, other scholars have offered methodological guidance for critical discourse analysis that may be considered (Bloor & Bloor, 2007; Carspecken, 1996; Chilton, 2004; Vaandering & Reimer, 2021; Van Dijk, 1995). Moreover, while Fairclough (2013b) argues that discourse analysis is (or ought to be) inherently critical in nature, researchers may choose to not take up critical perspectives and may seek alternative methodological approaches that are not theoretically intertwined with questions of power and ideology.

## Conclusion

As we think with the two studies and explore two key approaches to discourse analysis, we are turning to each other again. Throughout our conversations we have realized that there is never a ‘right’ approach, but rather that there is a need to justify methodological choices.

Allie: I can see the struggles Su Han and Maddie you are facing as you make a decision about whose approach you will follow. Power is a central element in the ways you have conceptualized your substantive focus, and yet how we make power visible can be diverse.

Maddie: I choose to undertake my proposed research because I can see how power impacts the inequities that people experience in their daily lives. Seeing how I can expose these connections and impacts remains central to my interest in undertaking a discourse analysis. As a nurse it is critical for me to understand how discourses and systemic structures undermine the wellbeing of people.

Vera: As part of the struggles of settling on a particular approach in each of your work, it is critical to remain wakeful to the shortcomings and limitations. These limitations are not only bound theoretically or methodologically, but also in our own preparation to undertake this work.

Su Han: When I began my studies, I was not able to clearly name why it mattered to me to understand what was happening to patients by listening to and recognizing the discourses nurses engaged in. I am much better positioned now to draw connections between texts, ideologies, social practices, and power. While feeling settled in taking a Foucauldian inspired approach to my work, I am much more closely attending to the nuances of texts, structures, and silences in the everyday and ordinary dialogues.

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## Note

1. Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is also considered Canada’s poorest urban neighborhood (Boyd et al., 2016; Evans & Strathdee, 2005). Single Room Occupancy hotels (SRO) are unique to Vancouver and are notorious for being infested with rodents, bugs, and mold (Evans & Strathdee, 2005). SROs are between 100–120 square feet with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities (Evans & Strathdee, 2005).

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