

Absences and Silences in Critical Discourse Analysis: Methodological Reflections

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Abstract

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative methodology frequently taken up by researchers to explore complex questions of how discursive power drives inequities. Across approaches to CDA, the emphasis of methodological directions has consistently been centred on examining and illuminating dominant discourses in texts. This paper argues that alongside the analysis of dominant discourses, it is crucial to examine absences and silences that are located within and beyond the text. The exploration of absences and silences can support more fulsome analysis of discourse, and is essential for challenging power structures and illuminating discourses of resistance. In this paper, three analytic strategies for attending to absences and silences in CDA are presented: (i) the lens of the theoretical framework; (ii) interrelation between dominant and excluded discourses; and (iii) positionality and local knowledges. Across each analytic strategy, an exemplar from the author's research is presented to illustrate the practice of engaging with absences and silences in CDA research. Ultimately, this paper contends that the analysis of absences and silences can support researchers in conducting inquiry that enacts resistance to power structures that perpetuate inequities, and envisioning possible paths toward equity and justice.

Keywords

absence, critical discourse analysis, discourse, fairclough, foucault, silence

“...the document was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence, its fragile, but possibly decipherable trace.”(Foucault, 1972, p. 6)

Background

Discourse analysis is a powerful methodological approach, often used within health and social sciences research to illuminate the social and structural forces that undergird systems and institutions, and thus shape healthcare and social services providers' practices and patients' experiences. The broad methodology of discourse analysis includes multiple varied approaches, each with their own orientations to conceptualizing discourse and undertaking analysis (Ong et al., 2024). Of particular relevance to researchers are critical discourse analysis (CDA) approaches, which integrate the examination of discourse with the challenging of power structures (Fairclough, 2012; Foucault, 1980; Parker, 1992). Within CDA, *discourses* can be understood as “a set of common assumptions” (Cheek, 2004, p. 1142) that are so

interwoven into social norms that they are nearly invisible (Foucault, 1972). These underlying assumptions intersect with power to fundamentally order and shape the social world, and the systems, structures, and processes contained within (Cheek, 2004; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Lupton, 1992). While discourses may be nearly invisible, CDA contends that they may be made visible through the analysis of *texts* (Foucault, 1972, 1980) – with ‘texts’ encompassing any document or utterance that may be examined to question “Why was this said, and not that?” (Parker, 1992, p. 4). CDA therefore aims to illuminate and examine how the intersections of power and discourse create and perpetuate injustices, both within institutions and society more broadly – with an ultimate

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aim to challenge power and remediate injustice (Powers, 1996; Springer & Clinton, 2015).

Methodological directions for conducting CDA have predominantly focused on analytical processes of identifying dominant discourses within texts, towards exposing underlying ideologies as shaped by power (Lupton, 1992). This process of “uncovering and unmasking” (Springer & Clinton, 2015, p. 91) dominant discourses supports an analysis of which ideologies and conditions are shaping structures and processes, and thus ‘how’ and ‘why’ particular language appears in text (Powers, 1996). Indeed, many studies utilizing discourse analysis present empirical findings as collections of dominant discourses – similar to presentation of ‘themes’ within other qualitative research reports (Boulton et al., 2022; Kim & Chang, 2024; Valderama-Wallace, 2017). However, scholars have also noted that discourse analysis may involve attention to absences and silences revealed through a text. Absences and silences can be understood as that which is unsaid or unrepresented in text, consequently rendering particular discourses as hidden or unseen. Greckhamer and Cilesiz (2014), illustrating the interplay between dominant and absent discourses, assert that discourses necessarily reflect and reproduce a particular social norm or meaning, “to the exclusion of other possibilities” (p. 424). Indeed, dominant discourses have been noted to “marginalize or even exclude others” (Cheek, 2004, p. 1143), with CDA facilitating scholars’ exploration of *both* what discourses are asserted in text, and which are excluded (Crowe, 2005, p. 58). Khan and MacEachen (2021) observe that in contrast to CDA, other qualitative approaches – such as thematic analysis – do not support analysis of absences and silences, and rather emphasize “the presence over absence and spoken voice over silence” (p. 4).

Within other qualitative methodologies, such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology, there is also a robust tradition of examining silences and deriving meaning from such silences to enrich the depth and nuance of findings (Orange, 2020; Poirier & Ayres, 1997). Within such approaches that centre data collection on conversation with participants, silence is typically situated as a lapse in speech in which stories or perspectives may be ‘untold’ – with inquiry into these silences offering its own essential insights into a participant’s lived experience (Blix et al., 2021). Yet, within CDA, which often focuses on written texts, the question of how to analytically attend to absences and silences remains under-addressed.

This paper argues that within CDA, attending to absences and silences is crucial for ensuring a fulsome analysis of the intersections of discourse and power, as power necessarily excludes particular discourses as it centres others. Making visible not only dominant discourses, but also these excluded discourses, holds considerable potential for illuminating strategies of resistance to power. Yet, despite various references to absences and silences across the literature on discourse analysis, there has been a lack of focused methodological directions for meaningfully integrating

absence and silence into the analytic process. As such, this paper presents a methodological reflection on absences and silence in discourse analysis. Firstly, I offer an overview of CDA, presenting an overview of the notion of absences and silences across CDA approaches. Then, I present three analytic strategies for researchers in attending to absence and silence in research utilizing CDA approaches. Within each strategy, an exemplar is provided as an illustration of how this strategy may be practically applied to the process of undertaking CDA research. While this paper predominantly highlights exemplars of CDA research within the field of health services, the reflections offered in this paper may be of interest to CDA researchers across disciplines.

Critical Discourse Analysis: An Overview

Within the broad methodology of CDA, two predominant approaches include Foucauldian discourse analysis and Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. Beyond Foucauldian and Fairclough’s approaches to discourse analysis, numerous other researchers have offered methodological insights into CDA; yet, these two approaches remain central traditions within discourse analysis research. While fulsome description and comparison of Foucault’s and Fairclough’s approaches are presented by other scholars (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ong et al., 2024; Springer & Clinton, 2015; Waring, 2017), I offer a brief overview here to situate our exploration of absences and silences within CDA.

Foucauldian discourse analysis as a qualitative methodology grew out of Foucault’s writings, in which he describes how relations of power “permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93), and are established and maintained through discourses. Discursive power – as the intersection of power and discourse – thus produces a social ‘truth’ that perpetuates the dominance of certain discourses within a social/historical context. Discourses are constituted by – and made visible through – statements, which may be analyzed and ‘mapped’ within texts to explore how they interrelate within a particular regime of truth (Foucault, 1972). While Foucault offers limited guidance for ‘doing’ discourse analysis, he emphasizes that “one must conduct an *ascending* analysis of power” (1980, p. 99) that begins within the “infinitesimal mechanisms” of statements within texts, and ultimately illuminates discursive power. For Foucault (1980), power and knowledge are fundamentally intertwined, as power shapes which discourses predominate, and thus what it is possible to know.

Fairclough builds on Foucault’s conceptualizations of discourse, power, and truth, to offer an approach to CDA grounded in critical theory, and to present more detailed directions for undertaking discourse analysis as a qualitative methodology. Fairclough (2023) situates CDA within a broader tradition of critical social analysis, which facilitates critique of existing norms – or social realities – and supports the examination and evaluation of the mechanisms and

structures that drive these norms. This process of critique within Fairclough's CDA is therefore foundationally concerned with *ideology*: "the representation of 'the world' from the perspective of a particular interest" (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 46). Ideologies are operationalized within society and its institutions through ideological-discursive formations (IDFs), with particular IDFs maintaining dominance over others (2013b). This hierarchical organization of IDFs is shaped by – and perpetuates – power, as certain IDFs shore up the existence and status of dominant social groups that hold power. While IDFs are established as norms within social institutions, analysis of texts that are produced within such institutions facilitates the identification and organizing of these IDFs, and therefore supports nuanced analysis of how power functions within a particular context.

Absences and Silence in CDA

Across CDA approaches, absences and silences have been often invoked in the discussion of how discourses may be conceptualized, illuminated, and challenged. Within *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) consistently explores notions of exclusions, absences, gaps, and silences, observing that: "The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this 'not-said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said" (p. 25). This 'not-said', or 'unsaid', is situated in relation and counterpoint to dominant discourses within society, as Foucault emphasizes that power necessarily centres certain discourses, which constitute truth and construct knowledge. While he asserts that discourse analysis cannot map silence itself, he conceptualizes an interrelationship of dominant and excluded discourses, which in turn permit what can be said: "How is that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (p. 27). The interpretation of text therefore involves both 'hearing' that which is said, while listening for "at the same time a 'not-said'" (p. 25).

Fairclough, in his focus on ideology and IDFs, speaks limitedly about absences and silence in his writings; yet, IDFs offer an entry point into the consideration of excluded discourses within CDA. Fairclough conceptualizes power through notions of 'class', contending that dominant classes – particular social groups within an institution that hold power – shape which IDFs are maintained. Therefore, power shapes *orders of discourse*: the hierarchical interrelationship between discourses. While Fairclough's methodological writings focus largely on the more dominant IDFs within a social institution, he also recognizes the possibility of leveraging non-dominant discourses to challenge power: "Resistance is most likely to come from subjects whose positioning within other institutions and orders of discourse provides them with the resources to resist" (2013b, p. 27). Here, he suggests that social groups who may not hold power may still employ discourses that are non-dominant – or even absent – within a social institution's orders of discourse, toward critiquing and even shifting the

persistence of particular IDFs. In sum, through the leveraging of excluded and non-dominant discourses, resistance interrupts both norms and the power structures that establish and maintain them.

While Foucault and Fairclough both address excluded and absent discourses within their methodological writings, there remains a nearly total lack of directions for analyzing absences and silence. Therefore, the focus of CDA remains predominantly on exploring and illuminating *dominant* discourses in texts. While crucial for visibilizing power and its effects, I contend that current CDA approaches are theoretically and methodologically hindered by a dearth of approaches to examine absence and silence. Indeed, present analyses may even be considered incomplete in attending predominantly to illuminating dominant discourses, without also considering which excluded discourses the dominant obscure and marginalize. Particularly within CDA, which is concerned with remediating inequities and promoting social justice, attending to absences and silences may present a new pathway to resistance within discourse analysis research. Toward this aim, this paper identifies three strategies for attending to absences and silences throughout the process of undertaking CDA research.

Strategies for Analysis

To offer preliminary methodological reflections on attending to absences and silences within qualitative research guided by CDA, I present in this section three analytic strategies: (i) the lens of the theoretical framework; (ii) interrelation between dominant and excluded discourses; and (iii) positionality and local knowledges. Within each strategy, I offer an exemplar drawn from critical discourse analyses I have conducted across research studies, to illustrate possible applicability to the analytic process and provide tangible examples of integrating the presented strategies into research approaches. I offer these exemplars as a nursing researcher whose work focuses predominantly on promoting social justice within healthcare systems, and challenging social structures and processes that create and perpetuate inequities. These exemplars span already completed research and research-in-progress, to illuminate how inquiry into absences and silences can be integrated throughout the research process, and not only in end-stage analysis and presentation of findings.

The Lens of the Theoretical Framework

Within many discourse analyses, CDA is either considered both a theoretical framework and a methodology, or theory and methodology are closely intertwined with a central focus on critical perspectives and the examination and critique of social structures and processes (Cheek, 2004; Khan & MacEachen, 2021). As such, CDA research is inherently attuned to issues of power, discourse, knowledge, truth, and ideology, and weaves these foundational concepts into the

analytic approach (Fairclough, 2013b; Foucault, 1980; Lupton, 1992). These theoretical tenets serve as powerful analytic tools for visibilizing power, its intersection with discourse, and its effects. At the same time, the illumination of power can support inquiry into the discourses that power does *not* make dominant. Parker (1992) describes that conflating power and discourse, and thus only analyzing the discourses that power upholds, constitutes a ‘trap’ wherein “we would lose a sense of the relationship between power and resistance, lose the distinction between power as coercive and resistance as a refusal of dominant meanings” (p. 18). Consequently, he invites analysis of both oppressive discourses *and* discourses that challenge power, noting that indeed, they are often intertwined.

Foucault and Fairclough’s theoretical constructions of power, though they differ from one another, each similarly offer a theoretical in-roads to making visible the discourses that lie outside of the dominant. Within a Foucauldian lens, one might turn to a historical analysis of a discourse to illuminate knowledges outside of a current social/historical era, whereas Fairclough’s ‘orders of discourse’ may invite examination of the IDFs situated at the ‘bottom’ of the hierarchy within a social institution. In each case, discursive power as a theoretical framework supports the making visible of what power obscures, and indeed, how power is served *by* the act of obscuring. Through this lens, the absence of a discourse can also be seen as a relevant and necessary ‘finding’, as the operationalization of power through structures and processes has constructed and maintained this absence.

Beyond the theoretical framings inherent to CDA, a specific theoretical framework adopted within a particular study can also support the identification of absences and silences in texts. As articulated by Springer and Clinton (2015), theory illuminates “broken and unbroken chains of knowledge” (p. 91), or what Foucault (1972) terms *discontinuities*. These discontinuities may include, for example, ruptures between the worldview, truths, knowledge, and perspectives inherent to a theoretical framework and the dominant discourses operating within a particular social/institutional context under research inquiry. Within critical approaches, theoretical lenses often assert perspectives that are already excluded in society, and therefore can support the analysis of discourses that are intertwined with theory but may be absent from texts. Writing within a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach, Khan and MacEachen (2021) reflect that theory can further support researchers in analyzing data from an ‘outside’ stance, which can illuminate interpretations beyond dominant social norms. Similarly, within the tradition of Fairclough’s CDA, theory can illuminate conceptual alternatives to ideologies that hold dominance within a social institution, and thus support researchers in analysis of IDFs that are de-centred in a text and its broader context. When adopting such approaches in the process of analysis, it is crucial to ensure that the selected theoretical framework is not only thoughtfully chosen in relation to the research topic, but also fulsomely and clearly

articulated to ensure that the line of analysis from theory to absences and silences is rigorous and intentional. In utilizing theory to guide the process of identifying absences and silences in text, CDA researchers can reflect on the guiding questions: How does the selected theory ‘show up’ in text? Are there aspects of the theory that are absent in text, and in what ways might theory help us account for this absence? Does examining the data through the lens of the theory illuminate where power might be operating to construct dominant discourses? Exemplar 1 draws from a study exploring emergency department nurses’ practices of social justice to illustrate how applying a theoretical framework through the CDA analytic process can support the illumination of silences and absences within a dataset.

Exemplar 1: Applying the Lens of the Theoretical Framework

My dissertation research explored how emergency department nurses enacted social justice in their everyday practice. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, this study drew on institutional texts from the healthcare system, and interviews with nurses, to examine how social justice was discursively constructed and to explore implications for nurses’ actual practices in upholding social justice. In one of the analyses, we utilized Iris Marion Young’s (1990) theory of social justice paradigms to guide the analytic process. Young’s theory contends that philosophical constructions of social justice are delineated by two paradigms: a *distributive* social justice paradigm, and a *systemic* social justice paradigm. The dominant distributive paradigm centres the distribution of resources as the primary means of achieving equity, and has long been espoused by theorists and adopted across health system equity efforts (Daniels, 1985; Rawls, 1971). Young illuminates that a systemic social justice paradigm – often ignored in equity efforts – focuses on the upstream structures and processes that undergird distributive patterns. Systemic social justice illuminates the drivers of inequities, rather than merely calculating the tangible effects of inequities in society.

Through the lens of Young’s theoretical framework, our analysis of institutional texts and nurses’ talk illustrated that *distributive* social justice operated as a hegemonic discursive pattern within the institutional context of the emergency department, constituting a dominant discourse. Resultantly, initiatives within the emergency department that were designed to enhance equity in health and healthcare often inadvertently perpetuated inequities, because they failed to attend to *systemic* social justice by acknowledging or addressing structural drivers of inequities.

Notably, Young's theory further allowed us to observe that a *systemic* social justice paradigm was *nearly* absent from institutional texts and indeed may have been missed if we were not attuned in the analytic process to this theoretical lens of the duality of social justice paradigms. Throughout our process of coding and interpreting interview data, we identified that individual nurses in fact did draw on discourses within a systemic social justice paradigm to facilitate their recognition of inequities, and their engagement in practices to remediate these inequities. As such, the lens of Young's theoretical framework served to orient our analysis to a discursive absence (systemic social justice), despite textual silence.

Interrelation Between Dominant and Excluded Discourses

It is an inherent methodological assumption within CDA that discourses are interwoven – nearly invisibly – into the fabric of society, with texts reflecting discourse and therefore acting as a window into their identification and analysis. While prior methodological directions have centered on the identification of *which* discourses are most predominantly reflected in text, I contend that dominant and absent discourses exist in interrelation. As Foucault suggests, it may be impossible to map silence alone, but seeking absences and silences through what *is* 'said' can support the location and boundaries of what is 'not-said'. Allen and Hardin (2001) explicate this within their more linguistic approach to discourse analysis, where they note that signifying what is *inside* a statement involves differentiating from that which is *outside*; for example, they note that the word 'begging' excludes 'demanding' and 'talking'.

This exploration of what Foucault (1972) terms "negative space" can be similarly undertaken at the level of discourse itself. To illustrate this process, Crowe draws on the Derridean binary as an approach to undertaking CDA, emphasizing that examining binaristic discourses – such notions of healthy/unhealthy advanced within biomedical discourses – can open space for visibilizing "possible alternative reconstructions" (p. 57). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (2011) similarly explores and contests binaristic discourses, emphasizing their propensity to construct a "subordinate term": a masculine/feminine discourse subordinates and excludes the feminine. As such, they explore beyond-binaristic thinking to examine the myriad discourses and discursive possibilities that are excluded:

"...of equal importance is the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability, illuminating the

violence and contingent boundaries of that normative regime" (Butler, 2011, p. 25).

Approaching CDA through a within/beyond analysis of binaries can thus facilitate researchers in identifying discourses beyond the dominant alone, inviting exploration of what absences and silences are created and/or illuminated by dominant discourses. This approach further holds the potential for nuancing analysis beyond the 'listing' of dominant discourses as the product of analysis, toward examining *how* discourses are in interrelation, including ways in which particular discourses may obscure others. In this way, the act of obscuring itself – through power – illuminates that which is absent. Exemplar 2 demonstrates how analytic exploration of dominant and excluded discourses in tandem can illuminate absences and silences in a dataset, where such excluded discourses may otherwise remain invisibilized by discursive power. Drawing on a prior research study examining nursing professional texts, this exemplar offers insights into the process of visibilizing the 'not-said' within the data, and how such absences and silences constitute essential findings within a CDA study.

Exemplar 2: Applying the Interrelation Between Dominant and Excluded Discourses

I recently worked alongside a team of nurse researchers to conduct a discourse analysis examining how social justice is discursively positioned within nursing professional documents (inclusive of regulatory, ethical, and accreditation documents) in Canada (Slemon et al., 2024). The impetus for conducting this discourse analysis is the persistent emphasis among nurses that social justice is a collective nursing value and that nursing documents reflect this shared mandate – while prior analyses have illustrated that nursing documents demonstrate superficial conceptualizations of social justice that perpetuate neoliberal and biomedical paradigms (Bekemeier & Butterfield, 2005; Reimer Kirkham & Browne, 2006; Valderama-Wallace, 2017).

In analyzing these texts with an intent to explore social justice discourses, it was immediately evident that social justice – and related concepts of equity, equality, etc. – was completely absent from over a third of the documents, which were devoid of any statements that evoked this discourse. Here, the 'not-said' was palpable, and constituted a crucial absence within documents that were explicitly created to regulate and guide nursing work.

Moreover, our analysis of *how* social justice discourses were reflected in text illuminated the 'not-said' within and beyond what *was* said. In particular, the predominance of knowledge/awareness discourses positioned social justice as a process of recognizing the

existence of inequities in health and health care, and reflecting on one's own privilege, biases, and assumptions. This discourse of knowledge/awareness as social justice is so dominant as to be nearly total, and as such, it is a persistent analytical challenge to explore how power may be shaping the predominance of this discourse and what other discourses may thereby be excluded. In our analysis of these texts, it was through the process of identifying 'what' knowledge/awareness discourses excluded that we illuminated practice as an absent discourse. Indeed, constructions of social justice as a practice or action enacted by nurses was largely excluded from nursing documents – ultimately perpetuating the notion that knowledge and awareness alone constitute social justice, and are sufficient for remediating inequities within nursing. In sum, examining within/beyond dominant discourses of social justice in nursing documents supported our ability to locate and trace the absences in texts, thereby illuminating new paths for taking up social justice in nursing work.

Positionality and Local Knowledges

As analysts of discourse – especially within a CDA approach – one is never 'neutral' in relation to discursive power, and one's positionality as researchers inherently shapes analysis (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Indeed, all researchers (especially those within applied health fields, who may also work as clinicians) embody an insider/outsider status in relation to the inquiry, population, and context (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001). Insider status may support our identification of absences and silences that 'official' texts may obscure – such as that which occurs in the 'everyday'. Yet, we as 'insiders' may also take the dominance of particular discourses for granted, which can make it more difficult to identify how they are shaped by power and to challenge them. Outsider status can facilitate our analysis of texts with fresh eyes, without taken-for-granted assumptions inherent to an institutional context. As Fairclough observes, outsiders – beyond a social institution and the social groups that hold power – may indeed be best positioned to challenge dominant IDFs. However, as 'outsiders' new to a particular setting, we may experience difficulty identifying *what* it is that might be absent or silent. As we navigate our complex and nuanced insider/outsider status as researchers, including our own positionality, we can also undertake the analysis of data through an interplay of insight and distance, intentionally questioning: What does my positionality have me 'see'? What discursive assumptions am I bringing to the text? How does my situatedness in power structures obscure the challenging of dominant discourses and the illumination of absences and

silences? Working collaboratively with research teams may facilitate a diverse and intersectional analysis with explicit questioning of how researchers' varied positionalities shape our lenses and our findings. Moreover, we can also remain open as researchers to the process of the analysis and the possibilities that may be illuminated throughout the process of visibilizing discourse and power in text.

Beyond researcher positionality, a further strategy for visibilizing absences and silences in discourse is the engagement of communities who embody a different positionality vis-à-vis discursive power. Foucault (1980) articulates such communities as those who hold "local knowledges", or "subjugated knowledges" (p. 81). Such local knowledges constitute an array of discourses excluded from the 'truth' advanced within a particular social/historical context, and the dominant discourses created and maintained within. Foucault emphasizes that local knowledges are "not dependent on established regimes of thought" (p. 81), existing outside dominant discourses, and may indeed be leveraged to challenge discursive power through an "*insurrection of local knowledges*" (p. 81, italics in original). This notion of excluded discourses as a strategy of resistance has been taken up across CDA approaches (Lupton, 1992; Powers, 1996), including calls for seeking out and recentering groups who may illuminate such excluded discourses and the possibilities they make visible. Powers suggests that researchers engage in participatory approaches to discourse analysis, toward identifying where dominant discourses produce and perpetuate oppression, while Khan and MacEachen (2021) reflect that CDA holds potential to meaningfully engage "unsuccessful, marginalized, untold, and unspoken voices/silences" (p. 3). One approach to engaging the perspectives of those who hold local knowledges is through discursive qualitative interviews (Hammersley, 2014; Nikander, 2012), which can support the visibilization of the complex intersections between discourse and power, by illuminating knowledge beyond the dominant discourses advanced within a particular social/institutional context. Indeed, interviews through a CDA approach "may enable us to listen to socio-culturally produced silence in qualitative data analysis" (Khan & MacEachen, 2021, p. 6), giving voice to absences and silences created and perpetuated by discursive power. Moreover, researchers may consider participatory discourse analysis approaches, directly engaging communities in the process of analysis to illuminate perspectives outside of the dominant discourses advanced within an institutional structure.

Currently, engaging communities and research participants in discourse analysis is rare, perhaps due to the depth of philosophical and theoretical analysis that CDA often involves, as well as the complex linguistic analyses adopted within some CDA approaches. However, analyzing silences may be nearly impossible given a researcher's own positionality, and the robust and meaningful exploration of absences in discourse analysis may rely in some instances on the inclusion of voices from 'outside' communities; as articulated

by Rosiek and Heffernan (2014), a researcher “can’t code what the community can’t see” (p. 726). Resultantly, some researchers have engaged participant advisory groups in the process of conducting discourse analysis toward illuminating that which is obscured in institutional texts (Emard, 2023). Foucault (1972), speaking to dominant discourses upheld by power, reflects: “it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground” (pp. 44–45). As such, the fulsome examination of absences and silences within discourse analysis may necessitate engaging perspectives beyond the researcher alone, involving those with local knowledges as ‘insurrection’ toward challenging discursive power. Exemplar 3 brings insights from a research study currently in progress to provide a pragmatic example of how juxtaposing texts that stem from different knowledges and worldviews can illuminate otherwise unseen discourses. As this exemplar illustrates, through engaging people with lived experience as a form of local knowledge – a common practice in health and social sciences research – CDA researchers can explore new discursive possibilities that contest power structures and subvert dominant discourses.

Exemplar 3: Applying Positionality and Local Knowledges

I am currently engaged in a research project that aims to enhance the prevention of seclusion (containment in a locked room) among young people within inpatient mental health settings. The research team for this project consists of four nurse researchers with clinical experience in inpatient and community mental health settings working with young people. As such, we bring inherent assumptions regarding the use of seclusion – even as critical researchers who aim to challenge power structures within mental healthcare contexts. Yet, as critical researchers, we also bring potential biases regarding seclusion practices, which may be in misalignment with the lived realities of healthcare providers who currently utilize seclusion as part of their practice within inpatient mental health settings.

To meaningfully engage with the myriad and intersecting discourses related to seclusion use and prevention, we have developed a community-based project co-designed by researchers, mental healthcare providers who work at a local inpatient mental health unit, and young people who have lived experience of seclusion. Interviews are being conducted with both providers and young people to explore discourses of seclusion use and prevention. As a key aspect of this project, we have formed a Peer Advisory consisting of three young people who live with mental health challenges, who will continue be engaged throughout the process of analyzing policies and guidelines for seclusion use (as key

texts), and offer perspectives on how data is being analyzed and presented.

A central activity in this research is a planned *Collaborative Development Session*, which will bring together researchers, healthcare providers, and people with lived experience to share diverse perspectives on a variety of texts: policies, guidelines, and story (as a lived form of text). This approach of positioning multiple discourses alongside one another is challenging, and necessitates careful planning to create safe spaces of dialogue and even disagreement. Yet, the juxtaposition of dominant discourses (i.e., of the healthcare institution) and local knowledges (i.e., stories of people with lived experience) holds immense potential for illuminating the absences and silences that persist in relation to seclusion. Our intention is that new possibilities not yet visibilized will be illuminated through this process, offering both new discursive paths that challenge power, and therefore novel tangible strategies for seclusion prevention.

Implications for Research

By engaging with the notion of absences and silences in CDA, I emphasize that despite a central focus on dominant discourses within prior methodological reflections, discourse analysis may be incomplete without attending to these absences and silences that exist within/beyond the text. Indeed, exclusion of absences and silences within both the analytic process and the presentation of findings may uphold power, reifying the very discourses that CDA aims to visibilize and challenge. Conversely, illuminating absences and silences can be a strategy of resistance, leading to new paths of discursive possibility that contest discursive norms and the structures and processes such norms uphold. Within health and social sciences research in particular, absences and silences are crucial for driving change, innovation, or remediating of past harms. As dominant discourses within institutional texts – including policies, guidelines, and decision support tools – shape providers’ practices, excluded discourses hinder possibilities for alternative practices and actions that are not promoted or legitimized through institutional processes and structures. For example, a recent discourse analysis of nurses’ equity-promoting practices demonstrated that such practices were constrained by their institutional context and the dominant discourses upheld within, and were instead taken up (variably and inconsistently) by individual nurses as subversion of discursive power (Slemon et al., 2023). Therefore, beyond challenging dominant discourses and their intersections with power within healthcare and social systems, CDA as a methodological approach has considerable potential to introduce previously excluded discourses, thereby reinscribing

present absences and silences as new possibilities for practices – particularly those that aim to remediate present inequities.

Despite this potential, the illumination of absences and silences within CDA may also hold risks and unintended consequences. Powers (1996) reflects:

Naming and describing a resistance discourse can initiate the processes of the dominant discourse that control variability in the name of standardization. Co-optation of marginalized discourses is a real possibility that may have a devastating effect on the purpose of the alternative discourse. (p. 212)

While well-intentioned CDA researchers may contend that illuminating discourses constitutes resistance, there are also risks of co-opting the discourses of a group that experiences structural inequities, misrepresenting discourses with harmful impacts, or revealing discourses that hold more subversive power by being obscured. With the consistent pressures of standardization, managerialism, and efficiency inherent to current healthcare systems under neoliberalism, colonialism, and capitalism (Anderson et al., 2007; Slemon, 2018; Weiss et al., 2002), it is a concerning prospect that visibilizing local knowledges may in fact drive their erasure. Moreover, intentions to illuminate absences and silences may also risk inadvertently reifying power structures while purporting to challenge them, particularly in relation to researcher positionality and situatedness. Spivak (1994) asserts that under colonialism, both the silence and the voice of the *subaltern* – those who are denied power and rendered marginalized – are read through the colonial capitalist patriarchal system, and as such, there is only ever silence. CDA researchers, particularly White scholars working in colonial contexts, risk attempting to ‘give voice’ to excluded discourses where it is not ours to ‘give’ or to represent. Even within critical approaches, undertaking CDA risks the researcher “imposing meaning” on a text, or even on the words and intentions of another (Cheek, 2004, p. 1146). Participatory approaches indeed risk the perpetuation of a hierarchical relationship between so-called ‘researchers’ and ‘participants’, and yet also hold immense possibility within CDA to explore absences and silences from a place of resistance to power, and with true subversive aims.

Ultimately, I contend that while resistance to power has long been upheld as a central aim of CDA (Fairclough, 2013a; Foucault, 1980; Lupton, 1992), CDA researchers may be hindered in this countering of dominant discourses if we do not access absences and silences through alternative ways of seeing the ‘not-said’. Indeed, resistance can stem from illuminating what discursive power renders nearly impossible. Given the risk of reinscribing power through resistance – such as advancing ‘new’ dominant discourses that do not actually dismantle power structures – hooks, in her landmark text *Ain’t I a Woman*, calls for resistance as revolution, rather than as reform. This paper intends to echo this call, emphasizing that beyond reworking and reorganizing current discourses,

visibilizing absences and silences can illuminate a “radical rhetoric” that may be “deployed and mouthed” to challenge current systems (Woodson, 2023, p. 40).

Conclusions

To support researchers in meaningfully integrating the analysis of absences and silences in the process of undertaking CDA, this paper aims to encourage a new orientation to notions of dominant discourses and discursive power advanced within current methodological discourses. Toward this aim, I have proposed three strategies for illuminating absences and silences in text and in doing so, aim to support CDA researchers in undertaking intentional and rigorous consideration of absences and silences within the analytic process. And yet, these strategies represent only a small number of possibilities for such explorations that may also include historical analyses and linguistic approaches to navigating discourse. I envision that by examining and visibilizing absences and silences, CDA researchers may identify further tools and approaches for enacting resistance to power and envisioning new emancipatory possibilities for healthcare practices and social systems.

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