

## **The Power of Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

In this presentation, I will examine the link between power and discourse. Researchers have shown that, at any particular moment in time, discourses – structured collections of texts and associated practices of textual production, transmission and consumption – shape the system of power that exists in a particular context by holding in place the categories and identities upon which it rests. In other words, the distribution of power among actors, the forms of power on which actors can draw, and the types of actors that may exercise power in a given situation are constituted by discourse and are, at a particular moment, fixed. Over time, however, discourses evolve as this system of power privileges certain actors, enabling them to construct and disseminate texts. Depending on the dynamics of their transmission and consumption, these texts may influence the broader discourse and shape the discursive context over time.

In order to understand the relationship between power and discourse, we need to unpack this complex, mutually constitutive relationship. Due to the influence of Foucault, the literature has been largely preoccupied with how particular discourses produce systems of power, while the way in which the dynamics of power influence discourse has received rather less attention. Accordingly, a re-examination of the power literature from a discursive perspective helps to draw out the dynamics that lead actors to produce texts that influence discourse and to understand why some actors are more successful in modifying discourse in ways that are useful to them.

This presentation will first consider the realm of discourse – how discourse produces power relationships and, in so doing, constitutes the social context for action. It will then examine the realm of action – how action affects discourse through time – through practices of textual production, transmission and consumption that provide shared templates for interaction and interpretation, leading to the addition of new texts that reinforce or change discourses and the objects, concepts and subject positions that characterize a social context. In so doing, it will

consider the power associated with particular subject positions that allow certain actors to influence discourse by using texts as “weapons” to create meanings compatible with their interests (Deetz and Mumby, 1990); as well as some of the characteristics of texts that make them more likely to influence discourse. It will show that the realms of discourse and action are mutually constitutive but, at the same time, they are characterized by very different dynamics. In providing the context for action, discourse both enables and constrains it through the way in which concepts, objects, and subject positions are constituted. However, discourse relies on the exercise of power by actors to support practices of textual production. Discourse and action are distinct but without discourse there can be no action and, without action, there can be no discourse.