Chapter 12
Advancing Social Justice with Policy Discourse Analysis

Elizabeth J. Allan and Aaron R. Tolbert

Abstract Policy discourse analysis (PDA) draws from critical and poststructural theories to provide researchers with an approach to identifying dominant discourses shaping policy problems and solutions. Such analyses reveal how discourse contributes to shaping subject positions, or roles, with implications for practice. This chapter defines PDA, describes the conceptual principles of the approach, and details the research methods for the implementation of a PDA study. Examples of studies employing PDA are shared to illustrate the utility of the approach.

Policy analysis offers an avenue for understanding the intractability of some equity and social justice challenges. However, conventional methods of policy analysis may be limited by dominant discourses that shape policy problems and may even reinforce the very problems they seek to alleviate. For example, it has been many decades since the passage of key civil rights laws and gender equity policy (e.g., Title IX) with implications for educational institutions. While progress has been made since these landmark decisions, the pace of change can seem slow considering what is at stake. Attaining socially just and equitable practices and inclusive climates in schools, colleges, and universities is paramount to their missions, yet this goal remains elusive, and efforts to roll back current gains continue to be a reality. Drawing on understandings of discourse and power, alternate approaches to policy analysis emerge providing insights that have the potential to impact practice. In this chapter, we review a methodology and methods that provide tools for rethinking and unthinking policy problems and policy solutions in the pursuit of social justice.

E. J. Allan (✉)
University of Maine, Orono, ME, USA
e-mail: elizabeth.allan@maine.edu

A. R. Tolbert
SUNY Schenectady County Community College, Schenectady, NY, USA
e-mail: tolberar@sunysccc.edu

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Discourse

Discourse is a term often used but without a simple definition. Considered broadly, discourse refers to both spoken and written language use, and the study of discourse (discourse analysis) includes the examination of both talk and text and its relationship to the social context in which it is produced. For our purposes, discourses are socially constructed constellations of words and images that both reflect and contribute to shaping particular realities.

Rather than understanding language and discourse as static entities that can stand in isolation and be investigated as such (e.g., a stretch of text or collection of words on paper), poststructuralist thinkers contend that language and discourses are dynamic sites for the construction of meaning (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008; van Dijk, 2008). Discourses are contingent upon historical context and power dynamics shaping the sociopolitical landscape. Yet, from a poststructural perspective, discourses not only reflect culture, they also actively produce it. However, as individual actors take up discourses to interpret the world around them, dominant discourses are most likely to be drawn upon because they tend to eclipse counter-discourses that can provide alternate views or perspectives. For instance, if a focus on reducing sexual assault on campus is undergirded by a dominant discourse of femininity, the problem of campus safety is often articulated as a "woman's issue" where women are framed as "vulnerable to assault" and in need of protection. In this framing, blue light systems, self-defense training, and "cover your cup" stories may be the predominant policy responses by postsecondary institutions. By drawing on a dominant discourse of femininity, even well-intentioned leaders may only focus on policy solutions that may help women feel more safe but rarely address root causes or conditions producing the violence. In contrast, if policy problems and solutions are framed through a counter-discourse that highlights the social construction of violent masculinity, the proposed solutions would more likely focus on strategies to help students critically analyze gender norms, build skills for clear communication about consent, and develop skills for bystander intervention in potential sexual assault scenarios that involve acquaintances. A counter-discourse that focuses on answering how good young men grow to become young adult assailants may never surface when the problem of campus safety is framed within dominant discourses.

Thus, from a poststructural perspective, discourse produces the ideological and epistemic framing of issues and therefore shapes the thinking and action of actors; thus, this productive power, not a Marxian hegemonic power, is the focus. This occurs as dominant discourses are taken up in the construction of new ideas, practices, and policies. Further, and especially important to thinking about policy issues, poststructural theory contends that discourse is the place "where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21).

It is this productive property of discourse (i.e., discourse *produces* reality rather than simply reflecting it) that shapes the development of particular kinds of research questions. For example, researchers who employ policy discourse analysis (PDA) ask, "What is being produced or constructed through a particular policy or practice?"

and "What are the discourses shaping particular perspectives, images, and cultural practices?" Instead of focusing solely on the efficacy of intended policy outcomes, this form of analysis can be used to identify issues in the framing of policy "problems" or "solutions."

The concept of dominant discourses is also vital for understanding the utility of discourse analysis for examining policy. Typically, dominant discourses embedded in policy are normalized to such an extent that they are rarely called into question. That is, dominant discourses often eclipse other potential ways of making sense of the world and one's experience in it. For example, framed from a neoliberal marketplace discourse, schooling can be understood as a cornerstone of a democratic society, a necessity for job training, workforce development, and a thriving middle class. Yet, a counter-discourse might contend that compulsory schooling was developed and remains, in many respects today, a mechanism for creating obedient citizens who participate in reproducing the capitalist status quo.

Scholars have investigated dominant discourses of "excellence" in shaping college student experience and research university practice (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Iverson, 2012) and dominant discourses of gender and sexuality in shaping understandings of school safety and teen pregnancy and campus sexual assault policies (Iverson, 2015; Pillow, 2004, 2006). Likewise, scholars have shown that access to higher education is shaped by policy discourses affecting opportunity programs (Hinsdale, 2012) and undocumented students (Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012). We turn next to a brief overview of the larger field of policy analysis as a contextual backdrop for a more detailed description of PDA theory and methods to follow.

Policy and Policy Analysis

Within the context of developing or developed societies, it is commonly understood that social policies serve as frameworks for decision-making in response to societal problems. The adoption of new policies, or a revision of old policies, is a complex process shaped by the larger sociopolitical landscape and policy actors within it. As such, human values play a role because many policies allocate resources for a collective course of action in response to a societal problem. Public policy, defined by Larson and Lovell (2010), is "a collection of policies embodied in constitutions, statutes, rules, and regulations, and enacted by various governments at some level" (p. 3).

Regardless of the particular policy reach, the study of policy can involve analyses of policy environments including power, demographic trends, political culture, ethics, values, and discourse (Fowler, 2012). The field of policy studies includes a range of different analytic approaches. In general, key differences among these approaches can be understood by the extent to which human values are acknowledged and by how policy problems are framed. For instance, the *rational scientific* model of policy analysis generally treats problems according to a step-by-step process of examining facts to arrive at the best policy solutions for any given problem. Proponents of the rational scientific approach advocate an apolitical and objective

process that involves policy analysis, implementation, and evaluation. Other models of policy analysis move away from an expertise-based, formulaic, and objective process and propose a more flexible analytic process where the complexities of human values are taken into account, and a wide range of stakeholders are included in the policy process. In general, these theorists are referred to as *political rationalists* because they apply a rational approach to dealing with values inherent in the policy process.

For example, in response to the need to enhance racial and socioeconomic diversity at baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, a rational scientific approach might lead policy analysts to examine demographic trends in enrollment numbers and pinpoint access to higher education as a key policy problem. Given this framing, enhancing affordability and increasing the number of qualified students applying to college would likely become proposed policy solutions. In taking a more flexible approach that acknowledges the role of human values, a political rationalist approach might be more apt to move beyond the issue of access to consider issues of campus climate when analyzing policy solutions for increasing the racial and socioeconomic diversity of students.

As a whole, however, many established approaches to policy analysis are criticized for their failure to acknowledge *assumptions* undergirding the articulation of policy. For example, the very "problem" that a policy may be designed to solve may only be a problem for a particular group (Bertrand, Perez, & Roger, 2015; Suspitsyna, 2012). A simple noise ordinance in a neighborhood is a hypothetical example. For some, neighbors' music may be a nuisance, but for others, loud outdoor music may indicate social engagement. Typically, these critiques assert that traditional policy approaches are embedded in a modernist frame that implicitly advances particular perspectives about efficiency, productivity, and personhood, and furthermore that these approaches often assume a common understanding of the very meaning of the term "policy." Adding to this, other scholars have asserted that conventional approaches to policymaking and policy analysis are constructed through a lens that privileges rational/scientific logic, which often results in policy perspectives that are narrow, linear, and managerial in focus.

As noted by Allan (2010), policy researchers and analysts are frequently called upon for expertise in assessing the effectiveness of policy and making recommendations for improvement. Yet, despite the implementation and refinements of policy based on the analysis of gathered data, some problems—such as those associated with access, equity, and social justice—continue to challenge educational institutions and systems. The seemingly glacial pace of change toward social justice, despite committed efforts of practitioners and analysts alike, has prompted scholars to explore the utility of discourse analysis for the study of policy.

Policy Discourse Analysis

In contrast to previously established forms of policy analysis, PDA is a hybrid methodology drawing from critical, poststructural, and feminist theories to inform an approach to policy analysis that foregrounds the discursive shaping of policy problems as a mechanism for advancing social justice. Traditional approaches to policy analysis do not typically consider subject positions as central to the analysis, nor do they specifically focus on the role of policy in the promotion of emancipatory goals. Subject positions are similar to identities, but instead of a construct produced in the mind of the individual, a subject position is an identity that others produce by drawing upon dominant discourses. In contrast to traditional policy approaches, PDA is a framework to guide policy analysts to include examination of (1) the process by which policy problems are defined, (2) the influence of identity differences in the shaping of policy problems and solutions, and (3) the ways in which policy as discourse not only reflects but also contributes to producing subjectivities and sociopolitical realities (Allan, 2010; Bacchi, 1999; Marshall, 2000). As such, this approach to policy analysis supports policy research questions that seek to understand and disrupt systems of oppression and assumptions guiding inequitable practices.

In some academic circles with expressed commitments to social justice, poststructuralism may be critiqued for being too esoteric to be of much practical use. Given the strong influence of poststructuralism in PDA, this assertion merits further elaboration. In her extensive treatment of this subject, Mills (1997) responded to the critique noting that theories of discourse acknowledge material conditions in our daily lives. In other words, conditions like poverty and discrimination are not simply discursive or linguistic effects—they are real conditions with real and damaging consequences for human beings. Nonetheless, such conditions are produced by, and understood through, a particular confluence of discourses and power relations that create "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1979). Certainly, a range of theories exists to offer lenses through which to understand conditions like poverty. For example, Marxism offers a distinct perspective from a capitalist or meritocratic approach. However, a distinguishing feature of a poststructural lens from other explanatory lenses is the foregrounding of discourse and the contention that we come to understand material aspects of our daily lives through discourse (Mills, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). In other words, "realities" are produced through the discursive shaping of materiality.

An example of recent policy scholarship employing discourse analysis is Bertrand et al. (2015), who analyzed how political leaders in separate political parties discuss educational attainment gaps between racially and economically diverse peoples. Their work showed that some policymakers explained these gaps through structural inequality while other policymakers drew on deficit discourses and placed responsibility for low educational outcomes on lower socioeconomic status families or racially minority families. Showing the value of PDA, Bertrand et al. (2015) found that those policymakers who drew on deficit discourses made the low educational outcomes "appear natural through the use of several sub-strategies, including

obscuring the identity of those harmed by inequality" (p. 2). In direct relation to this, alternate scholarship has shown that students entering college who are deemed "underprepared" and in need of developmental education are often placed in pejorative subject positions, as either encumbering society with additional educational costs or being maligned by failing higher educational institutions (Tolbert, 2017).

In other recent work, scholars using PDA have found that access to higher education is shaped by policy discourses affecting opportunity programs (Hinsdale, 2012), undocumented students (Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012), and university diversity plans (Iverson, 2012). Moreover, Suspitsyna (2012), through an analysis of 163 US Department of Education speeches, found that dominant discourses shaping higher education are focused primarily on the economy and economic contributions of postsecondary institutions as opposed to intellectual or social contributions.

To summarize, key introductory concepts for understanding PDA include the following: (1) discourses are more than words on paper—they are constellations of words and images that produce meaning, (2) discourses (and language) are dynamic and not only reflect but also produce culture, and (3) it is through discourse that we gain a sense of ourselves (subjectivities) and come to interpret the physical and social aspects of the world in which we live. PDA illuminates these discourses to examine persistent policy problems in new ways with implications for unthinking and rethinking policy solutions (Allan, 2008, 2010).

Policy Discourse Analysis Methods

Similar to other forms of inquiry, PDA begins with carefully crafted research questions to frame an investigation. These research questions, informed by the hybrid methodology previously described, are guided by overarching questions linked to identifying how a particular policy, a set of policies, and/or policy process draw on discourses to construct policy problems, solutions, and images—and how the identified discourses shape and re/produce particular subject positions. For example, a PDA investigation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) could be anchored by research questions that ask: what does ESSA describe as problems and solutions for schools and students? What are the predominant images of students, teachers, and staff that emerge from this policy? What discourses are employed to shape these problems, solutions, and images? What subject positions are re/produced through these discourses?

While policies alone cannot fully capture discourses that are fluid and contextual, they can provide perspectives about the ways in which discourses are drawn upon to construct policy, shape subject positions while also articulate policy problems and recommended actions to resolve those problems. Guided by the research questions, careful data gathering and data analysis for PDA are vital to the credibility of the study.

One criticism of many forms of discourse analysis (as compared to PDA) is poor reporting of data sampling, incomplete descriptions of the tools and methods of analysis, and a dearth of examples of how discrete data lead to particular results. While not all scholars employing PDA are explicit about these foundational research steps, we contend that clear and well-articulated methods of analysis are crucial to building the legitimacy of PDA.

Gathering data. In choosing samples for data analysis, PDA scholars often identify a period from which to gather documents or artifacts because of the inherent assumption that discourses are fluid and contextually based. For example, a five-year range of documents might be considered depending on when the policy issue gained traction in a given context. Decisions about the type of policy artifacts and the sources of them are also important because the scope of analysis, and its limitations, is linked to the sample. In 2012, Gildersleeve and Hernandez (2012) sampled 12 In-State Resident Tuition (ISRT) policies because the simple fact was that only 12 states in the USA had ISRT policies at the time. Similarly, Suspitsyna (2012) chose a three-year range and analyzed 164 speeches from the US Department of Education looking at the specific level of federal (as opposed to state) economic discourses in educational policy. Allan (2010) employed PDA to examine 21 women's commission policy reports produced at four research universities over a period of three decades, and Iverson (2012) analyzed 21 diversity action plans and policy reports produced at 20 land-grant universities over a five-year period.

Once a given focus is established, it is important for the researcher to describe the extent to which the documents or artifacts are widely consumed by a given audience and how they reflect a given population or focus. PDA scholars often summarize the search engines or other mechanisms used to identify source documents, the number of documents retrieved, and the criteria for identifying primary or secondary documents. Primary documents undergo a multi-phase analysis process while secondary documents act as reflexive points to calibrate and test the credibility of the primary document analyses.

Analyzing and interpreting the data. Data analysis for PDA scholars can vary but often takes the form of multiple, explicitly articulated stages or phases. Drawing from our own work and others, we advocate a rigorous process that includes the following five phases. In phase one, documents are sorted and the texts are deductively coded based on the research questions. In phase two, inductive and deductive coding allows for in-depth analysis of data sorted in phase one. A key tenet is that codes are not produced first and then applied to documents because in that model, a researcher's preconceived ideas and biases are more likely to be applied to the data set. This would then be no different from a "close reading" of the front page of major newspapers on a given day and then proclaiming insights from the reading. In contrast, PDA is a grounded methodology where the codes are generated through the systematic process, not in advance, of data analysis.

A third phase of data analysis is similar to theme building in basic interpretive qualitative research or grounded theory methodology. In PDA, the codes generated in phases one and two are then examined apart from their original sources and grouped in category maps informed by the study's theoretical frameworks and

research questions. A fourth phase of analysis is a careful reading of the category maps to identify predominant themes as well as potential policy silences. Finally, a fifth phase allows for dominant discourses to be identified and subject positions to emerge from these dominant discourses.

An example of policy silences can illuminate this concept. First, using PDA, Bertrand et al. (2015) found that the educational attainment gaps between Whites and students from minoritized groups (percentage of graduates at postsecondary institutions) are shaped by deficit discourses that "assert[…] that those most negatively impacted by inequality *cause* inequality" (p. 2). This means, drawing upon dominant discourses, minorities are blamed for their own lack of college degree attainment. The silence identified was a lack of focus on structural inequality, built through the history of slavery and segregation that produced the inequitable K-12 systems of education today. Throughout PDA, it is recommended that scholars engage in established practices that enhance research credibility including an audit trail that documents a researcher's analytic decisions; logs of reflexive notes beginning with foregrounding researcher assumptions prior to the analysis; working with one or more peer reviewers to help check potential biases and challenge assumptions; and triangulation through a layered analytic approach that includes secondary documents. Being explicit about a scholar's positionality, both in advance of the study and in reflection after the analysis is complete, is key to the credibility of the findings.

In contrast to other discourse approaches, PDA does not rely solely on a word count of particular words in an identified sample of documents because the simple presence or absence of a particular word, in the density of a single or many policy documents, is not indicative of dominant discourses, nor can a count of words reflect on the use of the word in analyses. Likewise, PDA does not follow lines of many discourse analysis approaches that provide exact guides on document sampling without accounting for the methods of coding or phases of analysis. Articulating that "multiple rounds of coding were used" as the full summary of analysis is not sufficient to identify how the analysis moves beyond a close reading. Thus PDA creates rigor and indicated credibility by having clearly articulated stages of document sampling and data analyses.

Writing it up. The writing of PDA findings can be quite different from other forms of summarizing research results. PDA scholars strive to articulate findings without oversimplification or generalization (especially beyond the scope of the sample of documents) while also not staying too granular or detailed such that only those who have analyzed the data can understand the findings. The development of terminology to name dominant discourses and subject positions clearly is an important initial step, and building on the work of established PDA scholarship can be a helpful starting point. Sometimes, scholars create visual maps of the discourses to indicate how policy documents follow narrative chains (Allan, Gordon, & Iverson, 2006; Tolbert, 2017). Another feature of PDA is to illustrate dominant discourses and subject positions with thick, rich description that includes data excerpts representative of the range of sources examined. Discussions of PDA studies connect back to the literature review such that contextual history of a dominant discourse

can also be illuminated. Finally, as the goals of PDA are grounded in emancipatory principles, articulating some initial implications for policy and policy studies is an essential part of PDA. Yet, given the poststructural influences of PDA, it is also vital for researchers to be cautious of contributing to a new regime of truth, asserting the certainty of their findings by articulating a commitment to dismantling the very findings they have produced.

Policy Discourse Analysis: Implications for Practice

An example of how a PDA study yields findings to inform social justice practice can be seen in Tolbert's (2017) study, where five dominant discourses were traced relative to developmental education policy. A narrative chain pervaded the documents shaped by dominant discourses of crisis, accountability, efficacy, standardization, and policy fiat. Critically, these dominant discourses were seen as working through interdiscursivity, with the effect of producing pejorative subject positions for both students and faculty involved with developmental education. Developmental students were positioned either as encumbering society with the cost of their education for a second time, implicitly wasting taxpayer dollars, or as maligned, as harmed by an ineffective and broken developmental education system. Likewise, faculty were framed as "prosaic" through dominant policy discourses where their outdated teaching philosophies and pedagogies were to blame for poor student outcomes with the implication that faculty needed to be managed by college administrators or policymakers themselves. These findings are supported by the work of Parker, Barrett, and Bustillos, 2014.

Tolbert's (2017) study revealed that dominant discourses framed developmental education as a broken system that was harming students and keeping them from attaining their college degrees. The dominant discourses in the policy briefs can be said to have, in part, *produced* problems with developmental education by simplifying the issues. The dominant discourses tended to oversimplify and thus eclipse highly contested and complex debates about the potential merits and drawbacks of development education (Goudas & Boylan, 2012).

The idea that developmental students "encumber" society has moved throughout discursive landscapes since the 1990s when blaming students for the cost of remediation was prominent in policy debates (Soliday, 2002). Against the backdrop of this discursive landscape, the CUNY system implemented a policy mandating that developmental education would be limited to two-year institutions (Soliday, 2002), thereby creating a tiered system as a greater proportion of racially minoritized students were identified as needing developmental education (Parker & Richardson, 2005) and thus funneled to associate granting institutions. Analysis of policy silences reveals another impact of this discursive history where cultural capital or community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of minoritized students is overlooked when dominant discourses frame developmental students as deficient.

Numerous other applications of PDA exist in scholarly literature. For example, Bertrand et al. (2015) used PDA to understand policy insiders' discursive strategies

for engaging with racism and class when discussing education, finding that in relationship to deficit discourses, "naturalization" occurred "which Bonilla-Silva (2014) described as the practice of explaining away systemic racism as a natural occurrence" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 21). In a study of diversity action plans, Iverson (2012) described how dominant discourses of access shape these policy documents and points to the need to "resist and contest dominant conceptions of diversity" (p. 168) that tend to homogenize difference and reinforce the status quo. Allan's (2008) study of university women's commission reports underscored how dominant discourses of gender reinscribe images of women as vulnerable outsiders to the institution and how policy solutions were shaped in response to these images.

In a study of transgender policy efforts at research universities, Dirks (2016) employed PDA to explore dominant discourses framing recommendations for inclusivity efforts. Finding that many such recommendations were predicated upon a discourse of trans-vulnerability, Dirks asks readers to consider if well-intended efforts might be reinscribing genderism in the guise of gender inclusivity. In another study, Iverson (2015) revealed potential unintended consequences of sexual assault policies by examining their discursive framing, and Hoffman (2010) explored ways in which dominant discourses shaping Title IX can reinforce a gendered system of power that promotes the commercial interests of men's sports and relegates women's sports to fulfill developmental goals.

In sum, PDA is a methodological approach that guides scholars in analyzing how discourses shape and produce realities that frame policy problems, the modality of solutions, and the interpretations of policy results. As described in this chapter, PDA also features rigorous methods along with theoretical underpinnings that make it well suited for advancing social justice through emancipatory inquiry.

Suggested Readings

Allan, E. J. (2010). Feminist poststructuralism meets policy analysis: An overview. In E. J. Allan, S. Iverson, & R. Ropers-Huilman (Eds.), *Reconstructing policy in higher education: Feminist poststructural perspectives* (pp. 11–35). New York, NY: Routledge.

This chapter provides a more detailed introduction to the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings helpful to understanding policy as discourse.

Dirks, D. A. (2016). Transgender people at four Big Ten campuses: A policy discourse analysis. *Review of Higher Education, 39*(3), 371–393. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2016.0020

This article provides a powerful illustration of a recent PDA study revealing how the policy discourses may actually undermine the outcomes of the policies intended to support trans-individuals.

Foucault, M. (2001). From "Truth and Power". In V. B. Leitch (Ed.), *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (pp. 1667–1670). New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.

Though brief, this passage may provide the most critical definition of "power" for poststructuralist thinking. Understanding how power is defined, especially in contrast to Marxian or positivist forms of power, is a conceptual key to poststructuralist work.

Gildersleeve, R. E., & Hernandez, S. (2012). Producing (im)possible peoples: Policy discourse analysis, in-state resident tuition and undocumented students in American higher education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 14*(2), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v14i2.517

In this study, researchers detail a PDA study of state laws to powerfully illuminate how tuition policy discourses shape understandings of identity relative to undocumented students in US higher education.

Iverson, S. V. (2012). Constructing outsiders: The discursive framing of access in university diversity policies. *Review of Higher Education, 35*(2), 149–177. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0013

This article provides a compelling illustration of a PDA study examining diversity action plans at US land-grant universities finding that well-intended policy efforts to enhance diversity and inclusivity may unwittingly reinforce inequitable practices.

Mills, S. (2011). *Discourse: The new critical idiom* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

This text provides a helpful introduction to the term "discourse" and how the term is used in the many varied sub-fields within scholarly work. The text introduces the history and language of debates and development of the idea of discourse for an audience not familiar or acquainted with the birth of the study of semiotics and structuralism under Saussure and Lacan. It also helps distinguish some of the fault lines between critical and poststructural thinking on discourse.

van Dijk, T. A. (Ed.). (2011). *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

While vast in its scope, and more focused on critical discourse analysis rather than policy discourse analysis, this text is a series of collected essays that provides multiple competing and interwoven definitions of power and discourse. It also includes relevant examples of the applications of discourse theory in research.

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