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Conceptualizing Discursive Analysis as a Culturally Contextualized Activity

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Abstract

Discursive psychology recognizes the primacy of the social and relational nature of human life. Research participants whose discourses (empirical data) we analyze do not exist independent of material and social world. In this paper, I attempt to develop an understanding of discursive analysis of social and psychological phenomena as a culturally contextualized activity in which discursive researchers analyze and interpret participants' discourses in the light of the cultural context in which the discourses are embedded. First, I provide a brief background to discursive psychology. Second, I discuss the cultural embeddedness of discursive analysis. I then conceptualize discursive data analysis as a culturally contextualized enterprise by drawing upon my own reflexive accounts on gender-based violence research to illustrate how discursive analysts can bring together an analysis of in-the-moment performative accounting with an understanding of the cultural context in which this accounting is embedded. I argue for and foreground research participants' lived experiences and the embodied socio-cultural meanings as origins of the consciousness and social behavior of people with whom and about whom psychological research is conducted. I conclude that data analysis is not and cannot be an innocent activity; it involves active thinking through the cultural lens of both the researcher and the researched.

Keywords

Discourse Analysis, Discursive Psychology, Sociocultural Context, Culture, Shared Meanings

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Discursive psychology recognizes the primacy of the social and relational nature of human life. Research participants whose discourses (empirical data) we analyze do not exist independent of material and social world. In this paper, I attempt to develop an understanding of discursive analysis of social and psychological phenomena as a culturally contextualized activity in which discursive researchers analyze and interpret participants' discourses in the light of the cultural context in which the discourses are embedded. First, I provide a brief background to discursive psychology. Second, I discuss the cultural embeddedness of discursive analysis. I then conceptualize discursive data analysis as a culturally contextualized enterprise by drawing upon my own reflexive accounts on gender-based violence research to illustrate how discursive analysts can bring together an analysis of in-the-moment performative accounting with an understanding of the cultural context in which this accounting is embedded. I argue for and foreground research participants' lived experiences and the embodied socio-cultural meanings as origins of the consciousness and social behavior of people with whom and about whom psychological research is conducted. I conclude that data analysis is not and cannot be an innocent activity; it involves active thinking through the cultural lens of both the researcher and the researched. Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Discursive Psychology, Sociocultural Context, Culture, Shared Meanings

Traditional psychology has long held the mind responsible for human behaviour in society (Sugiman, Gergen, Wagner, & Yamada, 2008) while language was treated as separate from thought. The trend has greatly shifted lately with social and cultural psychological investigations particularly concerned with the performative and productive functions of language in contexts (Adjei, 2013; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). This significant shift to language became prominent in the 1980s (Willig, 2013). The turn to discourse in psychological inquiry or a shift from a representational to a constitutive concept of language was partly influenced by social constructionist ideas (De Haene, 2010; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). Thus, knowledge of psychological phenomena became understood as relationally created in communicative practices (De Haene, 2010) with discursive psychologists theorizing that people's account of social phenomena largely depends on the discursive contexts in which the accounts are produced (Adjei, 2013; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013).

From a discursive psychological perspective, psychological issues such as the mind, experience, intention and emotion are constructed and oriented to in social interactions (Wiggins & Potter, 2013). Language thus gains its meaning through its use in social relations and forms the primary means by which people understand and constitute themselves and their world (Gergen, 2009). As Billig (2001) argues, the processes of thinking can be studied "by taking seriously the idea that psychology is constituted in language" (p. 212). Rather than treated as a communication conduit to the private, inner mind, discursive psychology (DP)

treats discourse as a site of study; as constructive of social realities, organized and oriented to actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Though the sociocultural environment in which people live their lives has no natural reality or identity separate from human understandings and activities, the cultural embeddedness of discursive constructions of social and psychological reality has received little attention in DP. Those who write about discourse analysis in the tradition of discursive psychology typically provide the reader with a set of discursive features that the analyst can look for in the data, along with a set of strategies for how to read the data and for the production of warrantable claims. However, they often neglect the topic of how the analyst draws on cultural knowledge in interpreting the data. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to develop an understanding of discursive analysis of social and psychological phenomena as a culturally contextualized process in which discursive researchers analyze and interpret participants' discourses (data) in the light of the cultural context in which the discourses are embedded. In this paper, I attempt to foreground research participants' lived experiences and the embodied *socio-cultural meanings* as origins of the consciousness and social behaviour of people with whom and about whom researchers study. This paper consists of three parts. In the first part, discussion focuses on understanding discursive analysis as a relevant background to frame the analysis in this paper. The second section presents the cultural embeddedness of discursive analysis, highlighting how interpretation of research participants' discourses should be culturally situated and understood. In the third section, I attempt to conceptualize discursive data analysis as a culturally contextualized enterprise by drawing upon my own reflexive accounts on gender-based violence project to illustrate how discursive analysts can bring together an analysis of in-the-moment performative accounting with an understanding of the cultural context in which this accounting is embedded. The paper concludes by re-emphasizing the significance of treating discourse and culture as dialectically connected, and the value of such effort in contributing to discursive psychological analysis.

Understanding discursive analysis as discursive psychology approach

Allow me to mention here that there are many different traditions of discourse analysis (conversation analysis, narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis, etc.), and that discursive psychology is one of these various traditions. The use of discursive analysis in this paper refers particularly to DP. While I sometimes refer to "discourse analysis" to mean the widest, general sense, the emphasis of this paper is on DP. Discursive psychology fundamentally involves the application of ideas from discourse analysis (DA) to the study of social phenomena in psychology (Potter, 2003) by recognizing the *action orientation* of talk or how participants in social interactions use discursive resources to achieve a certain effect (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013). Generally, discourse analysis is both a method of conceptualizing and analyzing language (McMullen, 2011) through the scientific study of both written text and talk and its role in constructing social reality.

Discourse analysis studies social life through the analysis of language in its widest sense including face-to-face talk, non-verbal interaction, images, symbols and documents (Shaw & Bailey, 2006). Social discourses are usually not overtly stated but need to be inferred from the ways that particular social groups are represented or through generalizations and assumptions that are embedded in statements (Baker, 2016). Thus, discourse analysts generally study the flow of meaning making and how this flow is patterned, shaped and how it is organized as mundane culture and a recognizable inter-subjective communication (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell, 2003). This offers the researcher ways of investigating meaning, whether in conversation or in culture. As a methodological approach, DA provides a systematic framework for the analysis of interviews and interactional data (Seymour-Smith,

Wetherell & Phoenix, 2002). However, DA, particularly in the tradition of DP, is much more than a qualitative methodology—it is theoretically and epistemologically informed by social constructionism, providing a major challenge to the dominance of cognitive and perceptual theoretical models in psychology (Augoustinos, 2017).

As earlier indicated, DP is generally regarded as social action (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and decidedly non-cognitivist, constructionist enterprise (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Willig, 2013). Discursive psychology focuses on language in use or how people employ language in specific contexts to construct social reality. DP theorises that an analytical account is cognitivist if it differentiates between mind and conduct; that is, simply adding on cognitive constructs to the analysis of discourse will not work (Potter, 2006; Potter & Edwards, 2003). Thus, instead of treating cognition as prior to, and separable from interaction, DP treats cognition as "something that is managed in, constituted in, and constructed in interaction" (Potter, 1998, p. 35). In other words, psychological states are created in interaction (Billig, 2001). Typically, research questions of discursive work explore and focus on what people do in the cultural context in which they live their lives (Wiggins & Potter, 2013). Discursive analysts adopt a dual approach to the study of discourse, focusing on both the construct*ed* nature of discourse or how it is put together using a range of discursive practices (e.g., lexical, prosodic, syntactic) and the construct*ive* nature of discourse or how it produces different versions or representations of the world (Potter & Hepburn, 2008). The underlying premise of discursive work is that when people use language to construct social reality or to perform social actions, they do so by drawing upon familiar cultural repertoire or meaning systems. The signature feature of discourse analysis is its flexibility and reflexivity, where historical and sociocultural experiences of both researchers and participants shape and direct data interpretation and analysis (Adjei, 2013). It is thus vital for discursive analysts not to treat research participants' discourses about a social or psychological phenomenon as "givens" nor treat the researcher's interpretation of same as the only and objective "truth" out there. Culture and context of participants should be placed at the center of discursive data analysis as they constitute and are constitutive of those (participants) who inhabit a given sociocultural milieu.

My goal in this discussion is to develop further the argument that discursive analysis of here-and-now social interactions need to be extended to include the broader cultural context in which people's discursive activities are embedded. I am proposing that analyzing interactional data by thinking through the researched and their discursive milieu is one of the most productive ways of doing discursive analysis or interpreting situated social interaction. This means that the analyst/researcher should make the effort to draw on relevant cultural knowledge and meanings embedded in the context of discourse.

The cultural embeddedness of discursive analysis

Discursive analysis of a psychological phenomenon is an interpretive exercise in search of meaning, and meaning is embodied and embedded in culture. Culture, like meaning, is public (Geertz, 1973), and describes non-fixed patterns of representations or actions that are distributed by and constructed through social interactions (see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). People in a given cultural context form social concepts and develop meanings that things have for a culture through their participation in the socio-economic, political, educational, religious and other interpersonal activities of that setting (Ratner, 1994). Thus, culturally embedded discursive analysis entails analyzing and interpreting interactional data (discourse) by means of drawing upon study participants' lived experiences and existential realities (cultural meaning systems, beliefs, desires, practices, etc.) as the basis of sense making and conceptual formulations. Analyzing study participants' interactional data involves a critical and reflective thinking through both the here-and-now context of discourse and the broader cultural space

within which the researched is situated. Research participants whose discourses (data) we analyze and interpret live their lives in a sociocultural world. A sociocultural world is an intentional world in the sense that "its existence is real, factual and forceful, but only so long as there exist community of persons whose beliefs, desires, emotions, purposes and other mental representations are directed at, and thereby influenced by, it" (Shweder, 1991, p. 74). As researchers, our understanding of others (participants) and their discursive activities arise out of the cultural collective in which they are socialized. As has been observed, the "source of our understandings of others is 'out there' in the social [cultural] world" (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 465) and people's cognitions are specific aspects of the cultural world in which they are embedded (Van Dijk, 2006). It is thus important for discursive researchers to recognize and treat study participants as specialists or experts on the psychological phenomenon of interest, and that their (participants') reflective consciousness and cultural meaning systems can be utilized to reveal hidden dimensions of human experience.

It is instructive for discursive analysts to recognize that the form and function of psychological phenomena depend on people's existential experiences and bear its imprint. Research participants, through social discourses, create and represent the realities of their mundane affairs. This implies that their positioning goes beyond the immediate discursive processes—it is also embedded and connected to actions, material conditions and contextual possibilities. For this reason, discursive analysts should aim at analysis, interpretations and theoretical formulations of concepts that reflect the culturally constituted realities of the researched and the analyst's reflective understanding of these realities to achieve a proportionate fit between the world as studied or interactional participants have represented it and the researcher's own reaction to or representation of the world (see Shweder, 1991). A culturally embedded discursive data analysis is a process of both representing and defending research participants' evaluations and experiences of, as well as their engagement with their specific cultural milieu. As Adjei (2013) points out, knowledge is situated and contingent and that an explanation of a psychological phenomenon should take into account both the cultural context and the circumstances of discourse.

Participants in any given research situation do take up positions and accordingly interpret the world from and through that position in terms of images, symbols, metaphors, values, storyline, and socio-cultural concepts and meanings accessible to them in a given discursive milieu in which they are embedded (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Wetherell,1998). This should not be interpreted as an attempt to vitiate individual agency and rationality in self-presentation. Rather, the crux of the argument here is that, although research participants remain active agents and rational beings in the process of self-representations in a given discursive context, the materials and the meaning systems available for telling their story in social discourses are a function of public and shared cultural knowledge and understandings (see Oyserman & Markus, 1998). To this end, analyzing and interpreting discursively requires the researcher's reflexivity, insertion of self and connection of the data with participants' existential experiences and their domain-specific culture. This is crucial because discursive analysis is supposed to give form to research participants' lived experiences, employing meaning systems and practices as defined by the social context in which participants live their everyday lives. This calls for an analytical effort to attend to and extend the interpretation of discourses beyond participants' immediate discursive contexts to include their broader social and everyday settings in which they live. The distinctive mark of discursive data analysis should be its attempt at sufficiently attending to the immediate responsive demands of discourse, as well as (de)constructing reality through culturally familiar social and mundane discursive practices of the studied.

Conceptualizing discursive data analysis as a culturally contextualized enterprise

Generally, data analysis is thinking, and thinking is done through the existential experiences (theoretical and relevant cultural knowledge) of both the researcher and the researched. Analysis can be thought of as a process of trying to understand a given situation or psychological phenomenon by cultural sense-making (cf. Brinkmann, 2014), and thus, discursive researchers gain empirical access to the researched when their analysis pays attention to the meaning systems and penetrates into the quotidian practices of the researched. Discursive analysis is, thus, a culturally contextualized enterprise in the sense that discursive activities of research participants are not independent of the relevant cultural knowledge, ideologies, shared beliefs and institutional structures of participants. People's social interaction and the cultural context within which such interactions take place are interdependent— neither can be adequately analyzed and explained without drawing upon the specifications of the other. Discursive psychologists believe that the way people speak about the world cannot be separated from their understanding of it (e.g., Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and thus conceive contexts or behavioural environments as important "because they are *perceived, experienced, attended to, understood…*" by participants in social interactions (Potter, 1998, p 31, italics mine). That is, the social and cultural contexts of talk and text cannot be divorced from the in-the-moment discursive constructions of interlocutors.

Given that social interactions take place in interlocutor's cultural environment, it is most appropriate to study talk and text in their social and cultural context. Analysis of interactional data (i.e., thinking) cannot and should not be abstracted from position and context and portrayed as the researcher's observation of "objective truth" as this may potentially and actively obscure the ways that data (discourse) reflect and reproduce the cultural perspectives and interests of the researched in their milieu. The most reliable and productive approach to the analysis of interactional data is therefore to extend discursive psychology's emphasis on the here-and-now responsive properties of discourse to also include the broader cultural and institutional context of discourse. This implies that the discursive researcher should aim at integrating immediate responsive demands of discursive situations and shared cultural knowledge in which participants' discourses about psychological phenomena form part and are situated. Also, analysis of study participants' social discourses should emphasize the dialectic relationship in which social realities and subjectivities are constituted historically, politically and socially at the macro level, whilst being drawn upon and produced in here-and-now dynamic constitutive interactions (see Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This implies that the meaning system, cultural and social understanding of the world— as defined and interpreted by participants in social interaction, and as highlighted and enacted in talk and text—provide the broader frame of reference by which discursive situations and events should be interpreted.

My own approach to DP is to consider the important dialectical relationship between in-the-moment performative accounting of interlocutors and the normative meaning systems (relevant cultural knowledge) drawn upon by them to construct social reality. This is consistent with the view that discourses of research participants do not unfold randomly, they unfold in line with specific established pattern and sociocultural meaning systems in which participants are embedded. For example, in studying the discursive accounts of husbands who abuse their wives in Ghana, I systematically and analytically showed that versions of hegemonic masculinity in Ghana are not only constructed in here-and-now discursive situations, they are also *used* or *deployed* in discourse to promote self-respect in the face of discredit (Adjei, 2016). The analysis revealed how participants in the study drew upon relevant cultural meanings associated with masculinity and the immediate interview situations to construct the relationship between masculinity and intimate partner violence (IPV). As the analysis further demonstrated, participants' discursive constructions of masculine authority in marriage and its relationship

with IPV reflected both participants' interactional needs in here-and-now discursive situations and the embodied historical and sociocultural non-discursive dimensions of gender relations in Ghana.

This is consistent with the view that participants in a social discourse take-up subject positions not from a vacuum, but from a palette defined by a given culture and context, and according to its rules (Raggat, 2015). Thus, to do a reflective, comprehensive, and representative discursive analysis of participants' constructions of masculinity, I needed to theoretically transform and reveal the intentional world of the studied by going beyond the immediate discursive situations and in-the-moment performative accounting to analytically think through the relevant cultural knowledge of participants in their given environment. The intent was to treat sociocultural meanings as the most fundamental to people's discursive interaction and social behaviour. When people take up positions or state a claim in a discursive interaction, the taken-up positions can be satisfactorily understood when one considers the processes going on in the here-and-now interactional context and the broader cultural context external to, but intricately part of the unfolding situation.

Generally, a researcher's lived perspectives and relevant cultural knowledge of study context becomes a significant asset to his/her analysis and interpretations. In my own analysis, as I have indicated earlier, my cultural knowledge or lived perspective of the discursive context allowed for a satisfactory identification and analysis of both the functional and embodied properties of participants' talk. In terms of functional properties, my insider position allowed me to identify and describe what participants/interlocutors in my study were *doing* with their talk/words in a much deeper sense. With respect to the embodied properties, I was better equipped to identify and describe how interlocutors drew upon and invoked familiar and relevant cultural concepts (normative meaning systems) to organize their worlds and construct social reality. While this does not vitiate discursive works of researchers without in-depth insider or lived perspectives of the cultural context of their studies, it does however suggest that discursive analysts with in-depth knowledge of the context of their research potentially enrich their interpretations through the identification and appreciation of the commonsensical ways (interpretive repertoire) and embodied accounts with which members of a given cultural ecology construct a given social reality. As Eisner (2003) aptly observes, the ability to provide a credible interpretation to a qualitative data requires a firm grasp or understanding of the context in which an action occurs. How can a discursive researcher satisfactorily analyze and interpret research participants' situated discursive activities without drawing on the cultural knowledge, metaphors, and the normative understandings of the people for whom, and the context in which, those interpretations are made? To satisfactorily interpret the use of discourse in a given context, it may be necessary to be aware of the wider social meanings and functions of that context (Willig, 2013). Thus, my own analytical approach benefitted from going beyond analyzing in-the-moment-by-moment performative accounting of research participants to include the broader cultural context in which this accounting was situated.

From linguistic anthropological perspective, moment-by-moment conversations are fundamentally interactional, in the sense that linguistic competence and cultural knowledge of interlocutors are made relevant through social interactions in which the interlocutors bring their cultural consciousness "to bear on the constitution, management, and negotiation of social reality and social relationships" (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995, p. 175). An important factor to consider when analyzing data is the power of culturally contextualized meanings, norms and moralities in the quotidian life of those for whom and/or around whom scientific research is conducted. As earlier indicated, the researcher and the researched, the knower and the known, are not independent entities but instead, they are socially grounded individuals and/or objects whose discursive practices and actions cannot be differentiated from the culturally created meanings embedded in their given milieu. Discursive analysis should thus be seen and approached as a

practical-oriented methodology that provides detailed insight into the management of everyday life of people (Wiggins & Potter, 2013); bearing in mind that everyday life of people (including the knower and the known) is driven by cultural symbols and meanings. The "truth" about a given psychological phenomenon is not given by individual participants in a social discourse, but rather, it is affected through the lenses of their given context because participants in a social interaction are both producers and products of culture (Adjei, 2013).

When a researcher's interpretation of data is derived from and based upon participants concerns and their cultural milieu, it grounds discursive work in sound theoretical and analytical position and sufficiently avoids imposing the researcher's personal categories and presuppositions onto the data. There is much virtue in analyzing and interpreting people's experiences and psychological phenomena in situ, by consciously taken into account the cultural settings of people's everyday life. Such analysis has the potential to capture life and people's psychological experiences as they happen and in much sufficient detail. As Shweder (2003) points out, in a constant cycle of mutual constitution, people are *culturally shaped shapers* of their environments; they make each other up and are most productively analyzed together. In the pursuit of scientific understanding of a psychological phenomenon, each instance of the given phenomenon can be regarded as "an occurrence that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members" (Denzin, 2001, p. 63). This means that the terminologies, stylistics and grammatical features, preferred metaphors and figures of speech and general commonsensical ways— otherwise known as *interpretative repertoire*— employed by members of a given community to characterize and evaluate actions are important considerations and building blocks for any discursive analytical enterprise (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

What then is the role of a theory in the culturally contextualized process of discursive analysis? Theory or theoretical knowledge in discursive analysis should simply serve as a sketch to be explored, contested, and developed in order to gain (new) understanding of the data. To do a culturally contextualized discursive analysis, the discursive researcher ought to ask certain important and fundamental questions: What does a situation or a comment mean for the interactional context and the broader culture? What is its significance? What gives rise to it? How can it be contextually, culturally and theoretically explained? What culturally relevant and theoretical ideas help to understand the action that has taken place? Are other equally plausible interpretations possible? Are these interpretations competitive? If so, can they be resolved, or do I live with multiple interpretations? For example, in one of my studies on moral discourses of IPV in Ghana, I initially analyzed and interpreted participants' moral discourses as *moral disengagement* practices by largely drawing upon Bandura's (2001) moral disengagement theory. Upon further reflections, reanalysis and interpretation, taking into account the broader social and institutional contexts of participants and their background normative conceptions of morality, it became increasingly obvious that participants' discourses were more accurately deployed as *moral constructs* (rather than moral disengagement practices), situating husband-to-wife abuse in the moral, social, and cultural context of Ghana. It thus became necessary to abandon the earlier theoretical (moral disengagement) analysis for a more context-fit and culturally relevant interpretation of the data (Adjei, 2018). To understand reality in the world, members of a group have to depend on classification and categorization processes which occur through cultural and social interactions, allowing individuals to differentiate themselves from others. As a result, individuals become cultural subjects, creating understanding of the world through shared conceptual maps. Such conceptual maps are expressed by language that refers to words, sounds, gestures, clothes, media communication and all those communicative practices that make meaningful cultural and social interactions. Discursive analysis of participants' interactional data should produce the meanings of the world of the researched within their circuit of cultures.

Conclusion

Discursive psychology recognizes the primacy of the social and relational nature of human life, and thus starts with that analytically (Wiggins & Potter, 2013). It is important for qualitative researchers, particularly discursive researchers, to understand that data analysis is not and cannot be an innocent activity; it involves active thinking through the cultural and contextual lens of both the knower and the known. This is because what we call data that we analyze are always produced, constructed and mediated by human activities within a given cultural and historical context (cf. Brinkmann, 2014). When this is understood and followed, researchers will not treat data as "givens" that they "collect" and code (Brinkmann, 2014), but instead, they will treat it as necessarily grounded in a particular world, and materially constituted (Byers, 2014), occurring within a given sociocultural context.

Situated discursive activities cannot be understood and interpreted adequately based only on in-the-moment accounting of interlocutors but also, and even primarily, on implicit cultural knowledge of the context in which the interlocutors are located. In this view, both the here-and-now social interactions and the cultural context of the interaction become significant resources through which a hearer of such interaction (i.e., discursive researcher) recognizes interlocutors' (research participants') intentions. Language has an indexical capacity "to bring into consciousness a realm of contextually relevant meanings, including the situated self," in discursive practices (Ochs, 2012, p. 142; see also Jacoby & Ochs, 1995). For example, a speaker may deploy a certain terminology, metaphor, concept or "interpretive repertoire" to index particular normative practice or meaning system in the cultural context in which the speaker is situated. This suggests that the cultural context in which interlocutors (research participants) are socialized and embedded needs to be understood and analyzed when making sense of their discourses. As has been pointed out by discursive researchers, context forms the ground on which situated meanings can be assembled and related to culturally based knowledge (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011). Participants' discourses (what researchers might call empirical data) do not exist independent of material and social world. It is thus essential for social scientists, particularly psychologists, to appreciate that it is not only the independent mind that gives rise to human action but also, participation in a world of socially created meanings (Sugiman et al., 2008). Clearly, if research participants' discourses are understood as presupposing, embodying, enacting, and reflecting or legitimizing social institutional arrangements and cultural artifacts, then there exists an important relationship between in-the-moment performative accounting of interlocutors and cultural knowledge (normative meaning systems) drawn upon by interlocutors to construct a given reality. Thus, an understanding of research participants' immediate discursive practices and the cultural context in which both the practices and the participants are embedded should be the desirable goal of discursive analysis.

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