Methods for Change

Sociological Discourse Analysis

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Sociological Discourse Analysis

Sociological Discourse Analysis provides a lens to analyse writings or speeches as 'social texts'. This approach is designed to reveal what we take for granted and the boundaries of what we consider relevant and possible as we talk about issues. By studying the 'common sense' meanings, forms of knowledge and cultural conventions that people share in conversations, people's actions can often be better understood, than by directly asking people to share their attitudes and experiences. Understanding socially shared meanings can help to better understand practices and ways in which things are routinely done, which can hold environmental or social challenges. This approach can combine different methods and is most commonly applied to forms of text available and shared within and between communities and institutions, such as business or governmental reports, newspapers, websites, speeches or advertisements. However, researchers also use Sociological Discourse Analysis to analyse texts produced in research settings, such as interviews or written narratives. Methods to observe customs and habits have also been proven to be well suited for this approach.

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How does Sociological Discourse Analysis create or contribute to change?

In this particular form of discourse analysis, culturally shared forms of knowledge – assumptions and associations about how the world works – are identified. These forms of knowledge are also inherent in debates, speeches and other forms of communication about contemporary challenges and the solutions that are regarded as possible. Investigating these shared forms of knowledge can help to identify the constraints that they impose on the type and extent of change that is considered possible within communities, such as policy makers, businesses, interest groups or the general public, as to how societal or organisational challenges, for example gender equality, access to education, pollution or workers' rights, are approached. In this way, discourse analysis can be understood as a means to study limitations to social change: it enables us to see implicit assumptions about what we take as a given in society. By illuminating limitations as to how social problems are debated as well as barriers to how agendas for change are formulated, this method can highlight avenues for change in society and within organisations, communities and institutions.

What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Discourse analysis emphasises the role of language in the ways we see and organise social reality. It is applied in many disciplines, including linguistics, communication and psychology. Discourse-analytical approaches from sociology and related disciplines are influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and their focus is less on the rules and conventions of conversations, but on accepted, institutionalised, power-constituting forms of knowledge that are present in conversations. This does not mean that the people or organisations who are the speakers or writers of the texts analysed are privileged and powerful. Rather, texts are studied as examples of 'naturalised talk' within social contexts, regardless of the roles and positions of the participants. While privilege and power play a key role in how these interpretative practices affect different peoples' lives, they all communicate based on the same unspoken agreements on what is 'naturally' taken as a given, considered possible or impossible, and seen as relevant or irrelevant.

The sociological discourse-analytical approach, in which texts are analysed as 'social text', suggests that instead of being individual or universal thinkers, human beings subscribe to 'thought communities' - communities of differing interpretations of how the world works. Such 'communities' could include, for example, expert circles, generations, nations or interest groups. In this sense, this approach is also inspired by contemporary philosophical theories of intersubjectivity according to which individual experiences are developed and maintained as a 'common sense' which is shared with the wider social community.

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Why might I want to apply Sociological Discourse Analysis and what do I have take into consideration when choosing this approach?

- Sociological Discourse Analysis is designed to identify the various ways in which communities and institutions identify social phenomena and the problems associated with these phenomena. In doing this, it illuminates also perspectives that are marginalised or overlooked, and paths that have not been taken.
- This approach, rather than trying to solve pre-defined problems, seeks to identify ways in which problems could be framed differently. Research findings open up alternative ways to approach problems faced by communities, organisations and society as a whole. These can concern wider social structures, the ways in which institutions work and also the roles played by different actors.
- This approach is particularly suited to study social problems where the previous interrogation of people's attitudes and experiences has not been fruitful. For example, it might be useful when behaviour change policy repeatedly leads to the identification of a gap between people's attitudes and behaviours related to types of interventions.
- Analysing text through the lens of Sociological Discourse Analysis means that what people say or write is not taken at face value. Research results are therefore not descriptions of a social phenomenon or problem, but rather descriptions of the possible ways in which such phenomena or problems are seen or interpreted by people within a particular cultural context. This approach captures what is assumed as obvious and 'natural' to the extent that it is often not spoken about. In this way, a study does not become valid and reliable based on the selection of participants and the interaction between researcher and the researched. Rather, it is the researchers' interpretation of the text, which must be consistent and comprehensible.
- It is not the individual person or group who is analysed, but what they say and how they say it. It is based on the idea that when people communicate, they may express their own intentions or viewpoints, but have to formulate their thoughts based on the background of 'common sense' understandings shared by the community they are part of or speak to. Unlike behavioural and cognitive approaches, for example, this approach does not consider the contents of documents or interview answers as the product of the person or group who wrote the document or answered an interview question. It is thus not suited for projects which seek to capture individual peoples' authentic attitudes, experiences and intentions, as it inherently breaks with the view that this is what social science does.

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Step by step guide to Sociological Discourse Analysis:

1. **Identify text material that is well-suited to studying the research problem:** Depending on the research question, discourse analysis can be applied to large volumes of text material as well as to a small selection of samples. It can cover a range of origins (i.e. different 'producers' of text), formats (i.e. different forms of written or spoken texts, even images), contexts (i.e. audiences and general reach of text) and timescales (e.g. in and around a certain event or over a longer time period). Specifying the research question(s) will help to select an appropriate range of material.
2. **Identify the sources and context of production of the collected text material:** What is known about the socio-political and historical context in which it was produced and how does it fit into the 'bigger picture' of the research problem? When were they produced, by whom, and for what purpose? Were they related to any major events, how do they tie into broader debates? If the materials were generated in the research process, what was the setting and context in which these texts were created, how were participants selected and what were they asked to do? What genre does the text material belong to?
3. **Identify the patterns of variation:** After making yourself familiar with the material to identify thematic contexts raised, organise text by (sub-)topics and recognise the kind of descriptions and accounts of a topic that come up. What are the different versions of the topic that can be found within and across texts? What statements about the social problem/phenomenon are made in this text? What are the different 'angles' from which the social problem/phenomenon is approached? The aim of this process is to establish how these topics are brought up and connected in communication, rather than to identify topics in themselves. While it can be helpful to identify a big set of topics, the aim is not to produce an accurate account on the range of topics that come up, or the frequency/depth to which they are discussed.
4. **Identify internal contradictions:** Scan individual texts for various descriptions and accounts and look for inconsistencies within this text. Is there a variation to the ways in which the topic is approached within one text? Argumentative inconsistencies in the speech of one person are normal in communication, as the interpretations and arguments that are considered acceptable are dependent on the context of the conversation. At the same time, two people might express divergent opinions, but derive them from the same interpretation. The aim of this process is thus not to 'catch out' speakers for contradicting themselves or speakers of their community, but to further establish variability as to how a topic can be interpreted in different contexts. The same speaker/document taking more than one viewpoint on a topic without making an effort to resolve tensions between these viewpoints is an indication that these different interpretations exist in the wider discourse – studying additional material is helpful to verify this.

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Texts are not studied as descriptions of the research object, rather they are the research object in themselves. Text is viewed as a representation of the culturally shared 'common sense' ideas available to people in the community in and for which this text was produced. In this way, the discourse analytical approach illuminates the common contextual backgrounds and culturally shared ideas which are at the basis of the varying attitudes and aims that different individuals and groups express. Interviews are, for example, not analysed to find facts about how people think or behave, but are seen as linguistic expressions of shared understandings of how the world works. Therefore, in an appropriately executed study, questions on the speaker's political views or trustworthiness are irrelevant. Regardless of their intentions, speakers make themselves understood by referencing culturally shared interpretations of social phenomena or problems – and this is what we want to capture when we study writings and speech as social texts.

5. **Identify basic assumptions:** Establish regular patterns, repeatedly occurring descriptions, explanations, and arguments across different texts to illuminate the particular ways in which social problems and phenomena are talked about. Does the text contain references to sources of evidence, or does it imply facts or knowledge on a subject matter?

6. **Identify the rules of the discourse and the ways in which they are interrelated with problems and possibilities:** In this final step, the findings of the text analysis are placed in the broader context that was established at the beginning. How do the basic assumptions provide starting points to speak about a topic in a specific way? How do they contribute to commonly accepted knowledge? What is the 'state of things' that these assumptions imply and how might this reflect and shape societal and institutional practices?

Examples of Sociological Discourse Analysis in social science research

Much discourse analysis is concerned with texts that address social challenges and ideas of social change. The projects presented below represent two such examples.

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Environmentally and socially responsible consumption?
A study on food sustainability discourses

Researcher: Dr Ulrike Ehgartner, The University of Manchester

This PhD project aimed to explore tensions within the wider agenda of sustainable food consumption and production in the UK. To meet this aim, the language of those who arguably have the power to influence food consumption to become more sustainable was analysed: professionals involved in matters of food distribution, retail, consumption and waste. The data used was a combination of policy documents, journalistic articles and interviews with practitioners who occupy senior roles in the field. Using Sociological Discourse Analysis, the projected assessed how these people speak and write about sustainability in the food system between 2005-2017.

One finding that came out of this research was that 'common sense' understandings about what is or is not 'sustainable' change over time, causing issues to come in and out of focus. One such dynamic concerns 'ethical premium' consumption, meaning consumers' willingness to pay a premium for a product communicating ethical information. Ethical consumption was an important way in which experts talked about food sustainability during the time from around 2006 to 2008, but was subsequently excluded from sustainability debates. While some food-industry related issues have profited from this development and gained prevalence to sustainability policy, it caused other concerns to fall off the sustainability agenda.

One such concern is organic farming. While an increase in consumer demand for organic produce in the 'early days' was considered a key evidence for progress towards a more sustainable food industry, organic consumption is barely mentioned in most expert accounts of sustainability. The experts focussed on eco-efficiency and arguments around global food security and thought organic farming to be irrelevant and a 'misnomer' to the sustainability agenda. Professionals had internalised these contradicting views to the extent that when they were formulating an agenda for food sustainability in the research interviews that were conducted in 2017, they would argue for conventional farming over organic, based on the argument that the former would be more 'eco-efficient' and therefore more sustainable. However, when thinking back to what had been achieved over the past 10-15 years in the same interview, they would refer to the organic movement as a positive example of progress towards sustainability. The organic chicken represents the symbolic object of this tension. In the years from 2008 onwards, experts have continuously referred to it for its low energy performance in comparison to the conventional chicken by the experts interviewed.

The analytical approach taken thus illuminated not only that there are contradictions to the ways in which 'sustainability' is tacitly defined, but it also allowed the tracing of the historical, political and economic background and context of competing interpretations. The findings can help practitioners in the field of organic production and consumption and the wider agri-food system to consider their positioning in relation to their contribution to a sustainable food system.

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Imagined Futures of Consumption

Researchers: Dr Daniel Welch & Dr Ulrike Ehgartner, The University of Manchester

TThis project on 'Imagined Futures of Consumption' explores how the general public imagines the future of consumption, and the opportunities and limitations that come with these 'imagined futures'. For this purpose, an empirical study was set up to identify the varying ways in which the future of consumption is interpreted in the public domain. This was realised through a collaboration with the Mass Observation Project at the University of Sussex, which involved a panel of volunteer writers, known as Mass Observers, writing descriptions of how they imagine 'the future of consumption'.

Applying Sociological Discourse Analysis showed that the idea of a future in which we are all consuming less is not only 'out there', as an 'interpretation' of the future that is shared amongst the general public, but many also attach positive values to this idea, as well as a sense of agency and responsibility. Most strikingly, however, it showed that as opposed to other types of imagined futures (i.e. one dominated by technological innovation, which was vividly described with accounts of a re-organisation of everyday life around technological trends such as artificial intelligence, automation at work and at home, medical advances, human enhancement, artificial foods, advanced transport and renewable energy), imaginations of a future in which we consume less or in simpler, more considerate and slower ways, lacked ideas about what people would do on a day-to-day basis, i.e. how they would work, learn, socialise and enjoy themselves.

From a sociological viewpoint, these findings matter because they reveal the dominance and influence that technology-based storytelling has on how the future is imagined in the public domain, as opposed to accounts of environmental and social justice. Taking a discourse-analytical lens was absolutely essential to identify this. If, in contrast, a content analysis-based research approach had been taken, ideas of constrained consumption (both positive and negative) would have appeared much more prevalent than technological accounts. This would have led to the conclusion that the general public is highly concerned about the unsustainable impacts that our consumer culture has on society and environment. Having applied discourse analysis, this critical perspective on over-consumption could be observed, but it also revealed our lack of ability to imagine alternatives to the mass- and over-consumption that defined much of our day-to-day lives over the past century, illuminating limitations and challenges for social change. Practitioners who seek to establish more sustainable lifestyles across society might find this observation helpful and adapt their strategies accordingly, for example by working towards building stories of alternative lifestyles, rather than focussing on campaigns to convince people that consumerist lifestyles are not desirable.

Where else could Sociological Discourse Analysis be used?

Taking a radically different perspective to study the experiences and motivations that people express, this approach is suited to investigate social phenomena and problems for which previous research and intervention has not led to the desired change. Applying this approach to analyse discourses in the public domain could help public and private sector organisations to better understand the shared meanings behind what appears to be polarised public opinions. Organisations could benefit from this approach to gain insights on how different causes that they stand or campaign for are framed and contextualised by the public or the scientific community. Gaining a different perspective in identifying problems associated with phenomena, policy makers could develop forms of interventions that have been not taken before. Activists, charities and those pushing for more radical change can use analysis to help build positive stories of alternative lifestyles.

Top tips

1. Start with a small sample. Although the process of analysis can be labour intensive, the point where no new possible interpretations of a topic can be identified can be reached relatively quickly. Even a small sample text may suffice to indicate patterns of variation and what kinds of interpretations are possible. Once the statements and angles taken to talk about a social problem/phenomenon start to repeat themselves, the researcher is close to completing their analysis. The smaller, thoroughly analysed sample can then be tested against a larger set of data.
2. Combine different types of research material. In many social science approaches, the quality and generalisability of research findings can be increased by combining multiple data-gathering methods (e.g. observations, interviews and questionnaires). The study of speech as interpretations of how the world works can be enhanced by combining different types of research materials which were produced in different contexts of communication (e.g. websites of organisations, interviews with affiliates and social media engagement of members of the public).
3. Always remain critical of your own work. Make sure you only make claims that your material supports. Always have in mind that the aim of this method is not to show what people think or believe.

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Further reading

- The discursive framework of sustainability in UK food policy: The marginalised environmental dimension
- Imagined Futures of Consumption. Lay Expectations and Speculations. Discover Society

To reference: Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Sociological Discourse Analysis' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems.* Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.

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