

DOCTORAL THESIS

Institutional construction of gamblers' identities: a critical discourse study

Leung, Chung Hang

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at unraveling the institutional representations of gamblers' identities in the postmodern era. Although gambling has been widely researched in many fields such as psychology, sociology and cultural studies (e.g., Cosgrave, 2006; Kingma, 2010; McMillen, 1996; Petry, 2005), there has been a lack of scholarly inquiry vis-à-vis this topic among language researchers including discourse analysts. With the recent inauguration of two casino-based holiday resorts, Singapore provides a suitable platform for carrying out gambling-related academic research.

Adopting the approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study focuses on how gamblers' identities are constructed through discourse as an artifact by social institutions. To this end, the present research capitalizes on the Bakhtinian (1981) notion of "dialogism" and makes use of multiple data sets in which different institutional "voices" are embedded. The data consist of newspaper forum letters, gamblers' monologues released by a state gambling regulatory agency, and materials on problem/pathological gambling published by medical professionals.

As a "public sphere" (Habermas, 1989) where a variety of "voices" about gamblers and gambling are accommodated, the newspaper forum letters serve as an opening scene for data analysis. From the 47 letters collected, three main groups of writers—(i) the non-affiliated contributors; (ii) the governing parties; (iii) the mental health-care professionals—have been identified. Adhering to the framework of Fairclough (2003), the analysis centers around the linguistic triggers for three social research issues: (i) legitimation; (ii) hegemony (aka "equivalence and difference"); (iii) "appearance versus reality." It has been found that the non-affiliated contributors make heavy use of legitimation strategies. By contrast, legitimation strategies are much less prevalent among the governing parties. As for the mental health-care professionals, legitimation strategies are frequently found in their letters as a medium to foreground their in-group knowledge or expertise.

To further investigate the government's "voice," a nationwide campaign initiated by the Singapore National Council on Problem Gambling has been used for analysis. Four gamblers' speeches presented in this campaign have been examined on the basis of process types (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), appraisal resources (Martin & White, 2005) and code choice. The findings show that the juxtaposed identities between the social gamblers and the recovering problem gamblers are symbolically mobilized by the state to create the stigmatized quality of "problematic gamblers" for the purpose of public governance.

The interrogation of the medical "voice" has been performed along the direction of knowledge "recontextualization" (Kong, 2009; Linell, 2009). The data analysis involves texts from three sources: (i) a clinical handbook; (ii) a complimentary leaflet of a mental health-care unit; (iii) a self-help book from a popular profit-making series. The sociocognitive approach to discourse developed by van Dijk (1995, 2003b, 2005a, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011, 2012) has

been chosen as the principal analytic framework for this data set. The findings indicate that the text producers are continuously fiddling the boundaries between different types of knowledge (e.g., technical knowledge and “general-sociocultural” knowledge) with the goal of not only “popularizing” the medical paradigm, but also “colonizing” the “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1987).

The significance of the research is primarily three-fold. First, bearing the undertone of deconstruction (Derrida, 1978), the current discourse-oriented inquiry about gamblers’ identities is an exemplar of how text and its ideological-cum-social implications are critically untangled and re-questioned. Second, the research offers concrete linguistic evidence on the essential complementary ontological presence of institutional power holders and the “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977) for societal functioning and the maintenance of social stability. Third, a procedure for studying gamblers’ identities (or other institutional discursive constructs) is devised. With CDA as the overarching constituent, analytical concepts from a range of scholars are incorporated into the study (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Hyland, 2005; Jeffries, 2010a, 2010b; Kong, 2009; Martin & White, 2005; van Dijk, 2008a; van Leeuwen, 2008).

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