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# Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Qualitative Inquiry: Data Analysis Strategies for Enhanced Understanding of Inference and Meaning

Mary Ziskin

*University of Dayton*, [mziskin1@udayton.edu](mailto:mziskin1@udayton.edu)

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## **Critical discourse analysis and critical qualitative inquiry:**

### **Data analysis strategies for enhanced understanding of inference and meaning**

Mary B. Ziskin, University of Dayton  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1057-3094>

#### **Abstract**

This manuscript describes an approach to critical qualitative data analysis that combines (1) Carspecken's critical qualitative methodological framework (1996; 2012) with (2) the conceptual resources of critical discourse analysis (CDA), as framed by Fairclough (2003, 2016) and colleagues (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Carspecken's methodological theory illuminates the connection between sociopolitical power and culture by introducing the content of validity claims into analysis of discourse. In turn, CDA helps to support the analysis of validity claims in that these are often expressed or legitimated through implicit references, and through the rhetoric, shape, or tone of what is being said. After an introduction of key concepts, I outline the combined approach and present an example, illustrating steps from coding to reconstructive analyses to CDA memos. I conclude with a discussion of the kinds of findings that can be supported by this analytical method, and implications for further research.

**Keywords:** *critical qualitative research; discourse analysis; qualitative data analysis; educational equity; research methodology*

This manuscript describes an approach to critical qualitative data analysis that is practically focused and rooted in social theory. As critical qualitative researchers, we examine everyday interactions to shed light on how social structures — especially those defined by racialized, gendered, and economic privilege and oppression — shape lived experiences. This is a complex task, and as researchers we navigate through a complex social environment in pursuing it. In ongoing discussions on research practice, we develop, debate, and rely on methodological guidance to ensure our studies can bring critical insights about education and social inequality to light and can support positive social change. Methodological models can help with this undertaking, especially when they are (1) methodologically rigorous; (2) grounded in social theory; and (3) practically feasible. Analytical method, in particular, is one area where additional discussion is sure to be helpful.

Qualitative researchers have long written about the entanglements and challenges of navigating our collective discussions about validity in research (Beach, 2003; Dennis, 2013; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Lewis, 2009; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Scheurich, 1997; Tracy, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in the US and globally, current education policy and research debates continue to develop in ways that underscore the need for critical qualitative research to be conducted, for it to be conducted rigorously, and for the validity of qualitative research findings to be clearly conceived and communicated (Denzin, 2011; Maxwell, 2004; Steinberg, 2012; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). Methodological models for analysis, grounded in social theory, can help to address these problems and needs. First, they can contribute to clarifying qualitative research debates and positions regarding validity. Second, they can support researchers in

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that in this introduction, I place the purpose of this manuscript within the context of debates on validity of research findings. Later in this manuscript, I will focus on the term *validity claims*, which is a separate and different concept.

developing our studies and our research practice in general so that they are stronger: more rigorous, more critical, and clearer for communication across contexts informed by multiple overlapping epistemologies and sociocultural frames. Against this backdrop, it seems clear that continued discussion of methodological models for data analysis is a pressing concern in qualitative research.

Current methodological writing on critical qualitative methods in general shows an active and thriving area of debate and innovation in our field. The literature specifically addressing analytical methods, however, is relatively scant. The fourth edition of the *Sage Handbook on Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), for example, included at least thirteen chapters describing critical approaches, but only one of these focused on hands-on methods for data analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 2011). In addition, while there is ample work in both the field of critical discourse analysis and in the methodological literature on applying critical qualitative methods in education research, these literatures have not focused on how we as researchers might use the conceptual connections between the two in data analysis, as called for by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) and van Leeuwen (2005). This paper presents one practical method for doing so.

This manuscript draws specifically on the ongoing methodological discussions centered on the critical social theory developed by Habermas and others (Carspecken, 1996, 2003, 2012; Dennis, 2013; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012), and proposes extending the repertoire of common data analysis procedures used in critical qualitative research, so as to (1) make better use of critical theory concepts and (2) support the rigor and reflexivity built into our processes. In pursuit of this goal, I outline a series of steps for harnessing the conceptual resources of

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA), to further the goals of critical qualitative research (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). More specifically, I offer five steps to consider, and outline a process that is aligned with the principles and implications of Carspecken's methodological theory (1996; 2003; 2012) based in Habermas' two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA) (1984; 1987), and CDA as framed by Fairclough (2003; 2012).<sup>2</sup> My aim in presenting a specific analytical method, as opposed to one that reaches more broadly across a range of critical approaches, is not to limit the possibilities only to the model described, but instead to outline one possible method through which a researcher can support their process, combining critical qualitative research with CDA. The purpose of the manuscript is to propose an analytical method that results in a grounded and accountable record of critical analyses, which take social power, cultural frames, and the indeterminacy that defines communication into account. Following the presentation of these steps, I demonstrate the process in an example.

### **Advantages of the Proposed Method**

Carspecken's methodological theory, built on TCA, provides well-tuned tools for explaining the social world as we experience it, while also accounting for how racialized social power (as well as economic social power) can distort communication in education policy debates, and constrain participation in a way that prevents full and equal representation of the perspectives and interests of low-income students and students of color. Moreover, reconstructions of meaning informed by this methodological model are judged successful based

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<sup>2</sup> While there are a number of frameworks and approaches that use the term critical discourse analysis (e.g., Baker, et al., 2008; Mautner, 2016; Muntigl & Horvath, 2011; van Dijk, 1998, 2004), this paper focuses on the particular version of CDA offered by Fairclough and colleagues. Consistent with Fairclough and others' definitions over time, in this paper, I understand discourse in the specific sense of *language-use as social practice* (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

on how well they resonate with participants' own experiences in the exchange. The fact that the model aims to reconstruct meanings that are readily recognizable by participants means that it is relatively easy to communicate about findings, and debate their value, with multiple audiences – including collaborators, participants, and readers. This is an important advantage that cannot be taken for granted in the wide-ranging debates about validity in qualitative research (Dennis, 2013). Given these advantages, I would argue that TCA and Carspecken's model are underutilized, and hold potential for illuminating the entrenched, often occluded ways in which racialized and economic social power (White supremacist ideologies, institutional racism, abuses of late capitalism, and the intersections of these) shape individual lives and legitimize inequities in US education (Blaisdell, 2015; Dixson, 2015; Garcia & Guajardo, 2018; Villenas & Angeles, 2013).

Next, combining Carspecken's TCA-informed methodological model with Fairclough's CDA has two further advantages, in that the combination illuminates (1) how the uses of and references to cultural content beyond the explicit statement play into fields of possible meanings in public debate (Carspecken, 1996), and (2) how the message connects with what Harvey (1996) and Fairclough (2003) have called the other 'moments' of the social practice in the study (for more on 'moments,' see below). Because of this second advantage in particular, the use of CDA helps in exploring the role of discourse in the broader social practice of education, and contributes to the more general goal of analyzing the ways in which social power structures inform individual action and lived experience. In research based in TCA, this is termed *system relations* and is a central focus of analyses (Carspecken, 1996; Habermas, 1984).

In order to lay the groundwork for the more specific discussion later, some further explanation of system relations will be useful. Sometimes we talk broadly about "power" in

social research, but in TCA it is particularly important to distinguish between various forms of power, according to how they work in our lives. Some forms of power operate primarily as conditions that are external to the experience of our own identity – i.e., as structures, external realities, constraints. Examples of this include economic inequalities and inequalities in access to resources and services, such as school funding, racist federal housing policies, affordable grocery stores, safe and equitable community policing practices, or public transportation. These inequalities reflect forms of power through which institutional racism and White supremacy can be instituted and reinforced. They may well have an effect on our thinking and sense of self, but arguably their main effect is through the constraints and resources they impose, privileging White students and families, and particularly constraining resources and opportunities available to Black and Latino students and families. There are other forms of power as well, however. Institutional racism and White supremacy are also reproduced by people in ways that directly and primarily involve our need to secure our identities socially through language and other forms of communication (e.g., school curricula, news media, everyday social interactions). That is to say, there are forms of power that work internally and through discourse.

In critical social theory, the first kind of power (structures, formal policies, laws, infrastructures) is part of what is termed *social systems*. In contrast, we can understand the second type of power as part of *discourse* (in the broad sense, meaning the domain of language and other forms of communication, e.g., body language, math, visual images, data, music). When, in using TCA and CDA, we talk about how discourse affects and is shaped by social systems, we describe that as *system relations*.

A brief example may help to illustrate. Because of the way we fund schools in the US, a school located in a low-income community may suffer under constrained resources from a

budgetary perspective, while only miles away a school located in an affluent community would show very stark disparities in terms of the resources devoted to students' education (Fitzgerald, 2015; McDermott, Frankenberg, & Diem, 2015; Vaught, 2011) . Because of the racist housing policies that have shaped our communities throughout the country (see Rothstein, 2017, for example), in many cities these inequalities are marked by race as well as by income and wealth. In 2009, over 45% of Black students attended high poverty schools, compared to 8% of White students (NCES, 2010; Urban Institute, 2015). This is institutional racism accomplished via the *social system*. It involves structures and resources that students experience as external realities. While they certainly have effects on students' beliefs and self-concepts, nevertheless, the students likely experience these patterns of privilege and oppression as external, objective constraints. Moreover, the resegregation of schools actually affects our lives as external, objective structures. Regardless of students' awareness of the concentration of Black and Latino students in high-poverty schools, and the far lower rate of White students attending high-poverty schools, these patterns affect the education received by students. Resource inequalities affect high-poverty schools' facilities, course offerings, and ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers, for example (Orfield & Lee, 2005). If, on the other hand, we focus in on the curriculum (i.e., communication, discourse) within the school, we see a form of power that works via ideology, and this involves our subjective experiences in a different way. If a curriculum does not include historical material relevant to understanding how federal, state, and local policies resulted in residential segregation that endures in cities throughout the US (Rothstein, 2017), then White privilege and institutional racism itself are normalized and rendered invisible in the discourse of the school (Blaisdell, 2015; Dixson, 2018) . The structures and ideologies that created and sustain achievement gaps are removed from the sense-making and communication that occurs



among teachers and students, and consequently students may attribute test scores as reflecting their own and others' innate abilities. This is an example of how discourse shapes and is shaped by the social system. This interdependence of discourse and system can be analyzed in TCA as *system relations*.

In sum, the process outlined below focuses on how the link between culture and racialized power works in our everyday lives, and because of this focus, can be used to advance the goals of critical qualitative research. The two threads—Carspecken's methodological theory rooted in TCA, and Fairclough's framing of CDA – complement each other in achieving these critical qualitative aims. Carspecken's methodological theory (1996; 2003; 2012) extends our ability to explore the connection between sociopolitical power and culture by introducing the analysis of backgrounded and foregrounded validity claims, while CDA concepts can help researchers to analyze the aspects of validity claims that are expressed or legitimated through implicit references, and through the context, rhetoric, or tone. Specifically with regard to analysis of education policy, the combination of a TCA framework with CDA concepts provides an analytical method with strengths for exploring legitimation and other distortions of communication that shape public debate on education in the US. While this kind of analysis applies widely to social phenomena, in the domain of educational institutions and practices specifically, the approach presented centers on analyzing and understanding the sociocultural structures and expectations that limit our ability to hold a genuinely democratic exchange and debate surrounding education in the US. Analyses of this kind have the potential not only to produce grounded, defensible and useful findings but also to weaken current and persistent barriers to the open, democratic, and participatory debate of important issues related to educational equity.

In the first section that follows, I discuss the role of public discourse in legitimating and transforming educational inequities, and explore the pressing questions that can potentially be addressed by the method I am proposing. Next, I outline key concepts from TCA and CDA and a way through which they can be incorporated into a combined process for critical qualitative data analysis. I conclude with an example of how these steps were applied in one study, a discussion of the kinds of findings that can be supported by this analytical method, and implications for further research.

### **Understanding Educational Inequity: The Role of Discourse**

Discourse, defined as the *semiotic and language-pragmatic*<sup>3</sup> *dimensions of social practices*, is arguably a principal vehicle for legitimating and occluding educational inequity. Through discourse, policy advocates can frame the conversation in ways that limit questioning in general, or otherwise diminish the voices of those whose interests are not represented (Dixson, 2015; Flores, 2017; Garcia & Guajardo, 2018; Villenas & Angeles, 2013). Via these distortions, participants in policy debates can gain the passive or active support of others. When, for example, the discourse frames the assumptions or conditions underlying a policy as natural, normal, or immutable, it makes it difficult for those who might question or oppose the policies to create change. The whole process of communication and debate (as discourse) becomes even more complicated when we consider the role of understanding, reception, and interpretations in these exchanges. It is important, therefore, to have critical analytical tools to help us to keep track of these layered interactions and show their capacity for shaping education policy.

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<sup>3</sup> In theories of meaning and communication, “pragmatic” refers to how language is *used* in social interactions. This kind of focus is different from analyses that emphasize the relationships between signs (e.g., words, symbols) and their referents. This second kind of focus is often associated with the term “semiotic” and so I include both terms here for the sake of clarity.

As noted above, discourse plays a particularly important role in understanding the legitimization of racial and economic inequities in education (Blaisdell, 2015). The widely cited discourse of "colorblindness," for example, can be seen to illustrate this point (Dixson, 2015; Villenas & Angeles, 2013). Chapman (2013) notes, "The discourse of colorblindness allows school adults to disregard the racial identities of students by solely viewing them as individuals who are divorced from the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape their past and present experiences. By denying the 'historical and current contexts of [W]hite domination' (Urrieta, 2006, p. 456), colorblind discourses position the perceptions of students of color as irrational and baseless (Lopez, 2003)." (Chapman, 2013, p.614). Similarly, Pollock (2004) describes the "colormute" discourse of serving "*all students*" (to the exclusion of targeting efforts to improve conditions for Black and Latino students whom schools underserve). Her empirical findings showed, ". . .that once universalistic discourse is set in motion, this very discourse can preclude targeting efforts: for once [colorblind/'colormute'] '*all*' talk is hegemonic, any targeting efforts seem to some to be inherently 'unfair'"(Pollock, 2004, p. 241).

There are multiple benefits recommending the incorporation of Fairclough's CDA into critical qualitative data analysis. Laying out a clearly situated set of methodological implications from CDA will help researchers to conduct qualitative data analyses with increased rigor and socio-theoretical grounding. Better analyses of this kind will help to shed light on the distortions of communication that characterize contemporary double-speak and legitimize conceptions of opportunity and academic merit that are actually based in social stratification and inequality (e.g., White supremacy; neoliberal economics), and that make it difficult for us to talk about race and equity in education in the twenty-first century. Fairclough terms these threads *discourses* (in the local sense). *Discourses* such as these (e.g., school discipline, neoliberal frames on

institutional accountability, high-stakes testing) are instrumental to understanding how contemporary politics and culture are shaping education in the US, and for this reason, researchers need to look at these discourses in more detail.

## **Critical Qualitative Data Analysis: Combining TCA and CDA**

### **Building from TCA: Carspecken's Methodological Theory**

A critical qualitative approach to data analysis based in Carspecken's methodological theory (1996; 2003; 2012; 2013) and TCA will facilitate researchers' efforts to contextualize discourse within a broader view on multiple aspects of a social practice. This is what Fairclough has pointed to in saying, "To research meaning-making, one needs to look... at how texts practically figure in particular areas of social life, which suggests that textual analysis is best framed within ethnography" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 15)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, Carspecken's (1996; 2003; 2012) methodological model provides a TCA-based framework for tracking the possible meanings introduced in interactions and in discourse. Most important, Carspecken's methodological theory is designed to illuminate hidden power relations at the social-system level and at the level of lived experience: the ways in which systems (e.g., residential segregation; late capitalism) structure and inform everyday interactions, and the ways in which ideology (e.g., White supremacy; rugged individualism) can shape these broader structures (social systems) and bring these structures into our lived experiences (i.e., via system relations).

Analytical methods along these lines can be organized around the concept of pragmatic horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996). Through this process, researchers reconstruct the claims

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<sup>4</sup> Although Fairclough centers on the concept of texts here, he writes about communication more broadly elsewhere, including the linguistic aspects of conversation and social interaction as well as written forms of communication, his concepts and frameworks can be used in understanding both "talk" and "text" (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011).

and culturally-informed interpretive schemes that participants employ in any social exchange, highlighting fields of possible shared meanings implicated in communicative acts (i.e., writing, speaking, reading, or otherwise communicating nonverbally).

According to this theory of meaning, everything we say gives rise to multiple possible meanings, or fields of meaning. Moreover, each singular possible meaning is made up of multiple component *validity claims*. Meaning occurs when we internally, intuitively, and all at once, identify the range of possible shared meanings that might be construed from a communicative act. These multiple possible meanings are constituted in context of the exchange, and draw on the content of the exchange. Meaning is influenced by the words and references used, but not fully determined by those resources. Instead, (1) the context (our social setting, what has happened leading up to the moment, social expectations), and (2) the unique configuration of various symbolic and nonsymbolic aspects of the communicative act (words, body language, etc.) converge to implicate a set of tacit *validity claims*. These claims come together to form multiple holistically-understood singular meanings. Together, these multiple possible meanings then comprise a meaning field for the interaction.

**Validity claims in communication.** It is important to note that in this context, *validity claims* refer to explicit and implicit claims to truth that are part of everyday communication; the term does not refer to the validity of research findings specifically. *Validity claims* partially constitute possible meanings in any given communication. For example, if I were to ask my friend “Could I borrow your pen?” and point to the pen sticking out of her bag, and if she said “Sure!” both my friend and I would produce (infer) a finite set of possible shared meanings for this brief exchange. It is likely that the field of possible meanings that occurred to my friend would overlap significantly with the field of meanings I inferred. Presumably, the meaning

would be clear between us, and it is reasonable to assume that we would understand each other with little need of further explanation.

Nevertheless, it is possible to look more carefully at the *validity claims* (claims to truth) that my friend and I together have implicated in the exchange. Among the validity claims in this example would be my claims that (1) my friend has a pen with her; (2) that the pen belongs to her; (3) that it is appropriate for me to ask to borrow it; and (4) that I would like to borrow and use the pen at the current moment. Furthermore, my friend's brief assent also implicates validity claims, including (1) that she has a pen with her; (2) that she is willing to lend the pen to me; and, more subtly perhaps, (3) lending me the pen is not a big deal to her ("Sure"). Interestingly, in order for us to understand each other, we each need to take a position on each of the validity claims implicated: agree, disagree, or abstain. For example, it seems likely that my friend implicitly agreed with the validity claim that it is appropriate for me to ask to borrow the pen. If she did not agree – perhaps if she were in the midst of using it to write an urgent note, or if she were busy helping a visiting dignitary – she could point out that my request was not appropriate. Likewise, in the scenario, my friend may agree to the implicit validity claim that the pen I pointed to actually belongs to her. Alternatively, she may not really agree that it is "her" pen, perhaps because she herself had borrowed it. Nevertheless, she may decide that this detail is not really important in this context, and decide not to foreground her disagreement.

If, after saying "Sure," my friend makes no move to offer me the pen, I might form the thought that I have to clarify that I meant that I would like to borrow the pen *now*. Trying to be polite, I might tentatively point toward the pen, saying "Could I just...?" Or if I were impatient, I might snap a bit, saying "Could I have it now?" Implicit in my thinking would be a cultural norm that I assume my friend and I share, indicating that I should wait for her to hand me the pen, and

that I should not reach into her bag to get the pen myself. Given this norm, I infer not that my friend expects me to reach into her bag, but instead that she has somehow misunderstood the time frame of my request. There is another cultural norm, of course, indicating that a request like “Could I borrow your pen?” implies an immediate timeline without the need to say I would like to borrow your pen “now.” I might feel surprised or even impatient that it would be necessary to explain that when I asked to borrow the pen, I meant the time frame to be immediate. I might even think that this should have been obvious, and fault my friend, thinking she was being obtuse.

From my friend’s point of view, she might have thought I had asked to borrow sometime in the future. Although, given the prevalence of the cultural expectation that implied timelines for requests are more-or-less immediate, this is unlikely. It is also possible that she was planning to hand me the pen as soon as she could, but since she was in the midst of doing something else (tying her shoe, replying to a text message, talking to a visiting dignitary), she was waiting to finish the current task before handing the pen to me. If this second possibility were the case, then my friend might clarify in her turn that she knew I meant “now” but that she was prioritizing something else over my request for a moment. This possibility has me feeling like a heel now. It may have been unwitting in the moment I replied, but in the next moment, I might see that my saying “Could I have it now?” or even just saying “Could I just...?,” to prompt my friend, actually could reasonably be thought to carry a validity claim something like, “You should prioritize my request over whatever else you’re doing.” In most non-emergency situations, this would be a very entitled way to think, and could logically then become a further point of disagreement. Fortunately, I have many kind and generous friends who might help me see this without writing me off for a hopeless jerk, “All right, Hurry McRusherton, here’s the pen.”

As illustrated in this example, many aspects of this exchange come together as my friend and I reproduce and infer meaning: words, body language, the physical and social context, cultural norms, the flow and pacing of the exchange, our previous relationships, and more. All of these aspects play in, but importantly, we can see through the example that (1) each possible meaning in the meaning field is partially constituted by validity claims, (2) these validity claims can be teased out in this kind of analysis, and (3) this kind of analysis shows how culture plays a role in our experience. Validity claims are an important and very telling component of the horizons of meaning my friend and I experienced.

**Types of validity claims.** To understand validity claims further, we need to return to the idea that the very possibility of my friend and me understanding each other requires that we each take a stance on implicated validity claims. In all communication, participants must implicitly or explicitly assent to, or challenge validity claims, or abstain. Without this, no understanding is possible in communication. Extending this idea from Habermas, Carspecken identified four categories of validity claims, distinguishable through the ways they could be challenged by another person: objective, subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity validity claims (1996; 2012).

**Objective validity claims.** Objective validity claims posit an outside world, the external existence of which is tacitly agreed to by the participants. (This is an intersubjective understanding posited in the exchange: Each participant *believes this agreement exists*, regardless of whether all participants *actually* agree on this outside world, or see it in the same way.<sup>5</sup> Given this, when people disagree about components and processes of a shared objective

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<sup>5</sup> Even if they did not believe in this central agreement, participants would have to implicitly acknowledge the *assumption* of a shared outside world. It is actually not possible to assume otherwise while communicating with others.



world, those disagreements themselves actually depend upon the underlying assumption that a shared objective world exists, and that these components and processes exist within that posited world.) This objective realm does not need to exist in any absolute sense, but it is a premise of all communication: participants assume the existence of a shared objective realm (whose particulars they may agree or disagree on), and they assume also that all participants have access to this shared objective realm via their senses. Given this premise, in everyday communication, validity claims in the objective category are subject to the possibility of challenge by another with equivalent access to the external phenomenon we are discussing.

***Subjective validity claims.*** Subjective validity claims, on the other hand, are about our “internal” experiences (e.g., emotions, feelings, intentions, modes of awareness). Subjective claims are by nature best supported by the person’s own privileged access to the (internal) phenomenon. Subjective claims cannot easily be challenged by another in convincing way, without somehow getting the person to assent to the different view on their internal state. For example, in a conversation with you, I might say something like: “Earlier, I said I was not sad, but then you pointed out that I seem tearful and vulnerable, and that a friend has recently died. I think maybe you are right. I am feeling sad.”

***Normative-evaluative validity claims.*** Normative-evaluative validity claims pertain to what *should* be (what is right, wrong, appropriate, desirable, etc.). Disagreements over claims about what is appropriate or *should* be (normative-evaluative validity claims) rest on other validity claims about what is right or wrong, good or bad. These latter sorts of validity claims are *moral, ethical, or value claims*, a specific subset of the normative-evaluative category.

***Identity validity claims.*** A fourth category framed by Carspecken is the idea of the identity claim. Identity validity claims center on character claims, or claims about what kind of

person we are (e.g., an expert; a friendly person). Validity claims asserting the actor is the subject rather than an object (i.e., “I” claims) are also included under identity claims. Most often, identity claims are experienced as singular and holistic, but they are usually also very complex. Rarely would an identity claim be simply “I am an expert,” but something including multiple attributes instead: e.g., “I am a principled, caring, down-to-earth expert.”

***Meaning and the pragmatic horizon.*** While all types of validity claims are present in a given statement, and multiple validity claims of any or all of the four types may be present, individual validity claims may be foregrounded (made explicit or important) or backgrounded (taken-for-granted, implicit, or unimportant). Moreover, every meaningful act has foregrounded, mid-region, and backgrounded claims. In any given exchange or interaction with another, we continuously take yes/no/abstention positions with respect to validity claims, and move forward based on those positions, and also within the context of all participants’ taking such positions while simultaneously tracking their own and others’ positions throughout the course of the exchange.<sup>6</sup> This whole process – the coming and going of multiple possible meanings into and out of relevance, the partial constitution of meaning through tacit validity claims, this navigation of positions on validity claims, the selection of claims to foreground and act on – is captured in Carspecken’s concept of the pragmatic horizon (1996; 2012).<sup>7</sup>

**Analyzing communication in research.** Next we need to turn back to the uses of this framework in research. The pragmatic horizon describes how we experience communication as a social practice, situated culturally and shaped by social power (e.g., institutional racism;

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<sup>6</sup> For further explanation of validity claims in critical communicative pragmatics, see Carspecken (1996, pp. 55-85).

<sup>7</sup> In theories of meaning and communication, “pragmatics” focuses on our uses of language as a social practice, and does not conceptualize communication in terms of static content or references. In pragmatics, our use of language in social practices is seen as fundamental to what all meaning is. Consequently, static content and references too are analyzed using concepts drawn from our understanding of communicative practices (e.g., using concepts such as pragmatic horizon).

economic privilege and oppression). The terms used above (e.g., validity claims, pragmatic horizon, meaning fields) describe aspects of communication as we experience it in “real life.” These components from TCA offer a theory of meaning and communication— not merely abstract concepts to be used as a research method. Building from this, Carspecken’s methodological theory points us to the goal of accounting for these experiences in social research. Critical qualitative research methods need to provide a way of reconstructing meaning. Carspecken’s pragmatic horizon analysis employs these concepts as a research method; the resulting reconstructions are capable of capturing processes, meanings and inferences that are still recognizable to the participants.

The analysis of validity claims has the potential to make the process of analyzing communication as socially-situated practice more accountable. By opening the analytical process more thoroughly to questioning and critique, this method can improve the depth and validity of these analyses. Furthermore, these resources help researchers to make the most out of analyzing specific properties of public discourse in education (or in other domains). They aid us in evaluating to what extent debates function as public spheres (i.e., whether they are inclusive, democratic, and dialogically open), or the degree to which the communication within them is distorted by ideological use of discourse or the exertion of social power over participation and reason. Contemporary debates in education policy — including the school-to-prison pipeline, neoliberal accountability structures and privatization, resegregation, school funding, affirmative action, and stratification of postsecondary opportunity — often hinge in part on the public representation of practices, institutions, and people in language (discourse) (Lester, Lochmiller, & Gabriel, 2016; Sabri, 2011) . Consequently, the uses of discourse can limit the terms and possibilities considered in the policy and can furthermore shape the outcome. Research that can

shed light on these uses of discourse can therefore help to identify processes that distort democratic, participatory debate representing all those affected by a policy. In this way, research can contribute to efforts to improve policy and practice and to address and eliminate racial and economic inequities in education.

### **Conceptual Resources from Fairclough's CDA**

One of the principal benefits of Fairclough's CDA lies in its emphasis on the close analysis of language (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992; 2003; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Fairclough has argued (1992) that detailed analysis of texts and other forms of communication can complement and augment other less detail-oriented strategies for analyzing social practices. Furthermore, Chouliaraki and Fairclough's model provides a vehicle through which to examine the role of discourse within a broader social practice (e.g., education). Fairclough and colleagues outline a method for exploring the use of discursive resources within and between threads of discourse — resources such as *genre*, *styles*, *discourses* (in the local sense), and formal maneuvers (e.g., eliding the subject in a sentence; nominalizing a phenomenon).

Discursive *genres* refer to ways of acting that define a specific kind of interaction or social practice (Fairclough, 2003). For example, writing a letter to the editor entails using language in certain ways, and without doing so, the writing would not be selected for publication in the paper (and therefore would not become a letter to the editor).

Similarly, discursive *style* refers to the aspect of discourse that informs a social practice through participants' performed identities. One example often given in Fairclough's explications of CDA is the example of *being a manager* in a specific way that is characteristic of

neoliberalism (2003). Styles can be specific and fluid but somehow entail a reference<sup>8</sup> to roles and ways-of-being that come from outside the immediate exchange or document. These are identities that are conveyed through discourse generally, including ways of talking or writing, and body language as well (e.g., a commonsense everyman, an approachable boss). The CDA concept of *style* offers a useful tool to complement Carspecken's concept of identity claims discussed in the previous section. Complex identity claims can sometimes be captured in a *style* that collects a constellation of certain culturally contingent attributes. To be a *style*, the constellation of attributes will show some consistency across instances (e.g., "tough-minded conservative"; "knowledgeable, caring professional"; or even "masculine person").

To Fairclough, *discourses* (in the local sense) are "ways of representing" phenomena in talk or text. This use of the word as a count-noun (*discourses*) is distinct from the abstract-noun version (discourse, meaning language and communication in general). *Discourses* have stability and continuity, and "constitute a nodal point in the dialectical relationship between language and other elements of the social" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 126). Examples might include a currently prevalent school discipline discourse that uses terms and concepts borrowed from the criminal justice system (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014); neoliberal frames on institutional accountability (Santos, 2006); or high-stakes testing (Kawai, Serriere, and Mitra, 2014). These modes of communicating about these topics, i.e., these *discourses*, are themselves instrumental to understanding how contemporary ideology, politics, and culture shape education in the US, and for this reason, researchers need to look at them in more detail.

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<sup>8</sup> In explaining Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, I include the idea that discursive resources *refer* to phenomena outside the text. This conceptualization does not address questions of understanding, reception, and interpretation, however. In TCA, these aspects are further explained via the process of inference (as opposed to reference). Clarifying the distinction between reference and inference makes our efforts to explain how communication works more precise. This has powerful implications for analyzing the role of culture in social power and inequity. For an excellent explanation of the difference between representational and inferential theories of meaning, see Brandom's *Articulating Reasons* (2000).

Analytical focus on discursive resources can help researchers to analyze and draw conclusions about implicit meanings. This is particularly important for critical readings of racial/ethnic inequity and socioeconomic inequality in the broader practice of education, mainly because these aspects of our society are often not discussed explicitly, or on the surface. They are assumed, backgrounded, and often implicit, even when they are important to an exchange or debate (Pollock, 2004).

Critical discourse analysis and the theory of communicative action (TCA) support each other's priorities and aims in important ways. Carspecken's methodological theory (1996; 2003; 2012) illuminates the connection between sociopolitical power and culture by introducing the content of backgrounded and foregrounded validity claims into analysis of discourse. Likewise, CDA helps to support the analysis of validity claims in that these are often expressed or legitimated through implicit references, and through the context, rhetoric, shape, or tone of what is being said. CDA provides terms for the structural and intertextual features of the communication. This allows us to see regularities more easily—for example through coding for the implicit and explicit references to content and ideas outside of the immediate interaction (interdiscursivity), which then can be explored with further depth and precision using analysis of validity claims based in TCA. Furthermore, Fairclough's frameworks stress the connection with the broader social practice (e.g., education), and those aspects of the social practice that are not discourse per se (e.g., institutions, transportation to institutions, students' experiences of hunger, success, fatigue, or anxiety). Harvey (1996) has referred to these discursive and nondiscursive aspects of a social practice as “moments.”

## **Data Analysis Combining TCA and CDA: One Approach**

Having discussed the purposes and benefits associated with combining CDA with critical communicative pragmatics and having introduced a set of relevant concepts underlying each of these frameworks, I turn next to describe one viable approach to combining attention to CDA concepts with qualitative data analysis based in TCA. In proposing the combined approach, my intent is not to suggest that either CDA or Carspecken's methodological theory are not viable frameworks on their own. Instead, my purpose in this manuscript is to highlight some further benefits that could be gained by combining attention to both in data analysis. What follows is simply one approach—one that I have used, employing the specific tools I chose or had on hand at the time I began a given study (e.g., *Atlas.ti* qualitative data analysis software, annotation tools in *MS Word*). More important than these specifics, however, is the broader idea of how to fold CDA concepts (e.g., style, genre, *discourses*) into the analysis of validity claims in a way that supports good practice and that is consistent with TCA.

The process entails five steps:

1. **Low-inference thematic coding and selection**
2. **Preliminary reconstruction of validity claims**
3. **CDA memos and annotations** (Steps 2 and 3 may be conducted iteratively or simultaneously)
4. **Focused coding using new CDA codes**
5. **Narrative reconstructions of selected examples**

I discuss each step below.

**Step One: Low-inference coding and selection.** This process involves reading through material multiple times and iteratively coding excerpts, consistent with Carspecken's (1996)

guidance, with very literal tags and descriptions of meaningful segments of speech or text. This process may primarily include low-inference thematic codes, such as "faculty" "students" or "science courses," for instances in which the topic concerns faculty, students, or science courses, and semantic codes, such as "indirect quote," or "reform" used to code participants' references and use of the term "reform."<sup>9</sup>

This step culminates in the identification and selection of important sections of data for further analysis. These would be the meaningful, whole statements (along with their contexts) that a researcher, informed by extensive familiarity with the data gained through early analyses, judges to be on the study topic. This process should result in the selection of many segments of data, and not of just a few key passages. A sizable but focused and manageable subset of material should emerge that will be the focus of the remaining advanced-stage steps in the analysis.

**Step Two: Reconstruction of validity claims.** A linked memo could be created using the comments function in a word processing program, or a specialized function in a qualitative data analysis software package. One linked "validity claims" memo is created for each excerpt, and in it, selected validity claims of all types are listed: objective, subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity validity claims. Spontaneous examples and notes on foregrounding and backgrounding may be included, since the validity claims memos will be revised and refined throughout this process.

Ideally, in order to keep the analytical statements as close to the data as possible, the original passage should be linked or included at the top of the validity claim memo. If it is possible to create a hyperlink from this copy of the statement back to the segment in its original

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<sup>9</sup> Other forms of low-inference codes are possible as well. For a full discussion, see Carspecken (1996, pp.146-148).



context (e.g., using software such as *Atlas.ti* or *N\*Vivo*), this is a good idea for the same reasons. When working with excerpts separately or grouped by code, it is important not to consider them only in isolation, but to keep your knowledge about the context surrounding the excerpt in its original setting fresh and accessible (Carspecken, 1996). Referring back to the original passage and reading longer excerpts in context are good strategies for maintaining close and flexible proximity to the original data. Using a linked-memo function in a CAQDAS package, or adding your own hyperlink in a word-processing document, makes referring back to the original exchange easy and quick, and so in some ways may help to encourage this good practice.

**Step Three: CDA memos and annotations.** Similar to the process described in the validity claims memos above, “CDA memos” can also be developed for each selected statement. These memos should each be linked with the relevant excerpt just as the validity claim memos were. In these memos, it is possible to quickly record thoughts (even in list form) about what discursive resources or other forms of interdiscursivity are used in the passage. These include discursive *genre* (e.g., a political speech, an informal conversation, a job interview); discursive *style* (i.e., ways we present ourselves in language, referring to concepts that are a part of our culture, such as “being professional” or emphasizing one’s masculinity). Relevant topics may be annotated in a similar way, as *discourses* (in the local sense).

The goal in this step is to take down thoughts about styles, genres, *discourses*, or other forms of interdiscursivity in informal analytic memos. There is no need for a standardized or structured approach with these memos, and it may happen that some excerpts will prompt us to see and write more of these notes than others. Having reviewed all the selected excerpts (all the most important excerpts from a few central codes, for example), it may be possible then to see

some repetition across examples.<sup>10</sup> In those cases, this step will culminate in the development of a few high-level CDA-derived codes. Examples might be “style: tough disciplinarian” or “genre: political speech” or “discourses: criminalizing Black men.”

**Step Four: Focused coding using new high-level CDA-oriented codes.** To bring the CDA concepts into the analysis of validity claims, a subsequent task can be to complete some focused coding of a selected set of data using the newly developed CDA codes (e.g., “*discourse*: criminalizations in school discipline;” “genre: performance review;” “style: friendly manager;” “style: disciplinarian”).

At the end of this process, the result is a grounded and accountable record of analyses, which include attention to explicit content, implicit content, and pragmatic structures. It is important to be able to capture these subtle points in critical research, especially, because power structures are present in our lives so often in the form of assumptions or expectations of what is ‘normal’ and more generally what is seen as legitimate. We need analytical methods that can take these multiple meanings and pragmatic structures—and the inference and indeterminacy that defines communication—into account. As critical researchers, we need to delve into these multiple layers, but at the same time, it can be difficult to convey or to support such interpretations, because of their basis in inexact and implicit layers of meaning. Having an accountable record like the one produced through this process supports researchers in forming and conveying critical interpretations, convincingly, reflexively, and with care.

**Step Five: Narrative reconstructions.** Looking back through the validity claim memos with results of the focused CDA coding also in mind, a researcher may then work through each of the selected examples, sketching out a reconstruction of complex meanings in narrative

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note, however, that repetition is not the only possible indicator of relevance. In some examples, even one instance of a participant’s use of a specific genre, style, or *discourse* could be important.

paragraphs. That is, ordinary paragraphs connecting sentences together to form an argument or summary. These summaries focus in on the most important findings from steps two through four, and, in the writing-up phase of a project, will serve as raw material for the results section. In accomplishing this step, researchers must draw on their knowledge of the data and the cultural contexts informing the exchange or example to describe the main validity claims, detailing the extent to which they are foregrounded or backgrounded, whether they might serve as anchors for broader identity claims, and noting —where relevant— whether and why they include claims that positions are open to challenge (dialogically open) or not (dialogically closed). This description might be followed with an overview of genres, *discourses*, and styles that are apparent in the example, and a brief explanation of how these may shape the meaning of the excerpt. Finally, this step will pull together points that emerged from steps 2 through 4 above. It may include a review across multiple reconstructions to support conclusions or further analysis on system relations. A researcher might, for example, look across individual reconstructions and at genres, *discourses*, and styles by code, to note patterns attending particularly to sociocultural power, nominalization, or normalization of phenomena and categories, the conditions within which actions take place, or the role of discourse within the broader social practice.

### **An Example in Practice**

I used this combined approach in a study of the public controversy concerning remedial courses at the City University of New York (CUNY) 1998-2002 (Author, 2004). Following the process described above, I worked through data analysis iteratively and built from low-inference, early findings toward higher-inference codes based in social theory and critical discourse analysis, to assess how racial inequities in college opportunity were construed and used within the debate. (See Appendix for an overview of the study.)

Identification of a “Decline of CUNY” *discourse*, and an analysis of how participants used it was an important theme in the study, illustrating how issues of race, racism, and equity were woven into the debate. The intense public critique of CUNY in the late-1990s set the stage for the subsequent debate and the eventual elimination of remedial courses from the system’s senior colleges.

A detailed view of how the “Decline of CUNY” *discourse* emerged as a theme can be seen by following the analysis of a *Daily News* article recounting Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s 1998 State of the City address (Sorenson, Wasserman & Schwartzman, 1998). This process is discussed in the Appendix and is summarized in Table 1. As an illustration of how findings can emerge through this process, I will retrace the steps briefly below.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In the course early low-inference coding (step one), I assigned two codes (“Descriptions of CUNY” and “Poor Quality at CUNY”) to a key sentence: “In his State of the City speech Wednesday, the mayor slammed open enrollment as “a failure” and criticized CUNY as ‘this disaster’ responsible for a historic ‘destruction of standards’ and a ‘plummeting graduation rate.’” These codes were meant to capture literal thematic content, deferring judgment and inference as much as possible as I developed a more detailed contextual knowledge of the full corpus of documents for the study. By the completion of this step, having developed a grounding in the data through low-inference coding, reflexive journaling, and review of documented analyses, I was able to identify the quote above, and others, as relevant for further analyses in steps two through five.

In the second step, I reconstructed validity claims for a large collection of important passages, including the example quote. In the case of the *Daily News* article, examples of validity

claims partially constituting the meaning of the quote included, “the 1998 State of the City address occurred Wednesday,” and in reported-speech attributed to Mayor Giuliani “[CUNY’s] standards used to be high; now they are low.” Validity claims from the quote are further illustrated in Figure 2.

In step three, I developed memos highlighting the CDA concepts used in each of the passages selected for further analysis. Figure 3 shows that the CDA memo for the example quote highlighted the use of discursive genres, such as “political speech” and “newspaper article,” as well as a discursive style that could be described as “tough mayor” or “tough conservative” (because of the blunt language “disaster” and “failure”). In this example and elsewhere, I was also able to identify a *discourse* (in the local sense) centered in descriptions of CUNY as formerly of high quality but currently of very poor quality – a discourse I labeled “Decline of CUNY.”

Next, I looked across all the memos to develop new CDA-based codes, for use in focused coding (step four). In one example related to the *Daily News* reporting on the 1998 State of the City address, new codes such as “style: tough conservative” and “*discourse*: Decline of CUNY” were used in a round of coding focused on any material previously coded under the low-inference “Descriptions of CUNY” code (see Figure 4).

Finally, in step five, I looked across all the documented analyses to synthesize a narrative reconstruction of meaning implicated in the example. I used the CDA coding to identify patterns across examples and to highlight particularly relevant examples. Using the validity claims and CDA memos to support a reflexive and rigorous analysis of meaning at multiple levels, I developed narrative paragraph-length summaries of key points for each of the identified

examples. For the *Daily News* quote, for example, I developed a narrative reconstruction that eventually became the raw material for part of my results section (see Figure 5).

In summary, the analyses presented in this overview and in the Appendix show first how the analysis of validity claims helped me to elucidate the multiple meanings folded into statements from the CUNY debate. In addition, they show how I supplemented and deepened these readings using CDA terms and concepts as the basis for focused coding in the later stages of analysis. Next, I explore how the combined approach to data analysis helped to bring relevant backgrounded validity claims to the light, making them more accessible for analysis and discussion, particularly with regard to system relations.

### **System Relations**

Analyses across the data showed that three elements contributed particularly to the preparatory role of the “Decline of CUNY” *discourse*: (1) the severity of this critique, (2) its volume, and (3) the consistent links it made, attributing CUNY’s purported failings to open admissions policies, and to the presence of remedial courses and underprepared students within the university. The combination of these elements further prepared the way for the elimination of remedial courses to be understood as an educational reform — i.e., as a technical improvement for a university allegedly in crisis. Moreover, a prominent narrative repetition of the “Decline of CUNY” *discourse* anchored this critique, and implicated validity claims that associated this decline with high proportions of students of color attending CUNY campuses. Steps two through four in particular facilitated my ability to see and document these associations.

Whether the language was colormuted, coded, or explicitly racial, the “Decline of CUNY” *discourse* and its uses in these critiques portrayed the expanded access afforded by CUNY’s open admissions policies as itself an erosion of standards. In this way, the “Decline of

CUNY” narrative was a potent discursive resource for embedding implicit (and nondeterminant) racist claims in the critique of CUNY. In the context of multiple possible meanings, implicated claims worked in couched yet clear terms to link the advent of significant numbers of Black and Latino students at CUNY with a decline in the university’s quality and prestige. In numerous examples found in highly visible or widely cited sources within the public debate, participants made validity claims associating the “Decline of CUNY” with Black and Latino students, without doing so explicitly.

Coded racializations and colormuted formulations — which paradoxically work in ways that make race matter (Pollock, 2004) — informed the CUNY controversy throughout the public debate. Examples of this dynamic are seen through debate participants’ representations of CUNY students and in other aspects of the debate (Author, 2004). Opponents of the CUNY Master Plan amendment seemed to understand the racial equity implications of the policy-changes as not only central to the issue (e.g., “...while the new admissions regulations promise to shift almost 30 percent of Whites out of senior institutions and into community colleges, more than half of black, Hispanic, and Asian students will be diverted to the latter” (Lavin & Weininger, 1999)), but woven pervasively into the historical context and institutions structuring the debate (e.g., “The CUNY system has long been a door to opportunity for poor people, students of color, and this [the new policy] is an attempt to completely remake the City University and abandon that mission,’ said Theodore M. Shaw, associate director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.” (Healy, 1998).

In contrast, the amendment’s supporters underplayed the relevance of race and equity considerations to the proposed changes (e.g., “The new admissions requirements at the City University of New York will ensure that young people of all racial, ethnic and class backgrounds

earn degrees that are meaningful, respected and negotiable in the business and professional school communities.” (Community Colleges, 1999)). Returning to the *discourse* of "reform" set up by the critique, they instead stressed the idea that CUNY urgently needed to raise its academic standards (“The new approach to remediation, which will be phased in come February, would offer those skills and would raise the standards for CUNY graduates without discriminating against anyone.” (More Nonsense, 1999)).

The analytical methods outlined in this manuscript resulted in additional findings, beyond the “Decline of CUNY” narrative. The combined approach using both TCA and CDA helped to uncover broad patterns in the discourse that built a gradual, accountable record, and ultimately shed light on system relations.

The ways in which debate participants construed, used, and implicated concepts of equal educational opportunity, for example, also shaped the progression and outcome of the controversy. The sole thread within the debate to explore the equity implications of the amendment in any interactive way focused on the projected impact of the new policies on CUNY enrollment. Within this set of exchanges, the racial diversity of incoming classes emerged as the measure by which to understand the amendment’s effect on equal opportunity. In the press coverage from 1999 forward, diversity within the CUNY system became the point of celebration, often used to support retroactive dismissals of equity-based objections to the amendment. Also significant, the Board of Regents’ 1999 probationary approval of the Master Plan amendment turned on the condition that the new policy not be detrimental to racial equity in educational opportunity. The regents’ permanent reauthorization of the amendment in 2002 depended on that proviso. Despite this, CUNY’s system-wide diversity numbers (and *not* equity measures) became the test by which the university had to demonstrate that the new policy had had no ill effect. The



emergence of continued racial/ethnic diversity as the principal measure of interest for public opinion and official approval meant that other equity measures were de-emphasized, and eventually disappeared from the discussion. The role of the amendment in exacerbating racial stratification of enrollments within the CUNY system, for example, was overshadowed in the course of public debate.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, discussion of the disproportionate exclusion of low-income students, and Black and Latino students within the city's high school cohorts also dropped from view. For these reasons, the construction of opportunity within this debate not only conditioned what equity was seen to entail, but also occluded the important issues of stratification and exclusion within the controversy. A full and genuine debate of the amendment's implications was, therefore, prevented.

Although this example centers on the remediation debate at CUNY, similar analyses could usefully be applied to other topics (e.g., the ongoing challenges to affirmative action, neoliberal rhetoric surrounding the emergence of massively open online courses (MOOCs), outcomes-based funding of public colleges and universities). This analytical approach supports researchers' explorations of how racial and economic power condition and shape these debates on education.

The analytical model proposed in this manuscript has clear applicability in studies on racial equity and education, and can be used to support future research called for in the current literature in this area. For example, Harper's pivotal work (2012) on pervasive but unacknowledged racist norms informing policy and practice in higher education institutions and research highlights the central role played by discourse. Likewise, Patton's recent research on applying critical race analyses and decentering Whiteness in higher education policy and practice

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<sup>11</sup> For discussions of stratification in higher education see Karabel, 1972 and Brint & Karabel, 1989, for example.

has shown the need for research that examines the embedded and occluded discursive uses of White supremacist ideologies and structures in education (Patton, 2016; Patton & Bondi, 2015).

Calls for this kind of research can be found in emerging qualitative research on specific aspects of equity as well—for example, on school-community relations and educational leadership (Green, 2017), the school-to-prison pipeline (Blaisdell, 2016; Tannis, 2018) and racist systems of privilege and oppression in schools (Mustaffa, 2017). Tannis (2018) has recently noted, for example, that "Discourse about the intersection of education and incarceration, about race and equity, about scholarly research, policies, and practices is critical" (p. 78). Similarly, Mustaffa (2017) highlighted the central role of discourse in clear terms, saying "knowledge production in academia still is culture violence for Black people" (p. 724). The analytical framework proposed in this manuscript can support the kind of situated critical analyses these scholars have called for in continuing and emerging efforts to understand and dismantle racial inequities in education.

### **Implications for Critical Research Methods**

While it is certainly true that the CUNY remediation controversy turned on politics particular to New York City, it is also true that the discursive and ideological resources used to carry it out are ready-at-hand and used pervasively in our society. This is interdiscursivity, and it is a central feature of public debate that analyses based in CDA and TCA allow us to identify and analyze. A close look at the CUNY remediation controversy shows how discourse might contribute to the legitimation of stratified college opportunity more broadly in the US, and shows how system relations defining a debate may also delimit the range of goals and solutions possible within its bounds.

Researchers could conduct similar studies to illuminate system relations in education or other social practices, in a way that is particularly relevant to current events. For example, researchers could examine how assumptions about race, academic merit, and Whiteness as property may play a role in school discipline policies. Looking to other fields, this kind of analysis could also be used to explore how politicians use Twitter, for example, to manage and influence the news cycle, to draw or deflect attention from national and international events, and in turn, to influence what policies and laws are enacted or enforced. In this way analyses can illuminate system relations, i.e., how discourse (e.g., Twitter; news coverage; other social media) both informs and is informed by the broader system (laws; policies; access to education, internet, healthcare, or asylum).

This manuscript proposes an analytical method rooted in TCA and Carspecken's methodological theory (1996; 2003; 2012) that 1) supports rigorous and accountable analysis and interpretation of discourse, and 2) provides sociotheoretical support for understanding how system relations work in US discourse on education (or in other domains as well). Moreover, additional conceptual resources from CDA illuminate aspects of interdiscursivity in the data, and extend system relations analysis in ways that are consistent with TCA. For example, the approach combining CDA with TCA-informed analysis of validity claims can show how debate participants worked with *discourses* (such as the "Decline of CUNY" narrative) and how participants drew on these themes and concepts across social sites. Finally, the combined analytical approach can further illuminate system relations, showing how large themes were leveraged for and via social privilege and power. Such an analysis illuminates the processes and reasoning which can characterize many debates about education and equity in the US.

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**Biographical Note:**

**Mary B. Ziskin** is an assistant professor of educational administration at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio (United States).

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## Appendix

### An Example in Practice: The CUNY Remediation Controversy

#### Background of the Study

In 1999, the City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees decided, amid debate visible in academic and mainstream news, to limit remedial course offerings to the system's two-year colleges. Supporters of the policy change — eventually embodied in an amendment to the CUNY Master Plan — focused on raising standards and what was termed the "quality" of students within the senior colleges. Opponents of the amendment stressed developmental studies programs' role in remediating unequal educational opportunity within the city. To many, the move toward selectivity within the system represented a departure from CUNY's mission and academic traditions, which sought since inception to bring "the highest education" to "the children of the whole people."<sup>12</sup> To others, it promised a return to CUNY's "golden era."

The study centered on the public debate associated with this controversy, and examined document and interview data pursuing the following research questions:

- What were the meanings and explanations ascribed to developmental education courses (college remediation) in the public debate and controversy (1998-2002) surrounding the amendment of the CUNY Master Plan to remove developmental offerings from four-year institutions?
- How were concepts of race, opportunity, and merit used, occluded, and otherwise woven into the public discourse on postsecondary remediation?

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<sup>12</sup> This description is attributed to Horace Webster, the founding head of CCNY (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996, p.40). Webster included this description in a speech in 1849, two years after the institution's founding (CCNY, 2017).

Data collection focused on research, policy documents, news articles, white papers and opinion pieces that 1) addressed remediation at CUNY, and 2) were published between 1995 and 2004. These primary documents were drawn from three targeted sources: 1) print media including: *The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The New York Post*, The Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, *The Nation* and other national news magazines<sup>13</sup>; 2) research and policy reports from the Mayoral Advisory Task Force on CUNY and from other interested contributors; 3) records from the CUNY Board of Trustees' meetings 1998-1999, and the CUNY Master Plan itself. A total of 686 primary documents were collected and stored for analysis in electronic format.<sup>14</sup> Table 2 shows further detail on the data set of primary documents.

**Table 2. The Primary Document Data Set**

[ABOUT HERE]

The debate could be described as a 2-year swell of activity amid a steady and persistent public discussion lasting almost ten years. Figure 1 shows the timing of the 686 primary documents in the data set (collected according to the protocol outlined in Table 2). The 1998-1999 segment of the longer-standing controversy saw intense debate in New York City, conducted not only on college campuses and in government boardrooms, but extensively in the

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<sup>13</sup> I drew primarily on sources published either with a national or New York City audience in mind. Outside of New York, non-national coverage of the CUNY debates were not included except as background. The rationale for this delimitation is that it can be safely assumed these pieces would not have played as direct a role in the interactive aspects of the debates as the more immediate or nationally visible forums.

<sup>14</sup> Documents that were not collected electronically were scanned and saved as rich-text files. This step not only facilitated data management, but also allowed for more trustworthy and confirmable analysis using qualitative data analysis software and the procedures outlined below (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

print media and on television news forums, such as the local news talk show *New York One*, as well.

The arc of the policy debate was reflected in media coverage, showing a distinct, steady, and intense bout of public debate from January 1998 through November 1999 (See Figure 1). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, while the 1998-1999 period stands out as a coherent episode of increased attention on remediation at CUNY, periodic attention to the issue is also apparent in the years preceding and following. The controversy over the 1998-1999 reforms was intense and cohesive, but it came out of a long standing political context preparing both the stakes and the terms of the debate long before Giuliani's January, 1998 State of the City address discussed below.

**Figure 1. Number of Items per Month Published on the CUNY Remediation Debate**

[ABOUT HERE]

With this overview as context, I turn next to outline an analysis of one thread within the debate, a series of news items documenting a *discourse* (in Fairclough's local sense) centered on the idea of the "Decline of CUNY."

**The "Decline of CUNY" Narrative**

A great amount of material in the debate revolved around discursive associations of CUNY with implications of extremely poor quality education. The characterization of CUNY as a poor-quality institution was most common early on in the controversy, and the tone was often severe. The following example, a January 16, 1998 *Daily News* article reported on Giuliani's critique of CUNY in his State of the City address.

In his State of the City speech Wednesday, the mayor slammed open enrollment as "a failure" and criticized CUNY as "this disaster" responsible for a historic "destruction of standards" and a "plummeting graduation rate." (Sorenson, Wasserman & Schwartzman, 1998, Jan 16).

While such representations saw particularly intense repetition in the early months of 1998, this kind of general critique of CUNY remained a steady driving force for nearly two years after. An excerpt from a *New York Post* editorial published 22 months later (in October, 1999) shows the continued cultivation and use of a negative image of CUNY in the debate: "Removing Badillo would preserve CUNY as a dysfunctional and inept academic institution run by the unions and radicals in much the same way these groups have run and ruined the public elementary and secondary schools" ("Lose Badillo, lose CUNY," 1999, Oct. 6).

Readers may note the severity of the language used in this quote. Such castigations were not unusual in this debate, as further discussion will show. While broad criticisms of CUNY were prevalent in many sources, the *New York Post* consistently took a sharper tone than other city newspapers.

In addition to characterizations in this vein, criticisms often focused on the history of open admissions as a principal root of current problems within the University. Some inkling of this has appeared already in Giuliani's comments, quoted above ("a failure," etc.). In other examples, *Post* editorialists refer, for example, to "CUNY's wholly discredited open-admissions regime" ("CUNY: The war on reform continues," 1998, Aug. 14) or to the "transformation of CUNY from an open-admission school into a recognized academic institution with true standards" ("Defining standards up," 2000, Nov. 23).



An important part of the larger complaint that centered on open admissions, an implicit narrative portraying the "Decline of CUNY" from a former height of excellence played a key role in these critiques. Dyer (1990) analyzed the history of such representation in his dissertation study. In the case of the late 1990s critiques of CUNY, words conveying a "once-and-future" glory abound, making repeated use of the "re-" prefix: restore, rebuild, repair, reclaim, reversal, rebirth, rejuvenation, etc. Some examples of passing references to this thread are presented here. I offer several examples to show both the prevalence of the theme and its persistence through the years.

- "[Ridding CUNY's senior colleges of responsibility for remediation] will help reclaim CUNY's once-sterling academic reputation" ("The real issue at CUNY: Money," 1998, May 8).
- "Yesterday was a milestone on CUNY's road back to excellence" ("A victory for CUNY," 1999, Nov. 23).
- "Real reform began in January 1998 when Mayor Giuliani noted the decades-long decline of CUNY - and charged former Yale President Benno Schmidt with writing a prescription for change." ("CUNY's necessary lesson plan", 2000, Sep. 13).
- "Mayor Giuliani, whose allies at CUNY have triggered many changes to repair the school's tarnished reputation" (Shin, 2000, Nov. 15).
- "Badillo led the charge for those who refused to accept that CUNY's golden days were long gone." ("Badillo steps down," 2001, Jun. 6).
- Headline: "City College, the Faded Jewel of CUNY, Is Recovering Its Luster and Its Achievers" ("City College's rebirth," 2002, Feb. 5).
- "a CUNY diploma once again means something to employers." ("Rebuild it, and they will come," 2003, Aug. 19).
- "Badillo attended CUNY in the 1950s, during its golden era. When he took over the leadership of the board in 1999, he believed that those good days could return." ("Herman Badillo's CUNY," 2003, Nov. 20).

These examples and many more like them portrayed CUNY as a university with a great history, now descended into failure. Moreover, these representations appeared consistently throughout the years at the height of the debate (1997-2003), and beyond. As we can see in the number, persistence, and consistent tone of these examples, the "Decline of CUNY" narrative was a *discourse* (in the local sense), as described by Fairclough (2003). More to the point, as a *discourse*, the "Decline of CUNY" narrative provided an important basis and legitimation for both the critique of CUNY generally, and for the specific "reforms" proposed in the late 1990s to address the crisis that the narrative portrays.

Even well after the climax of public debate and the Regents' initial approval of the Master Plan amendment, remediation remained an oft-cited symbol of CUNY's failure. In 2001, for example *The Post* opined:

Remediation — admitting kids who are demonstrably unable to do college-level work and trying to bring them up to speed — just didn't work. It turned once-great academic institutions like City College into glorified high schools — consuming scarce resources and thus shortchanging qualified kids, while degrading the value of a CUNY diploma ("The mayoral melee: Flunking the CUNY test," 2001, Mar. 4).

The point made here, and repeatedly through the years, was that remedial courses (and by extension the students enrolled in them), not only did not belong in the senior colleges, but that they were the cause of the university's downfall. In this way, the "Decline of CUNY" narrative was used by political and fiscal conservatives to prepare the ground for the removal of remediation from the senior colleges.

## **Behind the Scenes: the Analyses that Produced these Findings**

As a way of demonstrating the analytical process outlined in this manuscript, this section outlines the analysis of validity claims and application of CDA concepts in the first quote highlighted in the excerpted findings above.

In the course of the low-inference coding (step one, above), this pattern in which speakers, news articles, and white paper authors associated CUNY with poor quality was very easy to see. As noted above, these early analyses focused on multiple rounds of low-inference coding providing good grounding and a sense of context for deciding what was important and relevant to the research questions, and what was not. I noted the topics of statements with early-stage codes such as “Descriptions of CUNY” and (more narrowly) “Poor Quality at CUNY.” I combined and refined various codes as my analysis progressed, although “Descriptions of CUNY” remained a part of my coding throughout step one. Through this process, I made sure that I knew the full corpus of document data well before proceeding to steps two through five, and it was clear that the association of CUNY with extremely poor quality was an important theme to be explored further.

Building on these preliminary analyses, I knew furthermore that accounts of the Mayor’s 1998 State of the City address were important to the study, and so selected this article from the *Daily News* to analyze further. I turned next to analyzing validity claims for the excerpt and did the same for the others I had selected. Using qualitative data analysis software, I created a memo linked to the quote and listed relevant validity claims. My memo is shown in Figure 2 below:

### **Figure 2. Validity claims memo on *Daily News* article excerpt**

[ABOUT HERE]

As shown in this example, I included thoughts on various types of validity claims including objective, subjective, normative, and identity claims. I also included restatements of implicit validity claims at various states of backgrounding. Finally, I made sure also to think about the layers of claims made in this piece. Since it was a news article reporting on the mayor's speech, relevant validity claims came from or were attributed to Mayor Giuliani himself (in the form of reported speech) and from the *Daily News* reporter as well. This comprised my work with step two of the process for this excerpt.

Moving on to step three, I created a second memo linked to the same quote and wrote briefly there about the aspects of interdiscursivity I saw in the excerpt. This account included specific genres, discourses, and styles that were used in the report. In this example, the memo on interdiscursivity was a brief list (See Figure 3 below):

**Figure 3. CDA memo on *Daily News* article excerpt**

[ABOUT HERE]

Next, I looked across several selected examples to note patterns and develop codes based in CDA, such as specific genres, styles or discourses that are important across examples. An example of the recoding process for the "Decline of CUNY" discourse is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Recoding excerpts using new CDA codes**

[ABOUT HERE]

I revisited the passages that had been coded to "Descriptions of CUNY" in step one, and recoded using the new CDA-derived codes. As I proceeded through many excerpts in this way, I was able also to see how prevalent the "Decline of CUNY" discourse was across the broader debate.

In a final step, drawing from this raw material, I was able to assemble a narrative reconstruction of this excerpt, as well as others — highlighting multiple meanings and discursive

resources that were important in the article (step five). I used this reconstruction as raw material for writing up the results.

**Table 1. Overview of Proposed Analytical Method**

<b>Example Quote:</b> <i>In his State of the City speech Wednesday, the mayor slammed open enrollment as "a failure" and criticized CUNY as "this disaster" responsible for a historic "destruction of standards" and a "plummeting graduation rate."</i> (Sorenson, Wasserman & Schwartzman, 1998, Jan 16).				
	<b>Pattern or Content Identified</b>	<b>Analyses</b>	<b>Cautions and Points to Attend to</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
	<b>Step One: Low-Inference Coding</b>			
	Across multiple sources, many debate participants associated CUNY with poor quality.	Codes assigned to the quote: "Descriptions of CUNY;" "Poor Quality at CUNY"	Aim to develop thorough knowledge of the full corpus of document data before selecting material to focus on for further analysis.	Selection of this and other excerpts coded to "Poor Quality at CUNY" to analyze further
	<b>Step Two: Validity Claims</b>			
	The example quote (and other important material selected for in-depth analysis in step one) implicated multiple validity claims, partially constituting its meaning(s).	Lists of objective, subjective, evaluative-normative, and identity claims identified at various states of foregrounding or backgrounding (e.g., "CUNY is a disaster" )	Focus on reconstructing the component validity claims implicated by each example. As the process unfolds, revisit documented analyses at all stages for reflexive consideration, peer debriefing or both.	Validity claims memo, as shown in Figure 2
	<b>Step Three: CDA Memos</b>			
	The example quote (and other important material selected for in-depth analysis in step one) made thematic and formal use of various forms of interdiscursivity (e.g., genre, style, <i>discourses</i> ).	Lists of genres, styles, and discourses (e.g., genre: political speech; <i>discourse</i> : decline of CUNY)	Revisit collection of memos across various data excerpts for reflexive process, and to identify patterns that might be developed into codes for step four.	CDA memo, as shown in Figure 3; also, a list of new CDA codes to be used in focused coding (step four)
	<b>Step Four: Focused Coding</b>			
	Returning to the all the material previously coded with the "Descriptions of CUNY" code (step one), apply the new CDA codes as appropriate.	New codes assigned to the example quote (e.g., "Discourse: Decline of CUNY" "Style: Tough Conservative")	Take notice of patterns and exceptions highlighted through this process. As the process unfolds, revisit documented analyses at all stages for reflexive consideration, peer debriefing or both.	Focused coding, as shown in Figure 4
	<b>Step Five: Narrative Reconstructions</b>			
	Synthesized threads of meaning drawn from the focused coding and from the validity claim memos.	Considering the focused coding, CDA memos, and validity claims memos for detail, draft a contextualized reconstruction of the meaning of the example.	Use reflexive process, as supported by the documented analyses. Peer debriefing can be helpful here as well.	Narrative reconstructions, as shown in Figure 5

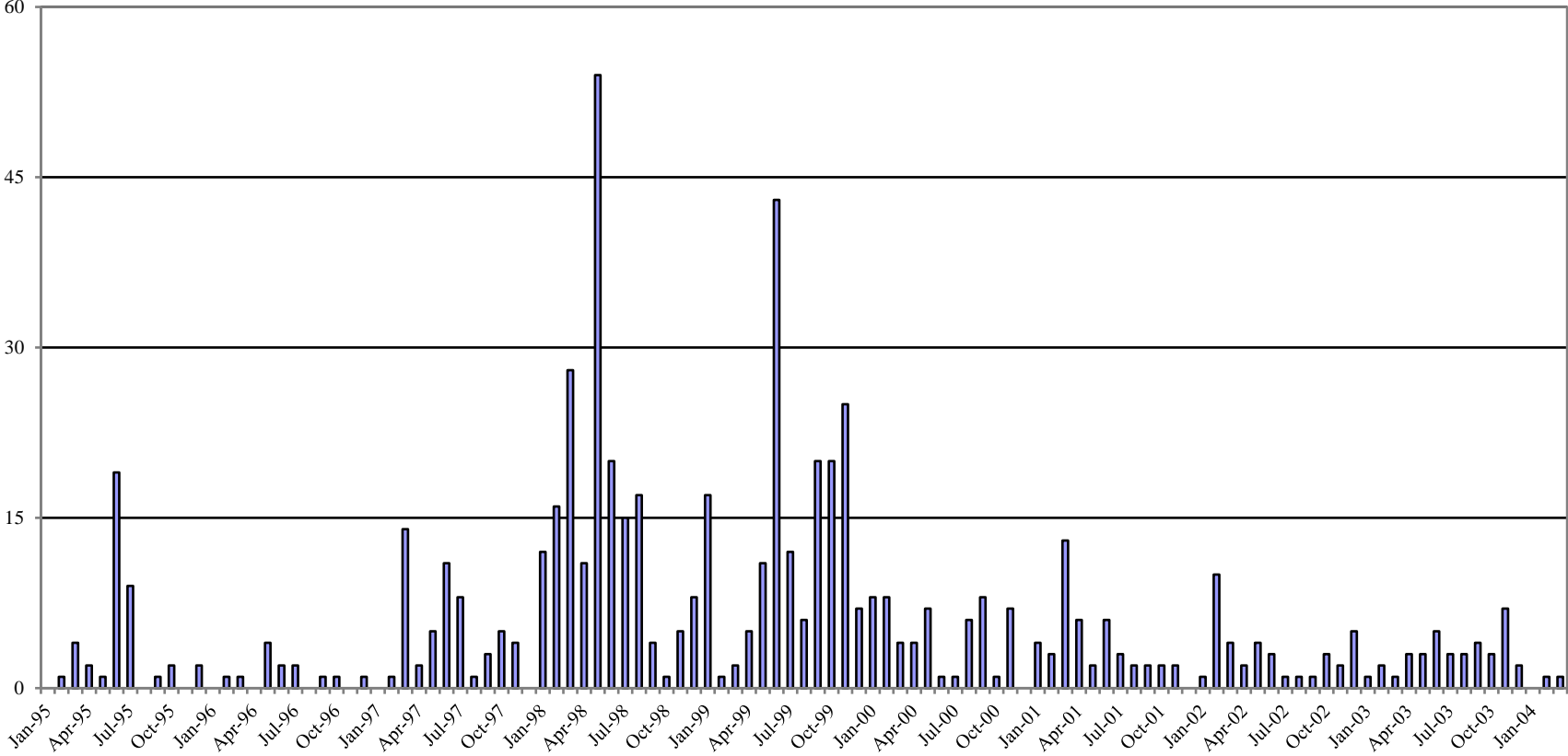
**Table 2. The Primary Document Data Set**

	Source/Type of Document	Date Range	Criteria	Items
<b>Policy Documents</b>				
	CUNY Board of Trustees Meetings Minutes	March, 1998- January 1999	Pivotal meetings in the process of passing the new admissions policy: March, May, November, 1998; January, 1999	4
	The CUNY Master Plan 2000-2004 & other CUNY Admin. Documents	1998-1999	Particular focus on the amendment outlining new remediation and admissions policies	4
	Regents' Documents	1999-2002	Documents relevant to the Regents' decision (Nov. 1999) and to the reapproval of the admissions policy (Dec. 2002)	24
	Faculty Senate/ Faculty Union Documents	1998-1999	Treat CUNY remediation policies and debates as principal topic.	23
<b>Research</b>				
	Commissioned Research & Reports	1998-1999	Research & reports commissioned by participants in an effort to influence policy-making as a part of this debate	10
	Academic Journal Articles	1998-2002	Articles published in higher education or sociological research journals during the period between initial proposal and final approval.	4
<b>New York City Newspapers</b>				
	<i>New York Times</i>	1995-2004	<u>CUNY</u> in headline, lead paragraphs, terms AND <u>Remedial</u> in Text (excluding sports or arts stories)	236
	<i>New York Daily News</i>	1995-2004	<u>CUNY</u> in headline, lead paragraphs, terms AND <u>Remedial</u> in Text (excluding sports or arts stories)	149

	<i>New York Post</i>	1998-2004	<u>CUNY</u> in headline, lead paragraphs, terms AND <u>Remedial</u> in Text (excluding sports or arts stories)	136
	<i>Village Voice</i>	1998-2004	Treat CUNY remediation policies and debates as principal topic.	2
	<i>City Journal</i>	1995-2004	Include mention of CUNY	4
<b>National &amp; Higher-Ed News (Print Media Sources)</b>				
	<i>Black Issues in Higher Education</i>	1997-2004	Include mention of the CUNY remediation debate.	19
	<i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>	1997-2004	Include mention of the CUNY remediation debate.	55
	<i>Academe</i>	1998-2004	Treat CUNY remediation policies and debates as principal topic.	7
	Other National Newspapers	1998-2004	Include mention of the CUNY remediation debate.	9
<i>TOTAL</i>				<b>686</b>



**Figure 1. Number of Items per Month Published on the CUNY Remediation Debate**



**Figure 2. Validity claims memo on *Daily News* article excerpt**

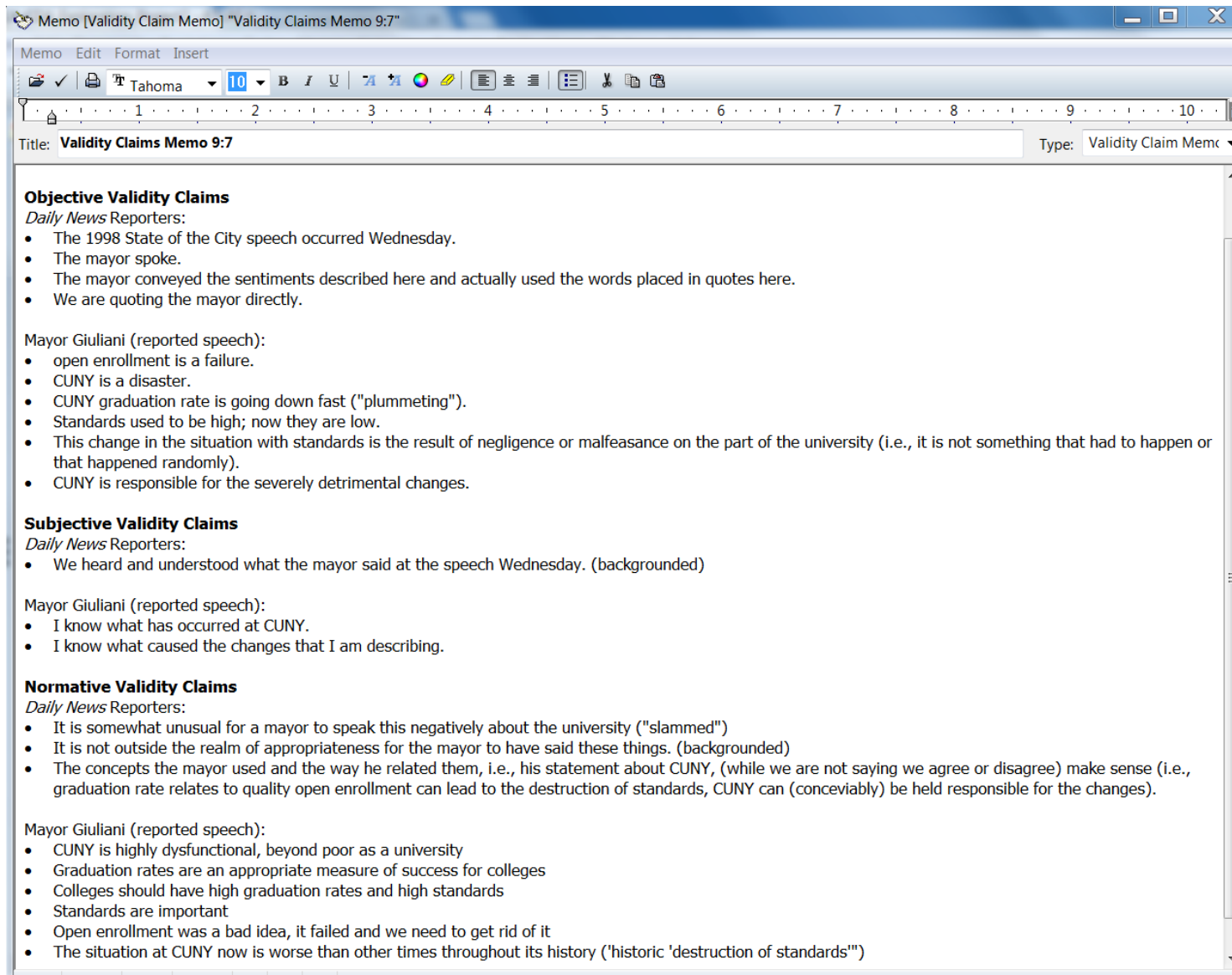


Figure 3. CDA memo on *Daily News* article excerpt

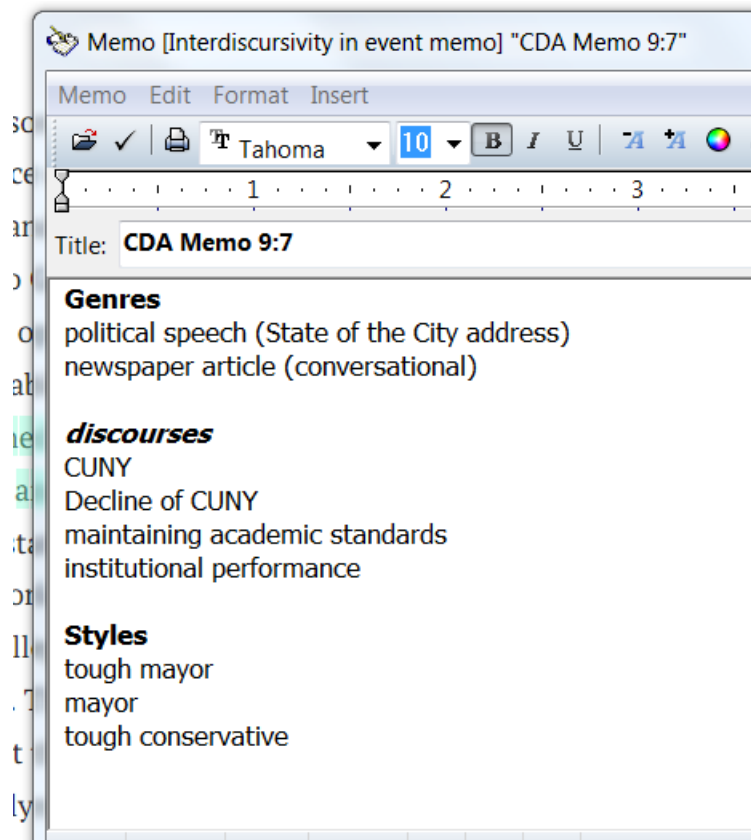


Figure 4. Recoding excerpts using new CDA codes

# BOARD MAY ALTER CUNY POLICY

BY JON R. SORENSEN JOANNE WASSERMAN PAUL SCHWARTZMAN

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS Friday, January 16, 1998, 12:00 AM

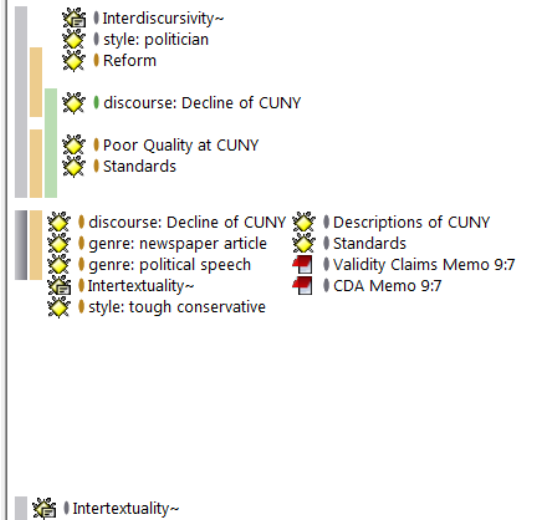
City University of New York trustees may be close to passing some version of Mayor Giuliani's call for an end to open admissions at the public colleges, a trustee said yesterday. Vice chairman Herman Badillo said the support is "there" among the 16 voting members of the board of trustees. "As I understand it, we have the votes," said Badillo, who backed the mayor's call for reforming CUNY's admissions policy. A source close to Gov. Pataki, who appoints 10 of the CUNY trustees, said the governor was "one or two votes short" of those needed to end open admissions. At an appearance yesterday, Pataki said the system needed to have "not just higher standards, but reasonable standards."

In his State of the City speech Wednesday, the mayor slammed open enrollment as "a failure" and criticized CUNY as "this disaster" responsible for a historic "destruction of standards" and a "plummeting graduation rate."

" Changing the CUNY admissions policies would not require state legislative approval. Since 1970, the City University has guaranteed admission to its community colleges to all New York City high school graduates. High school graduates must have an 80 average for admission to the system's four-year colleges. Badillo suggested that high school seniors take an admissions test before being let into the community colleges. That test would have to be prepared and considered before trustees vote to change admissions requirements, he said. But the proposed end of open admissions has already sparked intense opposition. City Councilwoman Una Clarke (D-Brooklyn) called Giuliani's plan "an attack on poor people."

" Trustee Sandi Cooper, chairwoman of CUNY's faculty senate, called the mayor's idea "cruel and unnecessary punishment. First he admits that the high schools and lower schools often fail students, and now he wants to take away their last opportunity.

" CUNY trustee John Calandra said he was "sympathetic" to the mayor's ideas, but suggested that remedial courses be offered to students who fail the admissions test.



## Figure 5. Narrative reconstruction

Mayor Giuliani (reported speech):

- I know what has occurred at CUNY.
- I know what caused the changes that I am

### Normative Validity Claims

*Daily News* Reporters:

- It is somewhat unusual for a mayor to speak
- It is not outside the realm of appropriateness
- The concepts the mayor used and the way he used them
- CUNY can (conceivably) be held responsible

Mayor Giuliani (reported speech):

- CUNY is highly dysfunctional, beyond poor
- Graduation rates are an appropriate measure
- Colleges should have high graduation rates
- Standards are important.
- Open enrollment was a bad idea, it failed
- The situation at CUNY now is worse than

### Quote 9:7 Draft Reconstruction¶

The *Daily News* reported that Mayor Giuliani characterized CUNY as a “disaster” in his State of the City address. They noted further that he attributed CUNY’s current problems to the history of open admissions. The report highlights that Giuliani presented low graduate rates as support for these claims, and asserted that open admissions had failed as a policy and resulted in declining standards. ¶

This account refers indirectly to a discursive genre of a political speech and to Giuliani’s use of a discursive style (illustrated in other examples of his speech elsewhere) that could be described as “tough mayor” or “tough conservative.” In addition, this excerpt includes a way of representing CUNY as in decline from its former glory. This *discourse* (in the local sense) is noticeable across many examples in the data set, such that it is becoming noticeable as a prevalent theme “*discourse: Decline of CUNY.*” ¶