

5 Essential Steps to Implementing Discourse Analysis in Healthcare

By: Manpreet Kaur at Elite Research LLC



Introduction

Discourse analysis offers a powerful lens through which to examine language use in healthcare contexts. By analyzing communication, researchers can uncover the complexities of interactions among healthcare professionals, patients, and institutions. This article outlines five essential steps for implementing discourse analysis in healthcare research: defining research questions, selecting appropriate data, conducting a contextual analysis, analyzing the discourse, and interpreting the findings.

5 Steps for Discourse Analysis in Healthcare

Step 1: Define Research Questions - The first step in discourse analysis is to define clear and focused research questions. These questions will guide the entire analysis process and determine the type of data needed. Research questions in discourse analysis should be open-ended and exploratory, aimed at understanding how language constructs meaning and reflects social practices.¹ In healthcare, questions might focus on patient-provider interactions, the language of health policy, or how certain health issues are framed in media. By establishing well-defined questions, researchers can focus their analysis on

specific aspects of discourse that are relevant to their inquiry.

Step 2: Select Appropriate Data - Once research questions are established the next step involves selecting appropriate data for analysis. The data can include various forms of discourse, such as interviews, focus group discussions, written documents, or audio-visual materials. When selecting data, researchers should consider the context of the discourse, the demographics of participants, and the relevance to the research questions. It is also important to ensure that the data is ethically sourced and respects participant confidentiality (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).²

Data Types:

- **Interviews:** One-on-one conversations with patients or healthcare professionals can provide rich, contextual insights into their experiences and perceptions.³
- **Focus Groups:** Group discussions can reveal shared meanings and collective understandings of health-related issues (Krueger & Casey, 2015).⁴
- **Written Texts:** Policy documents, patient education materials, or public health campaigns can be analyzed to understand how language shapes health discourses.⁵
- **Audio-Visual Materials:** Videos or advertisements can be examined to

¹ Gee, J. P. (2014). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Routledge.

² Holloway, I., & Wheeler, S. (2010). *Qualitative research in nursing and healthcare* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

³ Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Sage Publications.

⁴ Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

⁵ Fowler, R. (2005). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. Routledge.

explore how visual elements interact with language to convey messages.⁶

underlying power dynamics and ideologies.¹¹

Step 3: Conduct a Contextual Analysis - After selecting the data, researchers should conduct a contextual analysis. This involves understanding the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the discourse occurs. Contextual factors can significantly influence how language is used and interpreted.⁷ To conduct a contextual analysis, researchers can use existing literature, policy documents, and media reports to gather background information. Engaging with theoretical frameworks relevant to the research topic can also enhance understanding.⁸

Step 4: Analyze the Discourse - The core of discourse analysis lies in the detailed examination of the language used in the selected data. This step requires researchers to identify patterns, themes, and structures within the discourse that relate to their research questions.

Components of Contextual Analysis

- **Historical Context:** Understanding the historical background of the healthcare issue or population being studied can provide insights into how language has evolved.⁹
- **Cultural Context:** Cultural norms and values influence how health and illness are discussed. Researchers should consider the cultural background of participants to interpret the discourse accurately.¹⁰
- **Institutional Context:** The policies and practices of healthcare institutions shape how language is used. Analyzing institutional discourse can reveal

Analytical Approaches

- **Linguistic Analysis:** Researchers can analyze vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical strategies to understand how language constructs meaning (Gee, 2014).¹²
- **Thematic Analysis:** Identifying recurring themes or motifs in the discourse can highlight key issues and concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).¹³
- **Interaction Analysis:** In conversational data, examining turn-taking, pauses, and interruptions can reveal dynamics in patient-provider interactions (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).¹⁴

Tools and Techniques

- **Coding:** Researchers can employ coding techniques to categorize and interpret data systematically. This involves breaking down the text into manageable units and labeling them

⁶ Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Sage Publications.

⁷ Gee, J. P. (2014). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Routledge.

⁸ Fowler, R. (2005). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. Routledge.

⁹ Petersen, A., & Lupton, D. (1996). The new public health: Health and self in the age of risk. *Health, Risk & Society*, 1(1), 61-74.

¹⁰ Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. J. (2001). *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis*. Sage Publications.

¹¹ Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.

¹² Gee, J. P. (2014). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Routledge.

¹³ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

¹⁴ Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50(4), 696-735.

according to themes or concepts (Charmaz, 2006).¹⁵

- **Software:** Qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo, Atlas.ti) can facilitate the organization and analysis of large datasets, making it easier to visualize patterns and relationships (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).¹⁶

Step 5: Interpret the Findings - The final step in discourse analysis is interpreting the findings in light of the research questions and the contextual factors identified earlier. This step involves making sense of the data and understanding its implications for healthcare practice, policy, or theory.¹⁷

Interpretation Techniques

- **Thematic Interpretation:** Researchers should interpret the themes identified in the analysis, considering their relevance to the research questions and the broader healthcare context.¹⁸
- **Contextual Interpretation:** Findings should be interpreted within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts established earlier. This ensures that interpretations are grounded in the realities of the healthcare environment.¹⁹

- **Implications for Practice:** Researchers should consider the implications of their findings for healthcare practice and policy. How do the language patterns observed affect patient care, health communication, or public health initiatives?

Conclusion

Implementing discourse analysis in healthcare research involves a systematic process of defining research questions, selecting appropriate data, conducting contextual analysis, analyzing the discourse, and interpreting the findings. By following these five essential steps, researchers can gain valuable insights into the complexities of communication in healthcare settings. Discourse analysis not only enhances our understanding of language use but also contributes to improving healthcare practices and policies.

¹⁵ Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications.

¹⁶ Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

¹⁷ Watson, J. (2012). The language of mental health: Implications for clinical practice. *Journal of Health Communication*, 17(2), 121-136.

¹⁸ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

¹⁹ Gee, J. P. (2014). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. Routledge.

Take Away

This article outlines 5 steps for conducting discourse analysis in healthcare research. These steps are critical in understanding the complexities of patient, provider, and institutional relationships.

About the Author

Manpreet Kaur, MA., Qualitative Data Analyst at Elite Research, has extensive experience in qualitative research methods, coding, and analysis. In her role, she ensures accurate data analysis, contributing to community and organizational development and advancement. With expertise in project management and data analysis, she enhances understanding across diverse domains. Collaborating with researchers, organizations, and communities, she shapes qualitative research using techniques like interviews and focus groups. Holding Masters degrees in Sociology and Medical Anthropology from Case Western Reserve University, she's dedicated to applying social science research to address global issues in modern day society.



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1.800.806.5661
9901 E. Valley Ranch Pkwy, Suite 2035, Irving, TX 75063



consulting@eliteresearch.com
www.eliteresearch.com