

# The Power of Language: A Call to Critically Analyze the Discourse of the Human Service Professions

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## **Abstract**

While human service professionals are trained to listen carefully to our clients, we receive little training on how to listen to and analyze the professional discourse that surrounds us. This article introduces critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a set of tools for unpacking how power works in forms of discourse such as policy, legislation, and communication between individuals with unequal amounts of power. To illustrate the process and purpose of CDA, this article analyzes policy text from the counseling profession. Specifically, the author analyzes the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Board of Director's charge to the 2024 CACREP Standards Revision Committee. The author examines active versus passive sentence construction, imperative and declarative sentence mode, and speech act values to explore what the language in the charge reveals about how power worked in the initiation of the standards revision process. The analysis reveals three differing yet co-existing depictions of power and concludes that the Board used these multiple depictions of power to make a claim about the legitimacy of the revision process. The article closes with implications for CDA as a research method and a tool for training and social action.

*Keywords: critical discourse analysis, power, CACREP, accreditation, counselor education*

## **The Power of Language: A Call to Critically Analyze the Discourse of the Human Service Professions**

One of the first sets of skills human service professionals learn is how to listen to our clients (Hill, 2020). We listen because clients' language matters, and we listen closely so we can get beneath the surface to access underlying meanings (Reik, 1983). Close listening is a skill not only for client-facing work, however. Human service professionals spend our work lives awash in language. Our professional discourse appears in the form of agency policies, state and national legislation, statements from professional organizations, training program curricula, hallway discussions among colleagues, and supervision sessions, among others. This language also matters: It shapes our conceptions of right versus wrong and professional versus unprofessional. It also shapes what we do (and do not) learn in our training programs and what we can (and cannot) do within our scope of professional practice including our engagement in social action and justice activities. When we tune our listening skills to the discourse of our professions, we can analyze how power operates in our systems of care; a critical and essential social justice competency. For instance, we can analyze how institutions structure professional training programs, how services are allocated within communities, or how some sociocultural values are upheld in human service work while others are ignored or discredited. We can then use our own language to enact change within these systems.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a useful set of tools for closely attending to language and unpacking how power works in spoken or written texts. Using CDA, analysts pivot between the details of a text, such as word choice, grammar, and sentence structure, and the larger social reality that the text operates within and helps to create. Some scholars have begun advocating for increased attention to the discourse we come across in our training and our professional work. For example, the social justice model of supervision developed by Dollarhide et al. (2021) calls for supervisors and supervisees to engage in discourse analysis to “deconstruct, dispute, and reject hegemony” (p. 108). Dollarhide et al. (2021) made a strong case for the value of discourse analysis in the context of supervision. However, there is much more room for human service professionals to engage critically with the discourse of our professions.

This article has two purposes. The first is to make a case for why counselors, psychologists, and others should learn the tools of critical discourse analysis and apply them to the discourse of the human service professions. The second purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth demonstration of CDA. Specifically, I use an analytical framework developed by Fairclough (2015) to analyze a statement from the organization that accredits training programs in one human service profession, counseling.

### **Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature**

Discourse analysis involves the examination of language as it is used in service of a particular goal or set of goals (Rogers, 2004). Researchers draw upon this qualitative research tradition to explore social systems via the texts produced within those systems (M. Luke & Gordon, 2011). Although educational researchers have been using discourse analysis for decades (Rogers, 2004), the method is not yet used widely in the scholarship of the human service professions, including counseling (M. Luke & Gordon, 2012). In fact, in an analysis of 250 qualitative counselor education dissertations published in 2017 and 2018, Waalkes et al. (2021) identified only one discourse analysis project. However, the published studies that are available yield intriguing insights.

In a series of articles (M. Luke & Gordon, 2011; M. Luke & Gordon, 2012; Gordon & M. Luke, 2016), Luke, a counselor educator, and Gordon, a sociolinguist, used discourse analysis to examine emails exchanged between school counseling interns and their university supervisors. Findings included the presence of several discursive strategies such as using professional jargon (M. Luke & Gordon, 2011), supervisor reauthoring as a means of professional socialization (M. Luke & Gordon, 2012), and differing uses of the pronoun *we* by supervisors and

supervisees (Gordon & M. Luke, 2016). Through these studies, M. Luke and Gordon (2011; 2012; Gordon & M. Luke, 2016) examined how the emails both structured and reflected social relationships including supervisor-supervisee, supervisee-client, and supervisor-supervisee-counseling profession.

What differentiates CDA from other forms of discourse analysis is its attention to power (Rogers, 2004). Depending on the analyst's purpose, examination of power in a CDA project might involve analyzing how the producer of a text uses elements of grammar to advance an argument, how a text reflects and/or sustains power differences, or how a text serves as a starting point to address a social problem (Rogers, 2004). Fairclough's work, which forms the analytical frame for this project, encompasses all three strategies of applying a critical lens to discourse. Fairclough (2015) stated that CDA "combines **critique** of discourse and **explanation** of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality, as a basis for **action** to change that existing reality in particular respects" (p. 6, bolding in the original). Thus, CDA provides not only analytical tools and methodological processes, but a perspective that the analyst's role involves both understanding social reality and working to change it. Put another way, CDA is both method and theory (Rogers, 2004).

Encounters with policies are frequent in both our professional and personal lives. As such, one common use of CDA is to analyze policy. In calling for a critical approach to educational policy analysis, Prunty (1985) defined policy as "the authoritative allocation of values" (p. 136). In other words, through policy, an organization or body with authority uses that authority to make a statement supporting the legitimacy of a set of values (Prunty, 1985). The body that writes and publishes a policy typically has power to enforce it, which puts policy in the category of discourse that Bakhtin, an influential Russian philosopher of language, described as "authoritative utterances that set the tone" (1979/1986, p. 88). Policy is powerful: Like other authoritative utterances, it is intended to be referred to, cited, and followed (Bakhtin, 1979/1986). Policy's power also makes it a frequent, and important, object of critical analysis. Woodside-Jiron (2004) asserted that the strength of policy analysis is two-fold: It reveals how power behind the policy is constructed, and it makes clear the impacts of that power in the lives of individuals who must follow it.

An example of policy analysis that is relevant to human service professionals is Barrett and Bound's (2015) CDA of state-level policies that prohibited "any school-based instruction, counseling, discussion, or activities that could be construed as being positive about or promoting homosexuality" (p. 267). Barrett and Bound used the term *no promo homo* to describe these policies, which they identified in nine states at the time of their analysis. Using Fairclough's approach to CDA, the researchers analyzed the language and impact of these policies. They concluded that although the policy authors claimed the policies were neutral, the policies were in fact harmful to LGBT students and to school communities. The authors also used CDA to examine how this posture of neutrality reproduces "unequal power relations in schools and society" (p. 280). In keeping with the aims and approach of CDA, Barrett and Bound started by examining policy text. Then, through processes of description, interpretation, and explanation, they developed a strong – and alarming – analysis of how policy supported and reproduced unequal access to power.

While Barrett and Bound's policy analysis was published several years ago, these policies are again on the rise. In a discursive atmosphere that includes policies limiting speech, civil rights, and access to services, along with oppositional texts such as the Unified Statement on Anti-LGBTGEQIAP+ Legislation (Association of Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2022), human service professionals must be equipped with tools to analyze the "authoritative utterances" swirling around us. CDA offers both a theory and method for doing so (Rogers, 2004). To advocate for greater use of CDA in research and training in the human service professions, I will provide an example of critical analysis of a discourse from the counseling profession. Specifically, I will use CDA to analyze an "authoritative utterance": the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Board of Director's charge to the committee that complete the most recent round of standards revisions. My research question is: What does the language of the charge reveal about how power operated in the initiation of the standards revision process?

## Methods

### Context

CACREP accredits more than 900 graduate counseling programs in the United States (CACREP, n.d.d.). With its large scope and close ties to the counseling profession, CACREP is a powerful player in the field. Whether a counselor graduated from a CACREP-accredited program can, in some cases, impact their access to professional licensure (Bray, 2014) and employment (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). And because CACREP standards communicate a preference for faculty who are themselves graduates of CACREP-accredited programs (CACREP, 2023), these accreditation standards have a profound impact on the academic job market as well.

The process of revising the accreditation standards unfolds over several years. The CACREP Board of Directors (Board), which is comprised of 13 to 15 members including counselor educators, practitioners, and members of the public (CACREP, n.d.a.), recruits and appoints a Standards Revision committee (SRC) to carry out the revision process. One of the first activities of the most recent revision process was the delivery of the Board's charge to the SRC. The charge identified the topics the SRC should attend to and the process it should use to do so (CACREP, n.d.e.).

The revised standards took shape through an iterative process in which the SRC produced drafts, released them for constituent feedback, and used the feedback to inform the next draft (CACREP SRC, 2020). After approval by the Board, the revised standards were published in July 2023 before going into effect in July 2024 (CACREP, n.d.b.). The revised standards that resulted from this process will shape how hundreds of programs operate, and how tens of thousands of students are educated, for many years. For example, a past revision required programs to shift from knowledge-based standards of assessment (e.g., what students know) to outcome-based standards (e.g., what students can do; Akos & Duquette, 2022). The revised standards also influence how powerful third parties, including state licensure boards, employers, and leaders of other helping professions, view the counseling field and its practitioners (Urofsky, 2013).

### Object of Analysis

The object of analysis for this study is the charge to the SRC. By describing the text as a committee charge, I am drawing upon Fairclough's (2015) concept of *discourse type*. In Fairclough's framework, a discourse type is a set of conventions that constrain the expected content and form of a text. Conventions associated with the discourse type of committee charge include that it is issued by a body with greater power (in this case, the Board) to a body with lesser power (here, the SRC), it provides instructions and expectations for the recipient, and it refers to a task that both bodies understand to be the recipient's responsibility.

Within this discourse type, *charge* has two grammatical functions. First, it is a noun, describing both a specific expectation (as in, "the committee is responsible for three charges") and the text as a whole (as in the phrase "deliver a charge"). *Charge* is also a verb, as in, "We charge the task force with developing strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change." Because a charge explicitly lists expectations, the body that issues it can also use it to evaluate the resulting work. For example, the Committee Charges section of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Leadership Handbook (ACA, 2015) stipulates that "the Reports to the ACA President and Governing Council will reflect the progress of these Charges" (p. 15, capitalization in the original). This breadth of purposes for a committee charge, and the power dynamics implicit in its construction and delivery, make it a discourse type with rich opportunities for analysis.

The charge to the SRC is a useful text for illustrating the theory and method of CDA because it is a powerful message written and published by a powerful body. Thus, it provides fertile ground for engaging in critical analysis of how power operated at the start of the CACREP standards revision process. Of course, power can appear in discourse as an explicit expression of oppression or privilege. However, power can also take less overt and more complex forms. As the analysis and findings here will illustrate, CDA provides tools for analysts to move beyond surface-level expressions of power to illustrate the more nuanced ways power works within a text.

The object of analysis in this article promotes a focus on the process of revising the accreditation standards, a process, of course, that had a significant outcome. While not all human service professionals are familiar with CACREP, it is likely that many have been part of training programs that are heavily influenced by powerful accreditation bodies (e.g., the American Psychological Association [APA] Commission on Accreditation, the Council on Social Work Education). Additionally, beyond the specific context of accreditation, this demonstration of CDA provides an example to other students and practitioners of how they can engage in critical analysis of the discourse of their own professions. As the example analysis in this article will show, CDA provides not only a set of tools to uncover and describe the many ways power can operate within discourse, but an entry point to engage in meaningful social action.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In CDA, as in many traditions of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of analysis. I have a dual professional identity as a licensed professional counselor and a counselor educator. I completed my master's degree at one CACREP-accredited program and my doctoral degree at another. My choice of training programs was driven in part by accreditation status. I knew that graduating from a CACREP-accredited program would positively impact the process of getting licensed, just as I knew that having a PhD from an accredited program would benefit me in the academic job market.

As a master's student, I worked as a graduate assistant in my department. In that role, I helped the department prepare for the CACREP re-accreditation process. I learned that meeting CACREP standards is a significant effort, and that some of this work involves building and reshaping program foundations. Now, as a faculty member in a CACREP-accredited program, I am responsible for helping to maintain my program's accreditation status. I was not directly involved in the most recent standard revision process. However, I followed the process by reviewing documentation on the CACREP website and by attending a conference session held by CACREP leaders.

As a white woman, I hold racial and gender identities that are in the majority among both full-time faculty and students in CACREP-accredited programs (CACREP, 2023). I strive to incorporate social justice into my work as a counselor educator with a goal of preparing professional counselors to provide affirmative and culturally responsive services for all clients. I work toward this goal by exploring issues of power, privilege, and oppression with trainees; fostering trainees' commitment to social action; and engaging in reflection and social action myself (Dollarhide et al., 2021).

In CDA, another component of positionality is the researcher's theory of language. I believe that language is constructive. It not only reflects the world, but helps to build it (Wetherell, 2001). This philosophy of language as a tool of world-building is aligned with the epistemology of constructivism. While analysts can conduct CDA with any number of texts, I am interested in analyzing the texts produced in educational bureaucracies. My goal is to describe, explain, and interpret (Fairclough, 2015) the texts that construct powerful social institutions (A. Luke, 1997).

### **Data Collection**

I retrieved the text of charge from the Standards Revision Committee News page of the CACREP website (CACREP, n.d.e.), where it was posted in July 2019. The text is 220 words in length and is comprised of four parts. The first three parts are separate charges. Charge #1 is a general directive to the SRC to "examine all aspects of the CACREP Standards" (CACREP, n.d.e.). Charge #2 is a list of eight specific issues the Board requested the SRC attend to. Charge #3 is related to the SRC's process, specifically the importance of gathering feedback from constituent groups. The final section of the text is a lengthy (52-word), complex sentence. This sentence establishes limitations on the Board's ability to alter the revised standards after the SRC has presented its final draft (CACREP, n.d.e.).

In addition to the text of the charge, I retrieved and reviewed other publicly available documentation related to the standards revision process from the CACREP website. The SRC authored some of these documents,

including a summary of the content of five virtual “chats” held in the Fall of 2020 (CACREP SRC, 2020) and a guide that accompanied the release of the third draft of the standards (CACREP SRC, 2022). I also accessed and reviewed the accrediting body’s policies (CACREP, n.d.c.) with a focus on policies related to the standards revision process. These additional documents provided insight into the SRC’s process beyond what was documented in the charge, the SRC’s understanding of its role and rationale for some of its revisions, and some of constituent feedback and questions to the SRC. Because this study does not involve human participants, Institutional Review Board approval was not needed.

### **Data Analysis**

I used Fairclough’s (2015) framework to analyze the data. Fairclough’s method of CDA is comprised of three stages or dimensions: description, which is focused on the words, grammar, and structure of the text; interpretation, which explores both how the producer used words and grammar to form a text and how readers make sense of it; and explanation, which connects the production and interpretation of the text to social life (Fairclough, 2015). Fairclough’s *Language and Power* (2015) specifies areas of inquiry, or tools, that an analyst can use to describe, interpret, and explain. Fairclough identified many tools for analysts to use. Some areas of inquiry are components of grammar that many of us learned in our formal education, such as the use of pronouns, synonyms and antonyms, nominalizations, and passive versus active voice. Other tools are more specific to Fairclough’s framework. One such tool, discussed previously, is *discourse type*. Fairclough used *discourse type* to label types of texts based on the presence of a shared set of conventions. Another tool that is specific to Fairclough’s framework is *speech act*. Fairclough used *speech act* to describe the meanings given to sections of a text by the individual or group that created the text.

I conducted several rounds of applying Fairclough’s tools to the charge to the SRC. I recorded notes for each of Fairclough’s tools and added to and revised these notes during subsequent passes through the data. This ongoing movement among the domains of description, interpretation, and explanation allows analysts to rotate between two perspectives: a close reading of the features of a text and a broad analysis of how the text fits within, and helps to construct, its social context (Rogers, 2004). Following several passes through the text applying Fairclough’s tools and taking notes, I re-read my research question. I then reviewed the notes and identified the tools that yielded the most information related to the workings of power. Through this process, I identified three tools/analytical entry points that yielded the richest insights regarding power relations in this text.

### **Active Versus Passive Voice**

Producers of texts use passive voice to construct sentences in which the active agent is unclear (Fairclough, 2015). One common way to construct a passive sentence is to lead with a passive subject, as in, “The squirrel was chased up a tree.” In contrast, active sentences foreground the agent responsible for the action. An active equivalent of the previous example is, “The dog chased the squirrel up a tree.” Fairclough categorized active versus passive sentence construction as a grammatical feature of sentences that provides analysts clues related to the content of a text. In the case of a passive sentence, the speaker or writer of that sentence has decided to foreground the action itself while omitting the actor. There are several reasons a speaker or writer might choose to use passive voice to construct a sentence: They may not know who the actor was; believe passive tense communicates a sense of formality that aligns with the discourse type; wish to communicate that the action is the most important information in the sentence; or prefer to not call attention to, or possibly even conceal, the actor’s identity.

### **Sentence Mode**

Fairclough (2015) identified three modes of interest in CDA: declarative, imperative, and grammatical question. Because there are no questions in the charge to the SRC, this analysis centers the declarative and imperative modes. Imperative mode sentences are commands that typically start with a verb, as in, “Put the dog on a leash.” Declarative mode sentences, in contrast, communicate information, as in, “Only leashed dogs are allowed in this park.” Fairclough (2015) categorized sentence mode as a grammatical feature that communicates

something about the social relations between the speaker/writer of a text and its recipient. When a speaker/writer uses imperative mode, the implication is that the speaker/writer believes they have the necessary power or clout to be able to tell the other party what to do. For example, while a park ranger may feel comfortable telling a visitor to “Put the dog on a leash,” a fellow park-goer may not.

### ***Speech Acts***

By closely attending to the use of active versus passive voice and sentence mode in the charge to the SRC, I was able to access another analytical entry point in critical discourse analysis: what Fairclough (2015) termed *speech acts*. Fairclough (2015) used *speech act* to describe what a speaker/writer is accomplishing by producing a text. In the example sentence “Put the dog on a leash,” one speech act value is to give a command. This speech act value is readily available to the recipient of the messages and to others. Fairclough asserted that texts could have more than one speech act value. For example, the sentence “Only leashed dogs are allowed in this park,” has a speech act value of providing information. However, in the social context of one park visitor coming across another who is accompanied by an unleashed dog, the sentence may also have a speech act value of subtly making a request. When a text has multiple speech act values, there are more meanings for the recipient and for observers to unpack.

After identifying these three analytical tools as providing the greatest insight into power relations in this text, I completed additional passes through the text and my notes. In these review passes, I focused on how the three tools interrelate to communicate larger messages about how power works in the text and in the standards revision process more generally. The result of this analysis follows.

## **Results**

Multiple review passes through the charge to the SRC using Fairclough’s (2015) analytical framework, and especially analysis of the tools of active versus passive voice, sentence mode, and speech acts, revealed three ways power works in the initiation of the standards revision process. The following sections describe the grammatical features and larger meaning of each depiction of power relations.

### **The Board Claimed Its Power**

One depiction of power in this text is the Board clearly demonstrating its power and influence. The first example of this relation to power is the discourse type of committee charge. In line with the conventions of its discourse type, this text exists because a group with more power (the Board) entrusted a group with less power (the SRC) to complete an important task by following specified guidelines. Thus, the entire text is a statement of the Board’s power: The Board can form a committee, appoint members, and set expectations for their work.

Imperative mode is common, as one might expect in a text with this discourse type. Using imperative mode, the actor (the Board) gives command to the receiver (the SRC). Examples include, “Infuse disability concepts into the eight core curricular areas” and “Review and fine-tune Section 4” (the section of the 2016 standards that addressed program evaluation; CACREP, n.d.e.). Imperative mode communicates that these items are outcomes expected from the SRC. Updates from the SRC during the revision process demonstrated the committee understood its role was to meet the expectations of the Board. For example, this sentence is from a document accompanying the release of the third draft of the revised standards: “Our goal is to follow the charges [“charges” linked to the webpage where the charge was published] set forth by the board and to provide revisions to the standards” (CACREP SRC, 2022, p. 1, capitalization in the original).

In the charge to the SRC, active voice also helps form the structure of the Board’s open claim to power. In charge #2, the sentence stem that introduces the list of items for the SRC to attend to is written in active voice: “Issues the Board requests the SRC to examine are:” (CACREP, n.d.e.). Although this sentence stem begins with a passive subject (“issues”), the clause that follows uses active voice to communicate the relationship between the

Board and the SRC. Using active voice, the Board made a series of requests, and the SRC was expected to act upon them.

As stated previously, Fairclough (2015) claimed that a text could have more than one speech act value. In this text, the Board engaged in two speech act values that each communicated the Board's power. The first, and most obvious, is the speech act of giving an order. This speech act value is directly connected to the text's discourse type, committee charge. Readers of a committee charge expect it to present an order (or series of orders), which is certainly the case in this text. In the charge, the Board communicated its expected outcomes. The primary audience for these expected outcomes was the SRC; however, because the charge was posted publicly, constituents of the revisions process – including counseling programs, faculty, students, licensure boards, consumers, and others – formed a secondary audience.

The wide availability of the charge is evidence of a second speech act value. Through this text, the Board made a statement about which issues the SRC must address to make the CACREP accreditation standards, and thus the counseling profession, stronger. This speech act value is most present in charge #2, which is a list of specific issues for the SRC to attend to. The presence (and absence) of items in this list communicates what the Board found to be important in 2019. Topics that warranted mention from the Board included the professional identity of counselor educators, field placement sites, and doctoral education. Other topics were not included the Board's list. For example, with the exception of disability, the Board's list did not address topics related to diversity, equity, or inclusion. Rogers (2004) asserted that critical discourse analysts attend “not only what is present in the text, but what is absent” (p. 7). Viewing the charge to the SRC through the lens of its speech act value of making a statement allows readers to analyze which issues and topics the Board identified as most important, and less important, at the start of the standards revision process.

### **The Board Distanced Itself from Its Power**

While the Board used active voice and imperative mode to clearly display its power, it used passive voice and declarative mode to communicate a more complex relationship toward its power in the revisions process. Charge #1 is a rich example of this complexity: “The SRC is directed to examine all aspects of the CACREP Standards” (CACREP, n.d.e.). This sentence is passive. Rather than leading with an active subject (“The Board”), it leads with the passive subject (“The SRC”). Fairclough (2015) noted that one impact of passive sentences is that causality is unclear. Drawing on other elements of the text, readers can infer that the Board is the subject of this sentence. However, in constructing this sentence, the Board chose to not name itself as the actor. Juxtaposed with this passive construction is a strong verb: “directed.” Taken together, the imperative mode and strong verb in this sentence communicate that the SRC has taken its directions from a powerful yet unnamed subject.

Charge #3 provides another example of passive voice in this text. It begins, “Feedback is sought on drafts from a broadly defined constituency” (CACREP, n.d.e.). The passive construction of this sentence conceals both the subject giving this directive and the receiver responsible for carrying it out. Instead, the sentence construction highlights what the SRC must seek– feedback – along with the individuals and groups whose feedback the SRC must seek. In addition to its passive construction, another distinguishing element of this sentence is its mode. Fairclough (2015) observed that declarative sentences position their (here unnamed) subjects as givers of *information*; in contrast, in imperative mode sentences, subjects are positioned as givers of *commands*. Had the author used imperative mode, as it did in other parts of the text, this sentence might read, “Seek feedback from a broadly defined constituency.” Instead, the sentence is a declaration from which the primary implied receiver, the SRC, must interpret its responsibility.

Indeed, declarative mode is another tool for the Board to distance itself from its power. In a text with a discourse type of committee charge, declarative sentences that do not clearly communicate commands stand out. One example is charge #1, the first sentence of the text, which in addition to being passive is also declarative: “The SRC is directed to examine all aspects of the CACREP Standards” (CACREP, n.d.e.). Charge #2 is declarative

as well. What the Board could have written as, “The Board requests the SRC to,” instead reads, “Issues that the Board requests the SRC to examine are” (CACREP, n.d.e.). Interestingly, while the first list item following this stem preserves the declarative mode structure (“Professional identity of programs and faculty”), the mode then switches to imperative for each of the seven items that follow (e.g., “Evaluate and review standards comparing core vs. specialty area standards”). Because this text was presumably written by a group, this discrepancy between sentence modes in charge #2 raises the hypothesis that individual Board members may have differed in their conceptualization of the group’s power in the revision process. Given the limited publicly available information on the process of developing the charge, however, such a hypothesis must remain tentative. Alternative hypotheses may be that the structure of the charge represents the merger of several separate documents or that the authors of the text had differing preferences on how to communicate their message.

One other notable way the Board distanced itself from its power in this text is by not explicitly naming itself as the author. Although the Board’s authorship is implied, as in the sentence stem “Issues that the Board requests the SRC to examine are,” this authorship is not stated directly. Instead, readers must engage in interpretation to determine that the Board is the author. The SRC has clearly formed this interpretation, as demonstrated in this sentence from its explanatory document accompanying Draft 3: “Our goal is to follow the charges set forth by the board” (CACREP SRC, 2022, p. 1). This decision to not name itself as the author of the charge to the committee underscores the complexity of the Board’s power in this text. Of course, an alternate reading is that the Board saw its authorship status as so obvious as to not need to be named directly.

### **The Board Ascribed Power to Others**

If the declarative sentences in this text allowed the Board to distance itself from its power, these sentences also highlight the power of other groups in the revisions process. Charge #3, which is related to the SRC’s process, has particularly interesting grammatical features. In full, charge #3 reads, “Feedback is sought on drafts from a broadly defined group that includes programs, faculty, students, practitioners, counseling consumers, state counseling boards, and higher education administrators” (CACREP, n.d.e.). As stated previously, the construction of this sentence obscures each of the following: its author, its primary recipient, and the fact that it is a command. Instead, the sentence structure highlights the specific and varied constituent groups from which the Board has instructed the SRC to collect feedback. The grammatical structure of this sentence calls attention to constituents’ contributions to the revisions process while masking the power and agency of both the Board and the SRC. By constructing charge #3 in this way, the Board implied that constituent groups hold considerable power in the standards revision process. The SRC’s Guide to Draft 3 (CACREP SRC, 2022) underscored constituents’ power, stating that “one of the charges and one of the most important aspects of the committee’s work is to solicit feedback from constituents” (p. 1). At multiple points during the revision process, both the Board and the SRC called attention to constituent groups’ important role.

In the final sentence of the text, which was not presented as a charge, the Board underscored the power of another group: the SRC. This sentence, which is quite complex, ends with a declarative independent clause: “[T]he Board will not introduce any significant changes to the work completed by the SRC at the final adoption meeting without due process” (CACREP, n.d.e.). In this clause, the Board used active voice to make a pledge to not overrule the SRC unless exceptional circumstances arise. Given the prevalence of passive voice in this text, including in sentences such as charge #2 that explicitly give commands, it is notable that the Board used active voice to construct the sentence pledging to not make last-minute changes to the SRC’s work. Instead, this sentence begins by identifying the source of the SRC’s power: The SRC has full access to constituent feedback while the Board does not (CACREP, n.d.e.). This complex sentence communicates another speech act value, which is making a promise. In a public way, the Board pledged to respect the outcome of the SRC’s process.

## A Statement of Legitimacy

I have used Fairclough's (2015) tools of attending to active versus passive construction, sentence modes, and speech acts to identify three different relationships to power depicted in the charge to the SRC. The Board openly claimed its power, obscured its power, and ascribed power to other groups, namely constituent groups and the SRC. The multiple orientations to power operating within this text suggest a fourth speech act value: a statement of the legitimacy of the standards revision process.

CACREP accreditation is a powerful force in counselor education, and revisions to CACREP standards can result in programs changing their curricula, policies, and personnel. To support the legitimacy of the revisions process, a powerful body (the Board) communicated publicly that it had endowed a chosen group (the SRC) with both a meaningful task and effective tools for completing it. Phrases such as "Issues that the Board requests the SRC examine" in charge #2 (CACREP, n.d.e.), followed by imperative mode list items, communicate the Board's power in setting expectations for the SRC. The Board's publication of the committee charge in July of 2019 is also supported by CACREP's own policies, which specify that the standards must be revised every seven years (CACREP, n.d.c.). In short, to establish the revisions process as legitimate, the text needed to underscore the Board's authority to issue the charge and the SRC's ability to act upon it.

However, to support the legitimacy of the revisions process, the Board also needed to demonstrate that the ultimate power lay in the revision process itself rather than in the body initiating it. This effort to locate power in the process rather than the Board is apparent in sentences that limit the Board's power implicitly (e.g., "The SRC is directed to examine") and explicitly (e.g., "the Board will not introduce any significant changes [...] without due process" CACREP, n.d.e.). This effort is also apparent in charge #3, which masks the agency of both the Board and the SRC while highlighting the numerous constituent groups whose feedback is essential for the revision process to be considered legitimate. By distancing itself from its power, limiting its power, and ascribing power to the SRC and to constituent groups, the Board engaged in multiple strategies to locate power in the revisions process and thus to support the legitimacy of the process's outcome.

## Discussion and Implications

In this article, I used Fairclough's (2015) analytical framework to conduct a critical discourse analysis of the CACREP Board's charge to the 2024 SRC. Specifically, I explored what the language in the charge reveals about how power operates in the initiation of the standards revision process. By analyzing active versus passive voice, imperative versus declarative sentence mode, and speech acts, I determined that there are at least three depictions of power at work in this text. Using active voice and imperative mode, the Board openly claimed its power. At other times, the Board used passive voice and declarative mode to obscure its power. The Board also used grammatical structures to limit its own power while highlighting the power of constituents and the SRC. I claim that these depictions of power, while seemingly operating at cross-purposes on the surface, all support the speech act value of attempting to bolster the legitimacy of the revisions process.

To arrive at this claim, I closely reviewed the text of the charge to the SRC many times and applied Fairclough's (2015) tools of analysis in a detailed and systematic way. This analysis also drew upon insights gained by reviewing related documentation, such as updates produced by the SRC (CACREP SRC 2020; 2022). It also reflects my positionality as a member of the counseling profession who was trained, and now provides training, in CACREP-accredited programs. By applying a different analytical framework or other member resources, a different analyst may arrive at a different claim. For example, an analyst who had greater first-hand knowledge of the process of developing the charge to the SRC may conclude that the text of the charge reflects less of a concern for the legitimacy of the process than a different value such as assuring the perspectives of all Board members were represented in the final product.

Containing multiple speech act values and written for multiple audiences, the Board's charge to the SRC is a complex text. CDA provides a powerful framework for analyzing this text within its social context. CDA

allows analysts to shift continuously between a microanalysis of the words, grammar, and structure of this text and a macroanalysis of what this text means within the social reality of teaching, practicing, and participating in counseling. If language is constructive (Wetherell, 2001), then this text has formed the foundation for an additional text – the 2024 revision of the CACREP standards – that reshapes how counseling students are trained across the country for years to come. If language reflects the social reality in which it exists, then the analysis of this text has revealed the complexity of power relations within one of the human service professions.

### **Implications for Constituents of Accrediting Bodies**

If language is the site of social change (Fairclough, 2015), perhaps this analysis will prompt greater interest and engagement in standards revision processes going forward. Indeed, one implication of these findings is the importance of constituent feedback in the revisions process. The SRC used constituent feedback to inform its work (CACREP SRC, 2022), and the Board identified limited access to constituent feedback as the main reason it would not significantly alter the SRC's work without due process (CACREP, n.d.e.). Readers who review the charge to the SRC closely may come away feeling empowered about their role in the revisions process. Thus, when the SRC or an analogous committee in another profession releases a draft for review and invites constituents to give feedback, readers may be reasonably sure that the committee will review and value their feedback and may be more willing to take the time to give it.

However, constituents' close analysis of the charge to the SRC may also spur them to ask more questions about the standards revision process and the Board's role in it. For example, what does *due process* mean in this context? What is the threshold for a change to be considered "significant," and who makes this determination? Did the Board have other expectations for the SRC, and if so, where are they documented? How did the Board compose and revise the charge, and who participated? Further information on the processes of writing the charge, revising the standards, and navigating the final adoption meeting is needed to shore up the statement of legitimacy that is one of the speech act values of this text. Drawing upon the demonstration of CDA presented here, constituents of CACREP or other accrediting bodies can engage in their own critical analysis of similar texts. Through this analysis, constituents can generate questions or concerns to raise during the process of revising accreditation standards.

### **Implications for Students and Practitioners of the Human Service Professions**

In addition to analyzing how power works in the standards revision process, another goal of this article was to make a statement about the usefulness of CDA among human service professionals. Compared to other traditions of qualitative research, discourse analysis is rare (M. Luke & Gordon, 2012; Waalkes et al., 2021), and CDA even more so. This absence is difficult to understand given the expansion of CDA in education research (Rogers, 2004). It is also difficult to understand in the context of a growing emphasis on training students to identify and work to address social forces that shape clients' lives (Burnes & Christensen, 2020; Dollarhide et al., 2021).

When used to analyze meaningful texts, CDA has the potential to move the research and practice of the human service professions toward greater attention to social context and to relationships between the micro and the macro. As the analysis in this article demonstrated, CDA provides professionals with a systematic approach to analyzing power in language that can then become the foundation for meaningful understanding and potential social change. For example, a human service professional who critically analyzes accreditation standards is in a better position to make a case for why a specific standard should be added, revised, or removed. Perhaps more than most qualitative research traditions, CDA includes a clear mandate to not just analyze, but to act.

A. Luke (1997) observed CDA has both a deconstructive moment and a constructive moment. Its deconstructive moment involves the analysis of discourse within its social context, paying particular attention to power relationships and sources of social inequity (Rogers, 2004) Researchers could harness CDA's deconstructive moment to engage in social action through analysis of policies that affect clients, human service professionals, and

those who train these professionals. Examples include proposed legislation; state licensing regulations; statements from professional organizations; other texts produced by CACREP; texts produced by other accrediting bodies such as the APA Commission on Accreditation; student handbooks; and course syllabi. Researchers also could use CDA to examine power and privilege in texts generated through interactions between human service professionals and clients, supervisors and supervisees, instructors and students, tenure-track faculty and non-tenured instructors, and others.

Further, CDA has a constructive moment (A. Luke, 1997) in which students and practitioners learn the principles of CDA and apply them to their social context and the texts that form and reflect this context (A. Luke, 1997). Letourneau (2015) suggested counselor educators teach students the fundamentals of CDA and then direct students to analyze texts such as assessment protocols, manuals for specific theoretical approaches, or state-level lists of disciplinary actions taken against licensed human service professionals. Applying this suggestion, an educator in counseling, psychology, or another human service profession might ask students to study Barrett and Bound's 2015 article analyzing *no promo homo* laws. After reading the article, instructor and students could engage in social action by applying Barrett and Bound's methods to the current wave of anti-LGBT legislation that is limiting how school personnel can support all students.

In their model for social justice supervision, Dollarhide et al. (2021) went beyond identifying possible CDA interventions to use with supervisees to embed a critical form of discourse analysis within the model itself. Dollarhide et al. included "dominant discourse analysis throughout all systems related to supervisees' and counselors' identities" (p. 108) among the most important interventions for furthering social justice in supervision. Echoing Fairclough's (2015) statement that CDA was the basis for social action, Dollarhide et al. positioned discourse analysis as the first step in a multi-step process that results in "disrupt[ing] oppression in the supervisory and counseling relationship, in the supervisory and counseling process, and in the counseling profession as a whole" (p. 108). Both Letourneau's (2015) and Dollarhide et al.'s (2021) work illustrates potential uses of CDA's constructive moment to support student and practitioner learning. While these scholars were writing specifically about the professional counseling, members of related fields, such as psychology and social work, also could engage in critical analysis of the dominant discourses of their own profession.

## Conclusion

Counselors, psychologists, and other human service professionals train and work in environments that are formed by and awash in discourse. This article put forward the argument that members of these professions, who are already skillful listeners, have much to gain by listening carefully to the professional discourse that surrounds us. CDA offers a theory and a set of tools for uncovering how power works in discourse; an essential skill to perform social justice activities. The article demonstrated the process and findings of CDA by analyzing one specific text: the 220-word statement that initiated the most recent revision process for the accreditation standards in counselor education. While not all human service professionals are directly impacted by the outcome of this specific process, many may benefit by taking up the tools and theory presented in this article. Critically analyzing how power works in a piece of professional discourse is one form of social action. Additionally, beyond the analysis itself, the tools of CDA provide an entry point into other forms of social action and justice that practitioners can enact on behalf of our clients, our professions, and ourselves.

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The author is grateful to the members of the 2022 and 2023 University of Iowa Critical Discourse Analysis Summer Workgroups, especially Dr. Carolyn Colvin, for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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