

# Analyzing Discourses on Human Trafficking with a Special Focus on Immigrant Populations and Social Justice

This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine discourses on human trafficking in the local context of Hawai'i. CDA is a collection of various techniques that examine how we construct the world around us through language and other symbols. This set of approaches is often grounded in a philosophy of critical realism which takes "a materialist view [that is] sensitive to the powers of discourse" (Parker, 1992, p. 25). That is, it recognizes the physical existence of the material world as an object of inquiry, but maintains that our understanding of that material world is always irrevocably filtered through our constructions, particularly our linguistic constructions, of that world. Because our understanding of the material world is mediated through social construction and language, these understandings can be seen sites of struggle for power over "truth." Often we are not consciously aware of the ways discourses shape our understandings of the world. Some discourses are so powerful that they operate in the background and are taken for granted as assumed truth. CDA makes discourses the object of analysis so as to make them explicit and open to critique. In general, critical discourse analysis is characterized by three features:

1. Viewing language as action (rather than mere representation)
2. Employing critique grounded in a set of values (e.g., social justice or human rights)
3. Understanding power as both reproduced by and potentially challenged through language

The CDA project on human trafficking used interviews with service providers and advocates as the "texts" that were the focus of analysis. After transcribing each interview (N = 13) and selecting the relevant portions for analysis, I used strategies pulled from two CDA methodologies. Below I outline which ideas/strategies are borrowed from each methodology:

## Dispositive Analysis (DA) (Jager & Maier, 2009)

*Discourse strand:* set of discourses on a particular topic, such as immigration, human trafficking, sex, etc.

Discourse strands are topical (e.g., on immigration) and usually house within them multiple different current and historical discourses that compete for dominance.

*Discursive knot:* when two or more discourse strands overlap and are entangled (e.g., when talking about labor trafficking, discourses on human trafficking were often tangled with discourses on immigration and labor)

## Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009)

*Nomination strategy:* how social actors, phenomena, events and/or processes are named or labeled

*Predication strategy:* how these labels are described or qualified with connotations and attributions

My analysis took place in three stages. First, I systematically examined the various discourse strands and knots present in each interview. Second, I examined how human trafficking and related phenomena (such as prostitution, labor abuse, immigration, etc.) were labeled (nomination) and characterized (predication). Finally, I examined how important social actors (such as traffickers, pimps, victims, etc.) were labeled (nomination) and characterized (predication).

## Select CDA Results

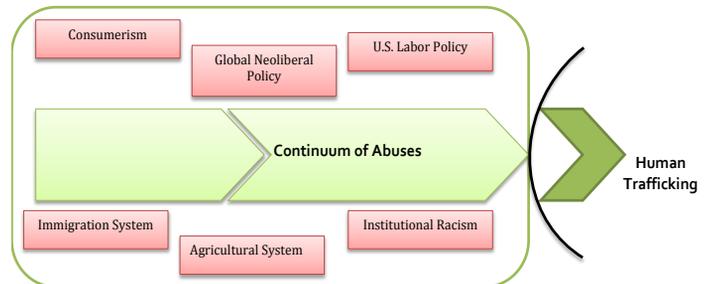
**Discourse Strands and Knots:** An analysis of the broad topics present in participant interviews revealed that six major discourse strands were tangled up in discourses on human trafficking: immigration, labor, children, sex, gender, and consent. Within many of the sample interviews a discourse strand on immigration interacted with the topics of human trafficking, labor, and sex (each containing many discourses).

Discourse Strands	
Immigration	Children
Labor	Sex
	Gender
Consent	

These interacting discourse strands produced complexes of complicated and competing discourses, known as a discursive knots. Discursive knots are particularly important for understanding issues of power and contested meaning. Discourses on human trafficking were found to center on two major discursive knots. The immigration and labor strands tended to be fairly consistently tangled with each other and with human trafficking, forming an Immigration/Labor/HumanTrafficking knot (major HT knot #1). Although less common, some participants also stressed the immigration discourse strand with regards to sex, gender, and human trafficking. These were mainly discourses related to adult immigrant women being trafficked in the sex industry. However, when talking about sex trafficking, the sex discourse strand was more often combined with either a discourse strand on gender or children (or both). This Sex/Gender/Children/HumanTrafficking knot (major HT knot #2) tended to be more heavily represented than discourses related to sex and immigration.

**Nomination and Predication of Phenomena:** Participants labeled and discussed a number of phenomena related to labor trafficking and sex trafficking including migrant labor, labor abuses, prostitution, Korean hostess bars, and more. In analyzing how these various phenomena were constructed and related to each other, I was particularly interested in examining whether participant discourses promoted or hindered socially just understandings of the phenomena. Other authors (e.g., Brennan, 2010; Chacón, 2006; and Chapkis, 2003) have discussed concerns that some of the rhetoric around the issue of human trafficking tends to serve the function of severing extreme forms of abuse from the range of other “ordinary” abuses in which they sit. These types of discourses call attention to the aberrant acts committed by a few “bad apples” rather than calling attention to the systemic context in which abuse and exploitation are often quite common.

When discussing trafficking of immigrants, I found that a few participants did talk about exploitative contexts (e.g., U.S. agricultural and migrant labor systems), but the ways in which they did so were limited in terms of promoting social justice. Some participants discussed a need for improved regulation of the current migrant labor systems so that corrupt individuals are less able to abuse the system. However, focusing too strongly on regulation can promote the “bad apple” construction and side-step questions about whether there is inherent injustice in the systems themselves.



Additionally, some participants did talk about the U.S. agricultural system and a related consumer culture that is unwilling to pay higher prices so that migrant workers could make a fair wage. This construction of the problem perpetuates the idea that exploitation is inherent to these systems, but does so in a way that makes this exploitation inevitable and inescapable. This discursive construction encourages the status quo because it intimates that change cannot occur.

**Nomination and Predication of Social Actors:** In examining the way potential victim groups (victims, workers, immigrants, women, children, etc.) were constructed versus the way that potential perpetrator groups (pimps, Johns, landowners, employers, consumers, etc.), were constructed, I found that perpetrator groups were rarely named and were often talked about in terms of their sneakiness and smarts. In contrast, victim groups were usually framed as passive and lacking agency, though they were frequently named and were discussed at length. The ability of locally powerful groups, especially landowners and employers, to escape mention in connection with human trafficking, combined with the sneaky and willful behavior ascribed to the perpetrators that were discussed, perpetuates a “bad apple” construction of human trafficking and fails to link the problem to systemic factors.

**Concluding Thoughts:** Together these findings show that everyday ways of talking about human trafficking can be unintentionally promoting unjust understandings of the problem and/or may be subtly sustaining the status quo and therefore supporting the interests of those in power. Counter-discourses should draw conscious attention to the systemic contexts that allow and promote human trafficking and other “everyday” exploitative practices and those individuals and groups who benefit from them (including mainstream consumers), but should do so in such a way as to avoid the fatalistic language of inevitability. Future research efforts documenting a range of abuse and exploitation can certainly add to our ability to call attention to systemic issues and delegitimize a “bad apple” understanding of labor trafficking practices.

### Suggested Resources

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