

DISCOURSE AS A NORMATIVE INSTRUMENT:
ANALYSIS OF MENTAL ILLNESS ON A DISABILITY SERVICES DISCUSSION LIST

Abstract

Publicly available archives of an internet discussion list for people who operate disability service offices at colleges and universities across the U.S. provided a unique insight into the values, interactions, and norms of this professional group. This study critically analyzed the discourse practices of this community. In and through their online interactions, these professionals define and construct the concept of “disability,” attitudes toward students with psychiatric disabilities, and ideological positions on “reasonable” accommodations on the part of their institutions. It was found that some of these professionals are talking in a way that can bring harm to the subjects of their discussions; it is important that this practice is revealed and remedies are taken. The analysis has provided many examples of how psychiatric disability is socially constructed as well as several examples of the decision-making process for accommodations. These features included unbalanced posting patterns, attempts at closure of discussions or debates, invoking greater expertise/experience or the Grand Discourse of law, and allowing misinformation, sarcastic humor, and damaging stereotypes to go unchallenged. The presence of hegemonic discourse in an archived list dedicated to disability support services in higher education has been confirmed. The use of power by DSS officials that results in prejudicial and discriminatory treatment of students with psychiatric disabilities was indicated by the discourse.