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**General Interest Articles**

*Tornadoes of Utterances: A Theoretical Approach to Studying Discourse, Power and Knowledge*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper expands upon our current understanding of the nexus between discourse and power by presenting an alternative theoretical approach to studying the intertextual workings of various discourses and how they work independently and interdependently to create power. Using Bakhtin’s theories of language, the paper first shows how all discourse is heteroglot and intertextually related to other discourses. The paper then shows how this intertextuality works to increase the connection between discourse, power and knowledge as discussed by Foucault. Taking this knowledge, the tornado model of discourse and power is presented as a theoretical and methodological tool to be used in studying specific discourses. Additionally, the tornado model can be used to help resist the power of such discourses.

Communication is essential to obtaining power, as well as the ability to exercise it. Various scholars have explicated the numerous ways in which language is both power and powerful, the discourse/power/knowledge connection. I expand on these theoretical forays by providing a specific, critical, approach for studying how various levels of discourse work together to create power in interpersonal relationships.

I will first show how all of our discourse can be divided into one of three levels – cultural, social, interpersonal – and how each of these levels are dialogically related to the others. I will then discuss how all of our discourse is heteroglot such that “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (Bakhtin, 1981 p. 428). Combining the work of Bakhtin and Foucault, I show how heteroglossia operates to create power exercised through discursive exchanges. I then provide a model, the Tornado Model of Discourse and Power, that can be used a guide for parsing out, analyzing, and increasing our knowledge of the various discourses at play in our everyday discursive meanderings. I close with a brief application of the Tornado Model.
Utterances Comprising Utterances Comprising Utterances

In order to understand the nuances and dynamics embodied within the discourse/power/knowledge connection, it is first necessary to understand the dialogic nature of all language. As social beings, our discourse occurs within the context of other social beings. Consequently, we understand our existence through defining our being in the world in terms of both ourselves and these others. This process of understanding is at the core of dialogism as explicated in the following.

When we speak, we choose certain words and combine them into intelligible utterances. Although we may think what we are doing influences what we say, the opposite is true. That is, “it is not experience that organizes expression, but, to the contrary, expression that organizes experience” (Volosinov, 1986 p. 85). The way(s) that we communicate about our experiences in the world influence our understanding of those experiences. Through speaking and attributing words to the phenomena around us, we make sense of our world in order to understand it: “We see the world by authoring it, by making sense of it through the activity of turning it into a text, by translating it into finalizing schemes that can order its potential chaos” (Holquist, 1990 p. 84). In order to know our reality, we author it. As social beings, meaning becomes a social product through jointly created shared definitions of words.

Just as meaning and words are social products, so too are our individual utterances: “no utterance in general can be attributed to the speaker exclusively; it is the product of the interaction of the interlocutors, and, broadly speaking, the product of the whole complex social situation in which it has occurred” (emphasis in original, Volosinov, 1976, p. 79). To put it another way, just as our words, meanings and life are social, so too are our utterances. Although we may think that each time we speak, we are originally authoring our utterances, we are not. Our utterances contain portions of the utterances of others so that “the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). More specifically, “any concrete discourse...is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). Even before we are able to speak, we are surrounded by utterances and discourse – from other individuals, from television, from radio, and from any other number of sources. Our utterances then comprise a bricolage of all these other utterances. When we speak our utterances are “full of transmissions and representations of other people’s words” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 338). All of these other utterances permeate our own utterances, thereby making our discourse intertextual.

Even though our personal utterances comprise multiple other utterances, we are not necessarily aware of how and where these utterances combine with ours. The essence of utterances and discourse “always develops on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects” (emphasis in original, Bakhtin, 1986, p. 106). For example, my utterances and my discourse form in the metaphorical space between myself and those with whom I communicate. My speaking of an utterance is not the completion of the utterance. My utterance enters the space between us where it combines with your utterances, your words and meanings. Even though I
speak the words, they gain relational meaning only through your hearing them and combining them with your words. Our discourse, then, is not my words or your words, but our words, intermingling and combining.

Many of us are generally unaware of this intermingling of utterances and discourses. As specifically noted by Bakhtin:

In our enthusiasm for specification we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture; we have frequently forgotten that the boundaries of these areas are not absolute, that in various epochs they have been drawn in various ways. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 2)

Our current approaches to the study of communication often have excluded a whole area of epistemological inquiry, specifically, critical analysis of interpersonal communication. By trying unduly to classify phenomena and lock them into opposing binaries, we have often failed to look at the embodied nature of lived experience. In order to bridge this gap of knowledge, “we must deal with the life and behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-linguaged world” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 275). We must examine how people actually speak in their everyday existence as opposed to how we think they speak. We must listen to their discourse and try to understand it as spoken. Because “no utterance is devoid of the intertextual dimension” (Todorov, 1984, p. 62), we must examine the intertextuality or interconnectedness of all utterances. To move closer to this type of inquiry, it is necessary to understand just what Bakhtin means by intertextuality.

**Intertextual Weaving Of Discourses**

At its most simplistic, intertextuality can be understood as the combination of past, present, and future utterances. Whereas dialogism focuses on the other-directed formation of our discourse, intertextuality focuses on the internally structured formation of discourse. Therefore, intertextuality appears in the spoken utterance, as well as the interweaving of spoken and written utterances. Our utterances form a text, explained as “any coherent complex of signs – thoughts about thoughts, experiences of experiences, words about words, and texts about texts” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 103). The text as utterance, then, is defined as including “its plan (intention) and the realization of this plan” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 104). Additionally, “language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). Intertextuality occurs in the metaphorical space between our intention as a speaker and the realization by the speaker. What I intend to communicate as a speaker depends upon the meaning attributed to my communication by the receiver. A tension is thereby created between intention versus meaning. As a speaker it is my responsibility to ensure that the meaning I intend is the one received by the receiver of my communication, unless, of course, the receiver can read my mind. Once we understand and accept that intertextuality applies to all utterances, we can move into understanding how it plays out in our utterances.
Todorov, reading Bakhtin, asserts that “every utterance is also related to previous utterances, thus creating intertextual (or dialogic) relations” (emphasis in original, Todorov, 1984, p. 48). In other words, “there is no first or last discourse, and dialogical context knows no limits” (Bakhtin as cited in Todorov, 1984, p. 110). Discourse, all discourse, is never-ending and never-beginning, it is ongoing. Even though we may think that we end our discourse when we end a conversation, we do not. The intertextual dynamic indicates that our discourse continues to swirl, combining and recombining with other discourses, making the meaning of our discourse in constant flux. More specifically, Bakhtin (1981) clarifies that “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (p. 259) that embodies the social at all levels or “social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse” (p. 300). This is explained in the following passage:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272)

In summary, “the utterance as a whole is shaped as such by extralinguistic (dialogic) aspects, and it is also related to the other utterances. These extralinguistic (dialogic) aspects also pervade the utterance from within” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 109). Each utterance comprises other utterances at the same time that it operates in conjunction with these and other utterances. Caught in the whirling of centrifugal and centripetal forces, no individual utterance stands alone or is created independent of other utterances. Each utterance is intertextually woven with other utterances, which in turn are woven together into discourse. Using Bakhtin’s theories of discourse as a foundation, I set forth a specific method to study this swirling of utterances through parsing out the various discourses found in individual utterances.

**Swirling Utterances**

Recall that utterances develop on the boundary between two levels of consciousness – ours and an Other’s. However, “instead of conceiving the space between two different levels of consciousness as a gap that is overcome only through an activity determined by a preordained telos – an activity in which the initiative of parts in affecting the whole is highly limited – dialogism sees the gap between higher and lower levels of consciousness as a zone of proximal development” (Holquist, 1990, p. 83). Like our discourse, the space between levels of consciousness is not one with a set beginning and end. Instead it is an amorphous place, changing and changeable through our discursive constructions. This gap presents a distance “that may be traversed (at least partially) through the pedagogical activity of the parts in a dialogic simultaneity relating to each other in time” (emphasis in original, Holquist, 1990, p. 83). Through our discourse we negotiate a way to traverse this gap in such a manner that we express our intended meaning as understandable to others. This negotiation represents what Bakhtin
refers to as “dialogic tension” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 314). The key to understanding discourse is to get at this tension, to understand just what dialogic tension embodies and how we negotiate our way through it.

We must first recall there is no beginning or ending to discourse despite that “every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (emphasis in original, Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). The answerability of discourse is not an end in and of itself. At the same time each word anticipates an answer, it also refers to an object in a specific context resulting in the “unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object” (emphasis in original, Bakhtin, 1981, p. 278). This Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages embodies the nature of discourse and has not been studied extensively. To clarify this lack of study, Bakhtin related it to specific phenomena as embodied in three levels of discourse:

These include the specific phenomena that are present in discourse and that are determined by its dialogic orientation, first amid others’ utterances inside a single language (the primordial dialogism of discourse), amid other ‘social languages’ within a single national language and finally amid different national languages within the same culture, that is, the same socio-ideological conceptual horizon. (emphasis in original, Bakhtin, 1981, p. 275)

I expand Bakhtin’s discussion of these ‘ignored’ language phenomena by translating them into specific types of discourse. As such, I relate single language to our interpersonal discourses, social language to media discourses, and national languages to cultural discourse. As I will demonstrate in the Tornado Model, we can see examples of each type of these discourses at play throughout our discursive exchanges at any given moment. Before explaining the model, I will discuss how discourse creates knowledge, which in turn allows for the possibility of power.

**The Power of Discourse**

Power is created and enacted through the knowledge created and communicated through discourse. Through discourse we gain knowledge, while at the same time the impact of discourse is realized in its transmission and production of power (Foucault, 1990). We have an inherent relationship between discourse, power and truth:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operate through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

Truth is not something waiting to be discovered but is actually a complex of rules, an economy of discourses. Discourses, however, produce not a rule but a normalization that exerts power through discipline. Therefore, even discourse that appears to be aimed at subverting existing power structures is itself a form of power. With discourse we are active participants in extending
this power. The end result is a whirling of truth, power, knowledge and discourse in which each feeds off of and strengthens the others.

For Foucault, the relationship between discourse and power is especially damaging to individual subjects. Discourse acts as an “economy of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119) that creates and disseminates “procedures which allow for the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and ‘individualized’ throughout the social body” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). Discourse is more than just communication through the use of language; additionally “it is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed” (Foucault, 1972, p. 55).

These “distinct sites” can be better understood by considering discourse in conjunction with Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon and panoptic gaze. As a metaphor for power and societal control of power, the idea of the panopticon can be seen at play in various ways. The panoptic prison works by being physically constructed and operated in such a manner that prisoners know they could possibly be under continual surveillance. Because of this possibility of surveillance, the prisoners learn to monitor themselves and change their behavior accordingly. In other words, they internalize a surveillant gaze that may not even be there. Like the prisoners housed in the panoptic prison, we learn to function as if we are always under surveillance. In such situations, discourse serves as a metaphorical gaze under which we monitor ourselves and discipline ourselves accordingly.

What we hear and see around us in discourse presents images or ideals of what we should/could be -- we change our behavior accordingly, just as the prisoners of the panoptic prison do. These discourses exert power not by presenting direct mandates that must be followed in order to avoid punishment. Instead, discursive power is realized in the ability to gain access to our minds and through our minds, our bodies. There exists a “tyranny of globalizing discourses” (Foucault, 1980, p. 83) that act as “grids of specification” (Foucault, 1995, p. 42) or a “net-like organization” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). This tyrannical grid “prevent[s] even the possibility of wrongdoing by immersing people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts” (Foucault, 1980, p. 153). Therefore, instead of the necessity to imprison us in an actual prison, we are all imprisoned in a metaphorical prison from which we cannot escape – our everyday existence is one of continual, self-imposed surveillance through discursive regimes.

### Tornadoes of Utterances and Power

In order to understand and study how the intertextual component of discourse and discourse’s creation of power come into play it is necessary to understand how each level of discourse presented above operates on its own and how they all operate together. Bakhtin does not provide us with a specific diagram or layout of these levels of discourse. A diagram can be inferred, though, by returning to his discussion of intertextuality. At any given instance our present utterances are swirling together in the midst of centripetal and centrifugal forces. These
opposing forces create a mass of whirling levels of discourse. Visually, one can imagine these whirling levels of discourse in the form of a tornado – up and down forces combined with inward and outward pulling forces (See; Appendix A: Figure 1). Looking down into the tornado from the top, a bird’s eye view, the three levels of discourse are seen as three concentric circles swirling independently and interdependently with each other (See; Appendix A: Figure 2).

The Tornado Model becomes more clear by understanding the organic development of the weather phenomena of tornadoes. On a basic level, a tornado occurs when opposing wind forces meet. The clashing of these oppositional forces results in the funnel cloud formations associated with weather tornadoes. More specifically, the inklings of a tornado begin when there is a disturbance in the upper levels of Earth’s atmosphere. This disturbance is akin to a churning of winds. As it continues to churn it moves down through the atmosphere gaining force and power as it moves closer to Earth’s surface. The tower of churning forces moves in a circular motion exerting force up and down. As the winds circle, more power is pulled into the tornado. This additional power exerts greater outward force. The tornado’s power and force is both vertical and horizontal, then. At any point between the initial inklings of disturbance and final touchdown, the swirling winds may dissipate into nothing, avoiding destruction. When the churning winds touch down on the ground, destruction is inevitable. After touchdown the only question is how much destruction will there be?

Figure 1 (at Appendix A), demonstrates how the tornado model represents the intertextuality of discourse. A disturbance begins in the upper atmosphere levels of cultural discourse. As this cultural discourse swirls it gains force through the addition of media discourse. These two discourses reinforce each other thereby strengthening the discursive impact of each other. Finally cultural and medial discourses touch down in lived experience through our interpersonal discourse. The power of cultural and media discourses is felt at this touchdown moment and afterwards. Additionally, through our interpersonal recreation of cultural and media discourse, we reinforce or strengthen their power. Our interpersonal discourse then works to exacerbate the destructive forces of the discursive tornado. Like a weather tornado, however, a discursive tornado may dissipate before reaching our everyday experiences. In other words, not all cultural discursive disturbances travel down to the interpersonal level. Additionally, the upper-level cultural disturbance may be precipitated by some occurrence at either or both of the other two levels.

The intertextual working and strengthening of discourse is illustrated in the Bird’s Eye of the Tornado Model found at Appendix A: Figure 2. Each level of discourse is represented by one of the concentric circles, showing how each type of discourse operates independently while also operating interdependently with the others. The important factor is that no one level operates in a vacuum: “Every discourse is by its very nature, ‘dialogical’ that is, caught in intertextual relations” (Todorov, 1984, p. 107). Viewing these levels of discourse as operating both interdependently and independently is supported by Bakhtin’s observation that the “dialogue of voices arises directly out of a social dialogue of languages” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 285). The dialogue I have with you is a result of the heteroglot of discourses occurring around me as well
as the heteroglot of languages occurring around you. Bakhtin (1981) asserts all discourse has a “dialogic orientation” (p. 279). As each level of discourse is dialogic and intertextual within itself, it is also dialogic and intertextual with the others.

The first level of discourse is the primordial or beginning discourse. By “beginning” a specific first discourse is not implied. “Beginning” refers to the base of other discourses, that discourse which is the most basic. I include at this level of discourse our intrapersonal discourses as well as interpersonal and small group discourses. This level is characterized by personal transmission between parties. However, “personal” is not necessarily equated with in-person and can include phone calls, e-mail, letters, etc. At the social or national level I include all media discourses. These are the multiple messages and images we see purveyed throughout media venues and to which we are exposed from a young age. Just as there is no one dominant media venue, there is no one dominant media message or image. The cultural level of discourse includes the macro-narratives embodied in such cultural institutions as law, medicine and religion. These are the discourses that structure our day-to-day existence and are sometimes thought of as big “T” truth. These discourses tend to become entrenched in society and are not quickly changed.

Because each level is dialogic and intertextual with the others, each type of discourse embodies the other two. For example, media discourse contains aspects and parts of both cultural discourse and interpersonal discourse. At the interpersonal level, individuals appropriate specific utterances from media and culture and incorporate them into our discourse. Additionally, many individuals view media images and attempt to emulate them (or at least desire to). Finally, cultural discourse is changed through interpersonal discourse in courts, medical offices and other institutions where they are created. At the same time, cultural discourse often responds to social discourse such as laws regulating the content of movies and television programs.

In addition to relations between levels, there are also relations within any one level: Every extra-artistic prose discourse – in any of its forms, quotidian, rhetorical, scholarly – cannot fail to be oriented toward the ‘already uttered,’ the ‘already known,’ the ‘common opinion’ and so forth. The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse. (emphasis in original, Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279)

There exists a dialogic and intertextual relation between my present utterance and my past utterances. Just as what I have said in the past influences what I say now, what I say now influences what I said in the past. No utterance is stable; it is always in flux. However, since every word is directed at an answer, there is also a future component. By saying our past utterances are in flux, Bakhtin is not asserting we enter some type of time warp, return to the past and respeak or change our utterance. Instead, the flux occurs through our revisiting past utterances in thought and interpretation. For example, assume I pass a friend on campus and greet her by saying, “Hi, how are you?” to which she responds, “Oh, fine.” I then say, “Good, talk to you later.” Now, assume later in the day I learn from another friend that the first friend had suffered a severe emotional setback earlier in the day. Returning to our exchange, I
understand “oh, fine” does not necessarily mean good so much as it means fine considering the circumstances.

In terms of discourse, this means when I participate in discourse, I am influencing both that which has been said and that which will be said. Through time, the specific “mediatization” of my utterances become normalized. I am no longer aware of how I am recreating social and cultural discourses through my discourse. This normalization can be detrimental for it operates as a tool to create and circulate hegemonic power as illustrated in the following discussion.

Discourses Controlling Female Bodies

As part of my research agenda I examine the discourses in American culture that operate to subjugate women to both their individual bodies and a collective “ideal” body. Trethewey (2000) asserts that women’s approach to their bodies is a reflection of the social construction of the female body and their response to that body. Women who fail to adhere to this socially constructed ideal face possible ostracization by various members of society, including other women. These women also ostracize or punish themselves through participation in what I call Body Shape Discourse and define as friendship talk focused on how women “view their own and other women’s bodies, as well as the things they are doing to either accept or change their bodies” (Russ, 2004, p.215).

Working from Trethewey’s (2000) assertion that women’s response to their bodies is a combination of the social construction of the ideal body and their response to this ideal, we see a multitude of intertextual influences within Body Shape Discourse. The current ideal body for women represents the aesthetic ideal of femininity and embodies the sexual ideal. As a result, many of the cultural and social discourses feeding into Body Shape Discourse can be considered sex discourses. Their power as sex discourses arises through our engagement with and use of them. Using the Tornado Model, we can begin to unravel the multiplicity of sex discourses at play in Body Shape Discourse.

Cultural Discourses

We can trace the formation of modern sex discourses at the cultural level to the time following the Industrial Revolution in America (Ryan, 1975; Hymowitz and Weismman, 1978). During this time, the home became representative of a calm, private refuge from the public marketplace. Women, especially middle and upper class, were expected to be the angel of the house where the house was the heaven to which they were restricted. As the 19th century continued, concerns over maintaining the sanctity of the home began circulating in American culture – the initial cultural disturbance. This concern was realized in social mandates to women to remain or at least to appear sexually pure. A significant part of this purity involved controlling all aspects of appetite, not just the sexual appetite. That is, to be a woman demanded a constant focus on the sexual appetite through limiting all physical appetites.
These mandates are still seen today throughout the cultural institutions of religion, medicine and law. For example, the Catholic Church controls women’s ability to consent to sexual relations through prohibitions against abortion and birth control. Medical discursive controls are seen in prescriptive approaches to body size and the medicalization of female behaviors that deviate from the norm. Legal discursive controls are seen in the multiplicity of laws regulating marriage, sexual relations, statutory rape, access to birth control, and similar issues.

More generalized examples of cultural discourses can be seen in the women’s clothing industry. Today any woman can walk into a store and buy clothing in “standardized” sizes. However, as any woman can attest, the standardization of such sizes does not extend to the cut or size of the actual piece of clothing. The standardization seems to be limited to the numbering of sizes (Russ, 2008). Working in conjunction with standardized sizes is the designer assertion that “modern fashion was best displayed on a thin body” (Brumberg, 1988, p. 238). This assertion is realized in the fashion standard of using ultra-thin models to model new fashions.

These various discourses all operate together to form the cultural level of sex discourse, the power of which is supervised by society as a whole. Through their dialogic operation, they work to create norms to which all women must adhere. Women’s subjugation then becomes a product of both implicit and explicit mandate. As egregious as cultural sex discourses may be, their power is magnified when combined with social sex discourses.

Social (Media) Discourses

At the social level of discourse, cultural sex discourses are normalized through repeated promulgation and exposure. At this level of discourse, Foucault’s assertion that discourse is more than just an expression, “it is [also] a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed” (Foucault, 1972, p. 55) can be seen in action. Through the technology and saturation of media, social sex discourse surrounds us in all of our activities. The result is desensitization to sex discourse and a simultaneous hyper-sensitization to the ideal female, sexualized body as the apparent norm.

Many women compare themselves to media images and turn to them as role models. Despite the advances made in recent years by feminists and other women’s activists, there is still a dearth of positive female role models. Therefore, “given few role models in the world, women seek them on the screen and glossy page” (Wolf, 1991, p. 58). The homogenized images we see in films, magazines and other venues are the images many women turn to as models for their own body. Supermodels, the ultra-thin models whose bodies are thought to best display new fashions, take on new importance. They “are heroes to little girls, not because of their courage or good deeds, but because of their perfect features and poreless skin” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 59). In recreating cultural sex discourses, then, social discourses create an additional form of control over the female body.
Many of the ideal images purveyed through media are sex discourses and are sexual. One need only glance at the magazine covers found on any newsstand to find a multitude of examples of women posing to highlight their breasts or vaginal area or buttocks – or some combination. Women’s magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Shape, and Vogue and men’s magazines such as Maxim, FHM, and Stuff often present women in various stages of partial dress. Occasionally these magazines will present a woman totally nude with only the strategic placement of her hands allowing the cover to be shown publicly on the newsstand. This means one does not even need to purchase the magazine in order to view an eroticized female form.

Not all social sex discourse, though, is so overtly sexual in nature. Magazines, television, films, music, and video games present a subtler, though perhaps more pervasive, form of the discourse. Women -- and their bodies – are put on display to be consumed through our gaze. Women’s bodies are used to sell everything from cars to shoes to alcohol to cleaning products. At the same time, in situation comedies, films and video games such as the popular Tomb Raider, idealized, sexualized women are repeatedly put into situations wherein they are simultaneously viewed and consumed by the characters on screen with them and the viewing audience, what Wolf (1991) has referred to as “beauty pornography” (p. 132) and “beauty sadomasochism” (p. 133). Under the guise of presenting beautiful women, what is actually presented is various manifestations of sex.

Sex discourses at the social level are not limited to visual images. Sex discourse is also found in the actual discourse, spoken and written, found within media artifacts. For example, sex discourse is found within teen magazines and their advice columns (Garner, Sterk & Shawn, 1998), within popular self-help books (DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995) and within advertisements (Goldman, et al. 1991; Kilbourne, 1999; Rakow, 1992), just to name a few examples. These textual discourses work dialogically with visual discourses as well as cultural discourses to create an especially onerous example of female subjugation.

Interpersonal Discourses

Sex discourse on the interpersonal or primordial language level recreates the discourse from the other two levels and reifies the objectified, idealized, and sexualized images of social discourses. Sex discourse at this level operate as a micropractice where each interchange becomes a local center of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1990, p. 98). Since the discourse occurs in the interpersonal realm, power becomes an intimate and direct mandate that gives the appearance it must be followed.

The multiplicity and variety of interpersonal relationships each of us engage in are varied and as such sex discourse at this level can be demonstrated in many different ways. For example, the husband who discusses with his wife what she could do to be more sexually appealing and the mother who helps “beautify” her young daughter are both engaging in one type of interpersonal sex discourse.
In terms of Body Shape Discourse as sex discourse, most specific utterances fall within one of two categories: declarative statements or questions (Russ, 2004). For example, declarative statements include such things as “I feel like a heifer,” “I look like an elephant,” and “I am so fat.” Examples of questions include “Do I look like I’ve gained weight?” and “Does this make my butt look big?” These statements are the externalized manifestation of the internalized idea that the ideal body seen in social discourse is the one all women should have. Women participating in Body Shape Discourse compare themselves to these ideal women and try to emulate them. The power of Body Shape Discourse as sex discourse is realized at this moment.

Body Shape Discourse is manifested in the process of comparing one’s self to other women. Simmons’ (2002) study of high school girls aptly illustrates this process of comparison:
A group of ninth graders talked to me about sitting around comparing bodies during free time at school. “If we’re not doing anything,” one said, “we’re like, ‘I want her legs,’ and ‘I like her height’ and I love her hair.” (Simmons, 2002, p. 119)

This exchange demonstrates the extent of internalization felt by many girls and young women. They internalize the idea that they can pick and choose the ideal parts necessary to comprise their version of an ideal body. It seems they assume that like other consumer products, they can purchase the ideal body, which in some ways they can if they are willing to subject themselves to plastic surgery and other medical procedures.

Through comparison and participation in Body Shape Discourse, the body of each woman becomes the focus of friendship talk. This friendship talk arises as a direct result of the swirl of sex discourses dialogically brought into the friendship by each friend. Without even necessarily realizing it, the friends create a literal panopticon complete with surveillant gazes which feed off of each other strengthening the immediate surveillance and the larger social and cultural gazes. The doubly damaging nature of interpersonal sex discourse in terms of recreating a surveillant gaze is the same aspect that can be used to resist all levels of surveillance. Just an actual tornado can be diffused through its eye, a discursive tornado can diffused through changing its eye – interpersonal discourse.

Resisting the Destructive Power

The tornado of discourse described above is more than simple utterances influencing each other. Like an actual tornado, the discursive tornado is a powerful force that can potentially destroy. However, unlike an actual tornado, the discursive tornado can be destroyed. A weather tornado does not destroy every single physical object in its vicinity. Studying tornadoes one will find numerous stories of two neighboring houses – one destroyed, one left standing. Discursive tornadoes respond in a similar manner. While some people fall prey to the subjugating power of certain discourses, many do not. We can use this fact to start to find a way to resist discursive power. One can resist the destructive nature of weather tornadoes by taking
shelter in some type of physical structure. For discursive tornadoes, one must find some form of discursive shelter.

Even though discourse, truth, and knowledge feed off of each other to produce power, the power generated is not impenetrable. Recall that Foucault (1990) defines power as the “moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable” (emphasis added, p. 93). Even though it may seem, at times, that power relations are an all-encompassing stronghold, they are in fact much less strong. Power is “unstable” meaning it can change or more importantly be changed: “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1990 p. 95). The key to taking advantage of this instability is to work from the interior, the local center.

As power is transmitted through discourse, so too can it be resisted through discourse: Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1990, p. 101)

Instead of being trapped under the surveillant gaze of discursive power, we can use similar discourse to “reverse” (Foucault, 1990, p. 101) or resist the gaze. That is, we are not forever stuck in a subject position subjugated to oppressive discourse. We have the power, with our own discourse, to resist subjugation.

In order to enact such resistance, Bakhtin’s thoughts on intertextuality and swirling discourses should be kept in mind. Just as all discourse is shot through with prior and future discourse, discursive power strategies present a “multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play” (Foucault, 1990 p. 100). To be effective, then, resistance must “reconstruct the distribution” of such discursive elements (Foucault, 1990 p. 100). Using terms related to the tornado model, we must destroy the eye of the tornado to stop its full destruction.

Changing cultural and/or social discourses present a daunting task; however, changing interpersonal discourse is a more manageable task. With time, education and diligence, habits such as Body Shape Discourse can be modified into more productive discourses. More importantly, a change in one level of discourse should eventually precipitate changes in the other two levels. As Bakhtin (1981) repeatedly reminds us, the formation of discourse is dialogically and intertextually contingent. No one type or level of discourse operates in a vacuum. Therefore, the intertextual context within which discourse operates can be used not only to create power relations, but also to destroy or change them.

Concluding Thoughts

The Tornado Model discussed in this paper presents an alternative way to study the discourse/power/knowledge connection. I have drawn from the theoretical musings of Bakhtin on discourse and Foucault on power and knowledge. While both of these bodies of research are
illustrative and instructive in their own right, they can be somewhat confusing and difficult to access. Combining the two into one approach can be therefore be overwhelming. One of my goals with this model was to find a way to move beyond this confusion and make the study of discourse, power and knowledge as it is played out in our lives more accessible and “user-friendly.”

To illustrate the model, I have used the “sex discourses” that intertextually comprise Body Shape Discourse or how many American women discuss their bodies. As this application shows, Body Shape Discourse is precipitated by more than just an individual’s dissatisfaction with her body. This dissatisfaction is a discursive response to a number of cultural and social mandates on how women should look and specifically how the “sexy” or attractive body should appear. The model is not limited to such applications, though. The model could be used to examine how parents’ conversation with their children recreate and reinforce heterosexual norms about marriage or how teacher/student discussions work to maintain the traditional educational model of students being passive receivers of knowledge, amongst many others.

The Tornado Model also has practical pedagogical applications. With the model, students can analyze a particular discourse at any level. From this analysis, they can begin to determine what other discourses intertextually create the discourse under examination. Finally, they can use this information to consider power relations created and maintained by the discourses.
Appendix A

Figure 1: Tornado Model of discourse, intertextuality and power
Figure 2: Bird’s Eye View of Tornado Model of Discourse: Dialogism across levels

1. Single level of language (Primordial dialogue)

2. National (Social) Language

3. Cultural Language
References


**Endnotes**


2 Throughout, I will primarily use “utterances” for uniformity. However, the concepts I discuss herein should not be understood to be limited to individual utterances as they also are at work in all discursive exchanges.

3 It is commonly thought that this and other works by Volosinov are actually the works of Bakhtin published under his friend’s name. It is beyond my expertise to determine whether this is true or not. For an interesting overview of the controversy, though, see Todorov, 1984 pp. 6-11; Holquist, 1990 pp. 7-12.

4 As used herein, intertextual refers to the interconnectedness of all utterances, spoken and written.
However, in recent years we have started to see a turn toward acknowledging and filling this gap: Baxter, 2004; 2011.

Written and spoken utterances are not limited to words printed on a page or words spoken to another individual. In our multimedia society, they should be thought of as encompassing all forms of texts – film, music, internet, video games, etc.

With the intertextual nature of discourse, there are multiple types of discourses at play every moment. However, for purposes of explanation here I am limiting this example to media discourses.

Some theorists would argue that the past link is much more direct. For example, Gunn Allen (1986) discusses the Native American concept of “achronicity” in which the sense of time “is not ignorant of the future any more that it is unconscious of the past” (Gunn Allen, 1986 p. 150).

It could be argued that these ideals pre-date the Industrial Revolution; however, during the 19th century the mandates separating the private home from the public marketplace became formalized through multiple legal discourses mandating the separation. These mandates, though, primarily applied to middle and upper class women, leaving working and lower class women to fend for themselves. For an interesting discussion of the plight of working and lower class women see Berry, 1999.

For an extended discussion of Body Shapy Discourse as sex discourse see, Russ, 2008.