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Critical Content Analysis: A Flexible Method for Thinking with Theory

Jamie Utt
University of Arizona

Kathy G. Short
University of Arizona

Abstract

Critical Content Analysis is an explicit method for the study of text that also offers flexibility in theoretical approach and textual selection. In this introduction to the *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* special issue featuring Critical Content Analysis focusing on race, racism, and racial oppression, we introduce the method itself and highlight the flexibility of the Critical Content Analysis. Additionally, we highlight the ways that *thinking with theory* differentiates Critical Content Analysis from other forms of textual analysis and is central to the critical nature of the method.

Keywords: critical content analysis, qualitative methods, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies

Jamie Utt is a doctoral student in Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona and an editor of the *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* journal. His research focuses on critical mixed methodologies in education research and the intersections of race and schooling in the United States.

Kathy G. Short is a professor in Language, Reading and Culture at the University of Arizona and Director of Worlds of Words, an initiative to build intercultural understanding through global children's literature. Her recent books include *Teaching Globally: Reading the World through Literature* and *Critical Content Analysis of Children's and Young Adult Literature*. She is a past President of NCTE and USBBY.

This *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* special issue featuring Critical Content Analysis was initially born when two of the pieces included in this issue were submitted to the journal with strikingly similar methodological approaches to analyzing very different texts. As an editor of the journal, Jamie noted that he also had a piece nearly ready for submission that took up Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of a yet more disparate text, and saw the potential for a special issue. He invited Kathy to co-edit a special issue because of her expertise in CCA in children's literature, and the special issue focusing on issues of race, racism, and racial oppression was born. We share the origin story of this issue of *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* because of what it highlights about CCA as a methodology: the flexibility of this explicit method in applying it to a diversity of texts.

Generally, the more explicit a method is, the less flexible it becomes in its application. Yet as Lindsay Pérez Huber, Lorena Camargo Gonzalez, and Daniel G. Solórzano note in their article, CCA is much more explicit in its methodological approach than similar methods like Critical Multicultural Analysis but is still flexible and widely applicable. In this special issue alone, the method is applied to children's literature in studies by Pérez Huber et al. and Terry Husband and Alice Lee, to Peace Corps marketing images in Aurora Sartori's study, to college marketing viewbooks in Chris Corces-Zimmerman's study, and to School Resource Officer training materials in Jamie Utt's study. Though developed largely in the field of literary criticism and then by educators interested in text analysis, CCA offers a methodological tool that can be widely applied. Further, Short (2016) offers an explicit process for implementing CCA that, while clear and outlined, is flexible enough to be used in many fields that seek to critically analyze text (See

figure of the Elements of Critical Content Analysis in the Appendix).

The method's flexibility is not limited to text selection, though, as this special issue highlights how scholars can take quite different approaches to similar theoretical lenses. Considering the focus of the issue on race and racism, all of the included studies weave critical theories of race into their process, framing, findings, and implications.

Three of the featured articles are framed through tenets central to Critical Race Theory (CRT), though from quite different perspectives. Pérez Huber, Gonzalez, and Solórzano draw on Solórzano's (1998) foundational work in CRT to make the distinction that a study ought not to be considered a Critical Race Content Analysis unless it draws on the five central tenets of CRT; otherwise a study should be seen as employing CRT but not as a Critical Race Content Analysis. Husband and Lee focus on three broad tenets of CRT: (a) the centrality of race and racism in society, (b) challenging dominant ideologies, and (c) the centrality of experiential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Their broad approach to the tenets of CRT, focusing on the overarching themes that pull the theoretical field together, is a strong fit for the breadth of their study. As a study that set out to analyze 80 children's texts, narrowing the scope of the study as the analysis progressed, a broader theoretical frame suits the necessarily broad methodological approach of Husband and Lee's analysis of content. Utt's study is considerably narrower, analyzing the racial messaging of training materials for School Resource Officers in one state. In doing so, he employs two education-specific subtenets within broader CRT tenets. Knowing that Critical Race scholarship must challenge

racial essentialism and colorblindness (Crenshaw, 1988), Utt employs López (2003) who calls for approaches to race in education that are not race neutral but instead are racially conscious and actively antiracist. Also, because CRT emphasizes the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992), Utt employs King's (1991) concept of dysconscious racism, which posits that racism in recent decades is not so much subconscious (as often argued) but instead is maintained by a semiconscious state of willful ignorance.

The other two studies are similarly specific in employing theoretical frames from the field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), which notably is not a theoretical paradigm but a field that draws on critical analysis of Whiteness and race dating back more than 100 years. Sartori draws on Sullivan's (2006) notion of White ontological expansiveness as her primary theoretical tenet in analyzing the ways that Whiteness is communicated through Peace Corps marketing. Corces-Zimmerman primarily employs Gusa's (2010) conception of White Institutional Presence, an education-specific theory within CWS that focuses on how Whiteness as an oppressive force is advanced through institutional policy and procedure. The study looks at institutionally created marketing materials for colleges, reflecting institutional practices upon which schools rely financially and in which they have deep investment. Following Gusa's (2010) lead, Corces-Zimmerman analyzes the text through four subtenets, thus informing his units of analysis for a careful study of college marketing viewbooks.

We highlight these different uses of theoretical tenets not simply to introduce the content of the special issue but to demonstrate the methodological *and* theoretical flexibility of CCA. While this

special issue focuses on race and racial oppression, CCA offers a method that could be incorporated in a wide variety of fields and using a wide variety of critical theories, from intersectional subsets of CRT like QueerCrit (Misawa, 2010) and DisCrit (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016) to Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, or Postcolonial Theory. The key to CCA as a flexible method that can be applied so broadly is what Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe as *thinking with theory*. Like many critical methodological approaches, CCA demands that the researcher's stance and critical frame be explicit and must clearly inform *every aspect* of the research process—from the theoretical positionality to the text selection to the coding and analysis to the presentation of implications. CCA challenges the notion that the research process itself should be power neutral, as “text is never neutral” and neither is the process by which text is analyzed (Short, 2016, p. 5).

This concept of *thinking with theory* is demonstrated to varying degrees throughout the articles in this special issue, but in all cases, it demands more than the simple application of surface-level understandings of a theoretical frame to one's research study. One cannot dabble in a critical theoretical frame when taking up CCA as is so common in colonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012). The method demands that authors deeply know, understand, and live the theoretical approaches they are taking up so that *thinking with theory* is simply part of the research approach. Each part of the research process, then, is thoughtful and imbued with theory. Two of the manuscripts in the special issue highlight well how *thinking with theory* is about more than simply applying a theoretical frame to an analysis of presented content.

Sartori's article on Peace Corps marketing materials emerged from her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer herself. In her study, to simply analyze the images for representations of race would fall flat, as the analysis would necessarily be simplistic and superficial because of the limited number of images and limited depictions of racially identifiable individuals. However, Sartori draws upon Yancy (2004) to carefully consider the ways that Whiteness as an oft-invisible and unacknowledged discourse of power is communicated through visual imagery. Further, Sartori draws upon multimodal analyses to analyze discourses of race in the images through concepts like the gaze and emotional communication through the use of color in images to analyze how geographic space is racialized in images that are not explicitly racial in nature. In short, she didn't simply apply a racial theory to a group of images. For Sartori, *thinking with theory* means deeply considering the contexts of race and space that inform the images to draw thematic analysis with great thoughtfulness and depth.

Perhaps most comprehensive, Pérez Huber, Gonzalez, and Solórzano make clear that Critical Race scholarship is not simply scholarship, but part of a political project of resistance to racial oppression that is lived and embodied by the authors themselves. Their study grew out of a conversation between the lead author and her daughter when reading a children's text and led not simply to an analysis of text but to the creation of an entire library of children's literature featuring Latinx characters and to a framework for Critical Race Content Analysis. The authors' perspective and lens, then, is not one of theory applied to text but of deep lived concern for the well-being of Latinx children who are reading books marketed and leveled for children. For Pérez Huber, Gonzalez, and Solórzano, to *think*

with theory is to approach textual analysis from embodied theory born from experience as people of Color in a society structured through Whiteness for the benefit of White individuals as is intended in Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, 1998).

In summation, Critical Content Analysis is a flexible though clearly defined method for textual analysis, but it is not one to be taken up with ephemeral interest in a critical theory. As we hope the studies in this *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* special issue make clear, CCA can result in profound analysis of complex issues of power and oppression when taken up with depth and thoughtfulness. We hope that these five studies not only inform their respective fields but help other critical scholars and scholar practitioners to imagine how they might more deeply *think with theory*.

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Appendix
Elements of Critical Content Analysis

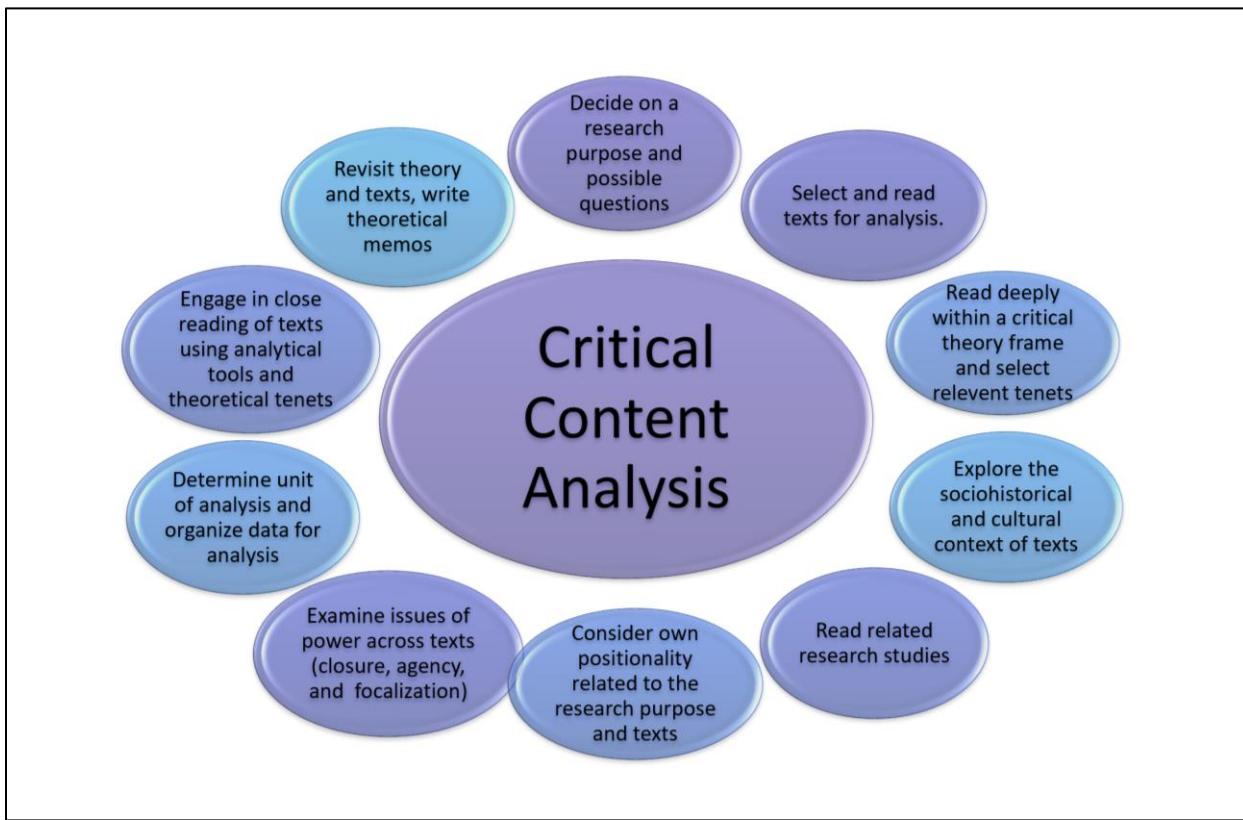


Figure 1. See Johnson, Mathis, and Short, 2016.