

“Under whose authority?”: a sociocognitive analysis of power dynamics in the confrontational discourse on same-sex marriage

Abstract:

Power is dynamic in social interactions. This is particularly true in an individualistic society like the United States wherein institutional authority may be juxtaposed with personal will, and social conformity may vary in reference to individuals' freedom of action. Hofstede (2001) has shown that American culture is the most individualistic in the world. American individualism is indeed reinforced by the US constitution that protects individual rights and liberties, for example, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Individuals are allowed to express their opinions and pursue their interests. This core value finds expression in every walk of life in the US. What is thus ingrained in American society may inform individual Americans' cognitive activities (cf. Triandis, 1995), which may come into play with their institutional roles and task performance in everyday social interactions.

A phenomenal instance of exercising power in social interactions happened in the courthouse of Rowan, Kentucky, USA on September 1st, 2015. The county clerk Kim Davis refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, and David Ermold and David Moore, a gay couple, tried to engage her in a debate before the cameras. The interaction was dramatized by a raucous scene in which protestors were chanting on both sides of the issue. The story reached its climax when Ms. Davis was arrested for defying the Supreme Court. The interaction in Ms. Davis' office has become a divisive event that draws national attention from different social groups, including all the Presidential candidates. The case is marked as the most conspicuous official resistance to the US Supreme Court's ruling on same-sex marriage, and it is by no means a spontaneous reaction against the state authority as evidenced in the outburst of public discourses on the issue.

Public discourses are mostly related to a part of the interaction in which Ms. Davis repeatedly said that she would not issue marriage licenses until she was questioned by Mr. Ermold. “Under whose authority?” asked Mr. Ermold, “Under God's authority!” replied Ms. Davis. While Davis' reply spurred a great many discussions or debates on political, legislative, and religious issues in the US media, I find the discursive representation of power dynamics quite informative about the individualistic character of American society. Drawing on critical discourse studies (cf. van Dijk, 2002, 2003), I will provide an analysis of the specific procedures in which institutional authority gets negotiated in Kim Davis' interaction with David Ermold and David Moore. One of the main reasons for this apparently interpersonal conflict, as I will demonstrate, is the *personalization* of institutional role performance. One of the obvious strategies for gaining power or control in this interaction is to *discredit* the other party personally. Looking from the angle of critical discourse studies, I will argue that social interaction is largely contexted, and informed by the participants' cognitive activities which are culture specific.