

A critical discourse analysis of authority and power in Kim Davis' case

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Same-sex marriage has been legal nationwide in the United States (US) since the US Supreme Court ruled that “state-level bans on same-sex marriage are unconstitutional” on Jun. 26, 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, in the video excerpt, Kim Davis, a county clerk, rejected marriage license to the same-sex couple – David Ermold and David Moore. This case reflects that, same-sex marriage does not mean the final step of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equal rights. Cultural transformation of the general public’s acceptance of same-sex marriage is more difficult than legal reform of the marriage system: even inside the US government sector, a county clerk from public authority can abuse public power and marginalize LGBT community in denying them same-sex marriage licenses.

My methodology for analyzing the case is critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA requires a study of “the relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249).” As an engaged and committed form of intervention in social practice and social relationships, CDA positions itself on the side of dominated and oppressed groups while against dominating groups (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011, p. 472).

CDA deals primarily with “the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252).” To accomplish this goal, the first step is to explore the historical context of the event—the fact that same-sex marriage has become a constitutional right in the US prior to the event (Ball, 2015). This makes a difference in order to explain the situation we are witnessing in the video, demonstrating Kim’s abuse of public power unquestionably.

To apply CDA for the analysis, we need to recognize the unequal social and political status between Kim and the couple. CDA’s critical targets are “the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252).” In the video excerpt, Kim, as a member of the political elites, plays a primary role in the reproduction of homophobia as well as the communicative discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of LGBT people. When asked whether she would deny the same rights to an interracial couple, Kim expressed heterosexual superiority in responding “A man and a woman, no.”

The video excerpt also reflects power relations in Kim’s directive speech acts and the couple’s counter-power. According to principles of CDA, the use of directive speech acts such as commands or orders may reflect the enactment of power, as well as the exercise and reproduction of dominance (van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). Kim used a great amount of command words and imperative sentences to show authority, such as “I’ve asked you all to leave,” “I’m asking you to leave,” “Just push back [away from the counter],” “Listen,” “Please listen to me,” and “Just listen to me.” Kim’s high-frequency use of the word “we,” legitimized government action and deflected its public accountability (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 480), though against the spirit of the Constitution. Interestingly, the video excerpt shows evidence of Moore’s counter-power (van Dijk, 1993, p. 255). The temporal reversed power relations reflected in the excerpt is Moore’s paragraph of asking Kim to answer “what’s the longest you’ve been with someone,” which brought the audience to laugh. To protest against the irresponsible public authority and ignorance of the clerks as a whole, Moore exclaimed, “YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF! EVERYONE IN THIS OFFICE SHOULD be ashamed of themselves.”

References:

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