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Beyond the Buzzwords: Why Ideas and Discourse Matter in Management

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Abstract: The social sciences have seen significant changes over the past three decades, with a return of ideas and discourses as crucial factors in management and organisational studies. This article examines the critical frameworks and analytical strategies for studying language and power that have been applied to the management field. We approach this by revisiting the literature on public administration, the domain where discourse first emerged as a key variable in the social sciences. Our contribution is an extensive review of the international literature to quantitatively and qualitatively assess academic output in this area. Based on the “argumentative turn”, we argue for three socially mediated dimensions—logistic, ideational, and material—that act as an interdisciplinary link with linguistics. We argue that discursive approaches are essential to management because they anchor the field in constructivism, thereby highlighting the power of ideas in the analysis of institutional dynamics.

Keywords: organizational studies, critical discourse analysis, critical discourse studies, discourse, argumentative turn

Introduction

Keywords like “power” (used by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun Van Dijk) and “social capital” (from Pierre Bourdieu) often seem outdated and fail to fully explain the dynamic processes within management discourses. This limitation is what motivated us, as discourse analysts, to write this article. Our first argument is that a superficial reading of postmodern discourses in

management has been like searching for the “philosopher’s stone”—a single solution to complex empirical problems (Schmidt, 2008; Lee & Romano, 2013).

Nevertheless, the proliferation of scholarship from major figures such as Fairclough, Foucault, Habermas, and Fischer has, since the 1990s, established new theoretical and methodological frameworks (Xiao & Li, 2021). These new approaches are highly suitable for analyzing public policies (Boullosa et al., 2021) and the administrative management (Lehman & Gould, 2022) inherent to the internal control of modern organizations.

In organizational studies, the variable “discourse” gains relevance in the face of different possible research clippings supported by creative recursive-conceptual abstractions originating from the so-called argumentative turn in management academia. This scholarly framework has effectively supported powerful means of interpreting the material social (Fairclough, 2013), historical, political, and economic (Bevir & Rhodes 2003; Jun, 2006; Rhodes, 2019) dimensions inherent in daily organizational management (Trein et al., 2019).

The imperative that appears irreversible in management academia is the accession of organized knowledge about what is understood as discourse from the postulates of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), both of which tend to be applied to the analysis of politics associated with management (Dunlop & Radelli, 2020; Fairclough, 2013; Xiao & Li, 2021). Consequently, we posit that discourse is fundamental to integration and coordination (Trein et al., 2019), as well as to organizational learning in the policy cycle (Dunlop & Radelli, 2020). It also frames strategies to prevent policy reform (Vis, 2016) from being employed simply as a performative sign of rapid action against the manifold challenges inherent in public management. In short, once incorporated as a categorical variable in organizational research, discourses invariably emerge under the organizational convention of their addenda in the aforementioned CDA and CDS. In spite of the clarity and distinctiveness of the English criticality of the French post-structuralist tradition, the truth is that we do not know, qualitatively speaking, how the use of this important variable has generated innovative explanatory insights in the applied social sciences, nor in which directions the underlying theoretical-empirical elaborations and confrontations are ontologically situated in management. After all, is there

a theoretical element common to critical discourse analysis in management that allows us to clarify in which directions academic production is heading? We are convinced and have been encouraged to conduct the research by the fact that there are no robust qualitative or quantitative analyses published in this sense.

The strengthening of these critical methodologies within applied social sciences, and management in particular, opens new avenues for analysis. They provide a level of innovation that alternative theoretical models have not consistently achieved (Schmidt, 2008). We therefore support Xiao and Li's (2021) call to organize the literature on qualitative discourse analysis in management, particularly given the manifold ramifications of interpretivism and constructivism in the social sciences. We seek to fill this void by synthesizing the field's output. Our analysis focuses on the concepts and strategies inherited from critical discourse traditions and their application to management.

We reinforce the coherence of situating our research in a journal of critical tradition in light of the historical silencing projected by the administrative sciences to ways of managing other than those drawn from the experiences of business organizations in the global North. We advance the field of critical discursive inquiry by adopting a systematic review methodology. Unlike prior studies (Rogers & Schaenen, 2014; Qian et al., 2018; Tian, 2019; Miao & Zhao, 2019; Xin, 2020), our approach evaluates the academic literature through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. We recognize the importance of the quantitative attributes required in a review. Mindful of the warning that quantitative metrics are often 'abstract and approximate representations of reality' which fail to capture 'actual work and the number of hours spent on tasks' (Boncorim et al., 2020, p. 59), we expand our analysis. We therefore focus on qualitative variables based on defined social categories. Our article innovates by combining a supra-qualitative approach with the quantitative assumptions of the 'Methodi Ordinatio' (a nomenclature for the creators of the method). This combination helps reduce the bias in defining 'most relevant articles' (Pagani et al., 2017). The quantitative variables we observed were the number of citations, publication year, and journal impact factor—a triangulation that was missing in Xiao and Li's (2021) study, which we aim to overcome here. We also identify the predominantly US and Eurocentric management epistemologies as

the starting point for epistemological work on public organizations, which we will henceforth refer to as Public Administration. Our main interest is understanding the transportation of the concept 'discourse' between different knowledge areas (like Linguistics).

Building blocks: the interplay of cognitive frames and discourse within policy analysis and public administration

The landscape of social science has evolved substantially over the last three decades. In essence, diverse intellectual paths have led to a resurgence of cognitive frames and discourses as pivotal drivers of political action. The escalating interest in critical approaches to discourse serves as a clear manifestation of this paradigmatic shift.

On one hand, the social sciences have witnessed an 'ideational turn' since at least the late 1990s. While Plato's critiques of poets and his guidance on educating philosophers demonstrate that reflection on the political power of ideas is as old as political theory itself, this tradition was marginalized during the late 20th century. The dominance of positivism and theories centered on the 'objective interests' of actors left little room for such inquiry. However, beginning in the 1990s, the re-emergence of ideas and cognitive frames (Blyth, 1997; Gofas & Hay, 2009; Béland & Cox, 2011) became increasingly visible across diverse fields, including Political Economy (Hall, 1989; Blyth, 2003; Mukand & Rodrik, 2018), International Relations (Sikkink, 1991; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993), and Public Policy (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Béland, 2019; Swinkels, 2020). For proponents of this 'ideational turn', ideas are the primary drivers of change in policy and institutions, while discourses are viewed merely as vehicles for transmitting these ideas (Schmidt, 2008). Consequently, this perspective tends to overshadow, or effectively remove, the sociological dimension of discourse.

Running parallel to the interest in cognitive frames, but acknowledging different roots, a 'linguistic turn' also unfolded (Gibbons, 1987; Fairclough, 1995; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Bevir & Blakely, 2018). This movement has a distinct nature: it stems from the philosophy of language rather than the positivist tradition.

Propelled by postmodern critiques of structuralism—and heavily influenced by Michel Foucault—this approach shifts the goal of inquiry from explanation to interpretation, dissolving the rigid separation between researcher and object. This turn is evident in International Relations (Epstein, 2008), Political Economy (Fairclough, 2000), and Public Policy (Durnova et al., 2013). Critical approaches to discourse are an integral part of this lineage. Because they emphasize power asymmetries and domination, however, these frameworks are often better equipped to explain the persistence of the status quo rather than the mechanics of change.

Historically, the ideational and linguistic traditions developed in isolation owing to their differing theoretical roots. Yet, the resurgence of cognitive frames has facilitated the acceptance of research into the political agency of discourse. While differing in ontology and epistemology, both perspectives concur that cognitive frames account for both the transformation and the stagnation of institutions. They also hold that discourse, while transformative, is inextricably linked to the situated practices that surround it.

Public Administration has largely failed to integrate the insights generated by this tacit coalition. Just as cognitive frames and discourse were regaining influence, the welfare state crisis shifted the state-market equilibrium, prompting renewed focus on state logic. The New Public Management reforms of the 1990s (Hood, 1991; Vining & Weimer, 2005), which produced varied outcomes globally (Ferlie, 2017), offered a critical opportunity for examination through discursive lenses (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Jun, 2006; Rhodes, 2019)—an opportunity the field has yet to fully exploit.

Methodology and approach

Consistent with our introductory remarks, our review process did not overlook quantitative metrics. Instead, we utilized the *Methodi Ordinatio* (Pagani et al., 2017) to prioritize scientific publications based on their relevance to the field. This instrument generates a hierarchy of works by synthesizing three variables: number of citations, impact factor, and recency of publication. The protocol unfolded across nine main stages:

Stage 1: Scope Definition. We sought to map the scholarship and methodologies associated with critical discursive inquiry in the field of Public Administration (PA).

Stage 2: Preliminary Search. We conducted a preliminary search in the Web of Science (WoS) database.

Stage 3: Keyword Definition. We defined the search terms as “TS = (Critical Discourse Analysis)” and “TS = (Critical Discourse Studies*).” (“TS” captures articles that cite these terms in their content).

Stage 4: Execution of the Search Protocol. The final data collection was performed on October 19, 2021, encompassing the entire historical range of the database (1945–2021). To ensure disciplinary relevance, results were filtered by the Web of Science category “Public Administration”. The search utilized the following specific parameters and indexes (SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, ESCI):

- Query 1: TS = (Critical Discourse Analysis*)
- Query 2: TS = (Critical Discourse Studies*)

Stage 5: Data Cleaning and Filtering.

- We imported the data in WoS “Bib” format using JabRef to exclude duplicate records.
- We then manually screened the titles, keywords, and abstracts, discarding 17 studies that were not relevant to the research.

Stage 6: Data Organization and Tool Use.

- The remaining data was organized in an Excel spreadsheet. We used the JCR 2020 calculation for the Impact Factor (F), and the WoS information (managed by SciMAT software) for the publication year and citation count (Ci).
- The complementary use of SciMAT was crucial as it listed 7,622 raw observations of references, preventing reference loss (e.g.,

VOSViewer showed only 21 citations for Foucault, while SciMAT correctly showed 34).

Stage 7: Calculating Relevance. The relevance of each study was calculated using the Methodi Ordinatio equation (1):

$$\text{InOrdinatio} = (Fi / 1000) + (\alpha * (10 - (\text{research year} - \text{publication year}))) + (Ci) \text{ (eq.1)}$$

Fi is the impact factor, and Ci is the number of citations. α is a weight defined by the researcher for the timeliness of the article (ranging from 1 to 10). We assigned $\alpha = 6$, indicating that the publication year had moderate importance for the research relevance in CDS and CDA.

Stage 8: Full-Text Retrieval. We located and collected the full texts for all articles included in the final research corpus.

Stage 9: In-Depth Analysis. The most relevant articles (Table 1), identified by the “InOrdinatio” ranking, were read and analyzed in depth.

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Table 1. Most relevant articles according to InOrdinatio calculation

Full Title	Author	Journal	F* ₋	Ap**	Ce***	IO****
Taking power to the sea: Towards a post-structuralist discourse theoretical critique of marine spatial planning	Ralph Tafon	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2018	38	80
Regulating higher education: quality assurance and neoliberal managerialism in higher education—A critical introduction	Darryl Jarvis	Politics and Society	1.181	2014	59	77
Deconstructing the debate over evidence-based policy	Joshua Newman	Critical political studies	0,566	2017	31	67
The urban resource nexus: on the politics of relationality, water-energy infrastructure, and the fallacy of integration	Joe Williams, Stefan Bouzarovski and Erik Swyngedouw	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2019	12	60
Bringing critical institutionalism and fragmented authoritarianism in China: an analysis of centralized water policies and their local implementation in semi-arid irrigation districts	Raymond Yu Wang, Tao Liu and Heping Dan	Regulation and Governance	1.417	2018	18	60
Discursive agency: (Re-)conceptualizing actors and practices in the analysis of discursive policymaking	Sina Leipold and Georg Winkel	Policy Studies Journal	1.773	2017	22	58
A framework for analyzing and practicing integrative governance: The case of global animal and conservation governance	Ingrid Visseren-Hamakers	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2018	12	54

Full Title	Author	Journal	F* ₋	A p**	Ce***	IO****
Wellbeing and welfare: a psychosocial analysis of being well and doing well enough	David Taylor	Social Policy Journal	1,425	2011	54	54
Toponymic assemblages, resistance and the politics of planning in Vancouver, Canada	Trevor Wideman and Jeffrey Masuda	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2,655	2018	11	53
Is 'Candidacy' a useful concept for understanding journeys through public services? A Critical Synthesis of the Interpretive Literature	Mhairi Mackenzie, Ellie Conway, Annette Hastings, Moira Munro, Catherine and O'Donnell	Social Policy and Administration	0,972	2013	40	52
Use of social media platforms by public administrators: overcoming the legitimacy dilemma?	Claire Connolly Knox	Administration e Society	0,982	2016	20	50
Puzzling and powering in policy paradigm shifts: Politicization, depoliticization and social learning	Matthew Wood	Critical political studies	0,566	2015	26	50

Impact factor; **Year of publication; ***Citations; **** InOrdinatio.

Source: Developed by the Authors.

The final rating for the selection of the most relevant articles was 50 or higher (numerical cutoff called “InOrdinatio”). This criterion was essential for our selection of which articles we should analyze in depth. For this reason, we divided our corpus into two groups: Group 1 (154 observed articles): considering the reading of the title, abstract and keywords and theoretical-conceptual orientation; and Group 2 (12 observed articles): considering the in-depth analysis of the most relevant articles (Table 1).

Analyzing the data from groups 1 and 2 of the research corpus

Our analysis delineated a corpus of 166 articles predicated on epistemologies and problematics characteristic of the Global North. These works mobilize analytical strategies—situated within US and Eurocentric traditions—that traverse the theoretical spectrum from Michel Foucault’s post-structuralism (deploying concepts of governmentality, orders of discourse, and discursive formations) to ideational frameworks such as Schmidt’s (2008) Discursive Institutionalism, which elucidates international relations through the lens of institutional and economic dynamics.

While Leipold and Winkel (2017, p. 512) have previously established Foucault’s ubiquity as a ‘basic reference in discourse studies’, we seek to refine this understanding. We demonstrate that, within the empirical and applied realm of management, the Foucauldian archaeological method functions not merely to trace the constitutive processes of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, but also to decipher the institutional order—often conceptualized as the ‘institutional environment’ (Lee & Romano, 2013)—in which actors operate. In aggregate, the reviewed scholarship interrogates public governance, applying critical theoretical lenses to the discursive content generated by technical, political, and stakeholder actors throughout the trajectory of public policy formulation, implementation, and discontinuity.

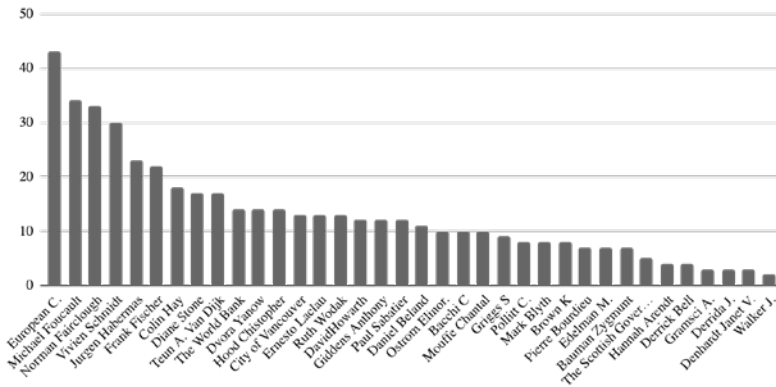
Put differently, these guidelines correspond to a policy landscape defined by deontic (normative) and epistemic (knowledge-based) constraints. This environment demands the coproduction of policies based on evidence with robust socio-ideational and socio-material legitimacy. Only through

such legitimacy become policies ready to ‘operate’, a term we define as the mobilization of discursively coordinated action, often through networks, to achieve material effects. This definition aligns with the trajectory of socio-material change outlined by Fairclough (1993).

Discursive practices exert tangible effects on the material sphere, most notably through the rationalization of resource distribution and the lexical stratification of policies into ‘strategic’ versus secondary categories. This critical orientation serves as the connective tissue of the reviewed corpus. Specifically, we observe that these studies share a focus on the interplay of the logistical, ideational, and material dimensions of discourse in shaping public policy. We dedicate the following paragraphs to exemplifying how these social dimensions underpin policy legitimacy. However, a prerequisite to this discussion is an examination of the meta-analysis, which establishes the ontology of the field’s scholarly output.

Our meta-analysis via SciMAT (Figure 2) positions the European Commission (EC), OECD, IMF, and World Bank (WB) as primary discursive anchors for critical policy analysis. As loci of high-level deliberation, these institutions provide the essential documentary evidence required to trace argumentative dynamics—both convergent and divergent—across multiple sectors. In doing so, they illuminate the complex interplay of agency and the discursive interfaces linking the political sphere, the technical apparatus of bureaucracy, and the realm of scientific research.

Figure 1. Major sources and seminal authors on CDS and CDA



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Our reference to the European Commission (EC) does not postulate a strict comparative homogeneity across the reviewed case studies. Rather, the prevailing scholarly focus lies in interrogating the ‘impact’ of discourses circulating in the supranational arena and analyzing their subsequent translation and reverberations within domestic policy environments. This is exemplified by the regulatory perspective of the World Bank (WB) versus the recommendatory tone of the EC. In most studies reviewed, researchers sometimes observe how the structures and knowledge bases of public bodies are transformed and, at other times, expose deficiencies and semantic conflicts within discourse communities or coalitions.

It is indisputable that the genealogy of cognitive frames and discourses is central to the public sphere, a fact that substantially reinforces the validity of constructivism within the applied social sciences. Throughout this analysis, we aim to demonstrate that this centrality is equally critical for decoding the institutional matrices in which these discourses are inscribed.

Our analysis reveals two axes central to critical studies in this domain: (i) governance conflicts and (ii) semantic struggles that disrupt the functioning of sectoral public policies. These disruptions challenge the State’s fundamental role in safeguarding social rights and stability. It is worth emphasizing that the volatility of public policies is not merely a symptom of government performance. Rather, it reflects the contingent character of the discursive arena, where competing definitions and systems of knowledge vie for dominance in policy design and execution. Our data suggests a balanced distribution of research along these two axes. While 41 of the 166 articles deal directly with governance, the others address it through the analysis of semantic tensions, cooperation strategies, or specific policy sectors.

We identify a consistent theme guiding this scholarship: the effort to position ideas and discourses at the center of political analysis, unveiling their potential to unsettle the social order. This research often reveals that the discursive construction of reality is contingent, driven by opportunity and context—a phenomenon Vincent and O’Mahoney (2018) refer to as the ‘transitive character’ of ideational carriers. To further qualify these findings, we selected the twelve most significant articles based on the InOrdinatio calculation for detailed review.

Tafon (2018) examines marine spatial planning by incorporating the concept of social life, arguing that the oceans must be understood as lived social spaces. The definition of rules and management styles in this sphere is influenced by the ideational power inherent in the act of planning. This administrative logic aligns with the principles long emphasized by W. E. Deming: that ultimately, valid planning requires forecasts minimally grounded in the objective rigor of mathematical and statistical laws.

Within this monolithic and restrictive epistemic framework, semantic hegemony is carefully curated to render specific planning models intelligible and persuasive, while marginalizing others. Consequently, alternative paradigms are displaced by a form of cognitive imperialism. Tafon (2018) observes that textual markers such as ‘integrate’ and ‘balance’ are mobilized to steer sense-making along this hegemonic path.

We recognize that this imperialism of organizational knowledge is a foundational concern within critical discursive scholarship. It directly reflects the nexus of knowledge and power elucidated by Michel Foucault (2012). Although Foucault did not explicitly address public policy, his relational ontology and analytical framework remain indispensable to the Public Administration literature analyzed here—precisely because they illuminate the selective and exclusionary nature of meaning production.

Tafon (2018) shows that the discourse of planning is interdiscursively woven into the matrices of sustainable development. This fusion allows planners to manage opposing voices without silencing them, integrating them into carefully controlled participatory processes. Based on Lee and Romano (2013), we conclude that while subjects are not passive—they engage and speak—they remain powerless in the face of these organizational institutions. Although they participate and are heard for pragmatic purposes, the institutional logic prevents this participation from translating into substantive control.

Wideman and Masuda (2018) expand upon the idea of imperial planning as a site of dispute among the guardians of spatial management expertise. Echoing Tafon’s (2018) critique of how specific cognitions and forecasting techniques are privileged, they apply this framework to Canadian urban planning. They emphasize that economic power acts as the central ideological force shaping

the built environment. The study convinces the reader that the holders of economic capital are the ultimate arbiters of how planning is organized, executed, and controlled.

However, this process is not without friction. The multiplicity of discourses and materialities involved creates a non-linear dynamic full of 'noise'. Wideman and Masuda (2018) describe a complex environment where dominant planning discourses can trigger unintended consequences, such as stimulating anti-gentrification movements. We classify this as a 'critical incident effect', which forces organizations to expend effort managing dissent.

Moving forward, Jarvis (2014) applies a similar lens to higher education, revealing the imposition of quasi-market rationalities through parliamentary discourse—a trend also noted by Taylor (2011). Key to this analysis is the finding that ideational coercion, softened by political rhetoric, instills a predatory logic within policy performance assessments. This research is essential for understanding how discursive ontologies translate into concrete outcomes within the legal and legislative systems.

In a different vein, Newman (2017) cautions against dismissing policy arguments as merely 'convenient' or logically dubious. He posits that, contrary to common belief, the arguments on both sides of the evidence-based policy debate are intelligible and compatible. Thus, we must distinguish between healthy disagreement and actual inconsistency. Such inconsistencies should be treated as intellectual puzzles that require resolution—ideally through civil deliberation, but also through systematic research. Clarifying these distinctions via rigorous study remains a primary responsibility for discourse analysts in public administration.

Newman (2017) adds a second caveat: policy discourses are 'messy, non-linear dialogues'. As a result, the notion of a structured 'public debate' is often a misnomer, as the chaotic nature of interaction prevents stakeholders from engaging in substantive dialogue. Even institutional actors may face uncertainty regarding their role in these public forums.

The networked actors approach seeks to bring order to this 'empirical mess' through systematic academic analysis. The complexity of mapping these discursive spaces—fraught with political and socioeconomic conflict—leads

Wang, Liu and Dang (2018) to conclude that these disputes extend beyond the classic Principal-Agent model. They observe that emerging groups act as 'staff agents', playing a gatekeeping role in maintaining the boundaries of the tellable and the institutionally acceptable.

The divide between agency and staff is not rigid; it is a tense and fluid boundary that, when breached, creates discursive cracks and fuels conflict between opposing groups. Wang, Liu, and Dang (2018) illustrate this within water law institutions, demonstrating how these emergent tensions are critical for understanding political discourse in water governance.

For readers seeking to expand their understanding of agency theory, Leipold and Winkel (2017) offer a vital complement to Wang et al. (2018). They propose the concept of trialectic agency, a model within the discursive agency approach that integrates the individual, the structure, and the researcher's interpretation. This perspective enriches the approach taken by Visseren-Hamakers (2018), who is also concerned with how actors use discourse to gain political standing.

Adopting a rigorous theoretical stance, Visseren-Hamakers (2018, p. 18) presents an analytical framework predicated on the axiom that 'discourses, practices, and structures mostly do not change overnight'. This perspective emphasizes the converse: that the maintenance of these elements is inscribed within the everyday material processes of institutions. Consequently, analyzing governance systems and actor relationships necessitates coherent methodological delineations capable of capturing this stability.

In a related empirical application, Mackenzie et al. (2013) investigate the utilization of public health services by the wealthy. They conclude that the ethical dilemmas surrounding state resource allocation to those with the least need cannot be resolved through the lens of 'candidacy'—a concept referring to the negotiation of eligibility for specific public services, typically analyzed in conjunction with equity. The study suggests that while candidacy explains *access*, it fails to resolve the moral question of allocation.

The role of discourse is central to rationalizing this ethical tension, validating the affluent as legitimate users of the public health infrastructure. By invoking the principle of collectivity, these discourses posit that the wealthy are not external to the societal body. Thus, economic privilege does not constitute

an impediment to state provision; instead, resource allocation is defended via abstract, generic principles of citizenship.

Addressing the dilemma that risks inducing administrative paralysis, Mackenzie et al. (2013) revisit the dialectic between the Lifeworld and the System. In an ideal configuration, the System's rules prioritize the collective interest, directing managerial logic toward human welfare. The Lifeworld, representing the realm of individual needs, seeks integration into the System. The functioning of both worlds is mediated by the social contract and solidarity, which serve as the regulatory mechanisms for organizing material distribution.

Knox (2016) investigates the nexus between the System and the Lifeworld, arguing that the quest for administrative collaboration with citizens is now anchored in social media. In this model, the Lifeworld is read as the communicative interaction occurring in cyberspace, supported by the System's instrumental infrastructure of professionalized management.

Applying Habermasian Communicative Action Theory, Knox seeks to understand how digital platforms can function as tools of communicative rationality, thereby legitimizing participation. This approach challenges the traditional politics-administration dichotomy. Yet, the friction between the public and their elected representatives remains a critical gap; Knox implicitly critiques the quality of deliberation in an era of political disaffection.

Wood (2015) advances this critique by exploring institutional change via rhetorical argumentation, pinpointing deliberative quality as the source of 'noise' in democratic systems. His theoretical inquiry engages with depoliticization and the capacity of discourse to act upon reality. Responding to skepticism regarding the material agency of ideas, Wood aligns with Schmidt's (2008, 2012) constructivist institutionalism. He illustrates that the achievement of communicative rationality is fundamentally a discursive operation, capable of reshaping the material social order.

In light of the analysis performed thus far, Table 2 synthesizes the primary social dimensions characterizing critical approaches to discourse in management. We emphasize that this taxonomy is not intended to create hermetic silos of knowledge. Instead, we propose a flexible organization, using the principle of intersectionality as the connective logic to navigate these dimensions.

Table 2. Social dimensions of the CDA and CDS applied in Management

Social dimensions	Overview
Logistics	The social dimension aggregates discourses of varying natures, spanning from deontic rules to epistemic truths. It functions as a logistic mechanism—an efficient transport system for ideas and arguments—capable of converting discursive intent into concrete material effects.
Ideational	Social dimension that captures discourses of different natures and modalities without necessarily identifying the transition from deontic to epistemic. It is only ideational because there is no degree of efficiency in its transport of ideas “mind to mind” in the cognitions of others.
Material	This social dimension offers a distinct innovation for analyzing how discourse exerts material domination. The framework clearly identifies the underlying objectives of these discourses. Moreover, it serves as a form of ‘effectiveness control’, evaluating the correspondence between discursive intent and actual execution.

Source: Developed by the Authors.

As detailed in Table 2 (Social dimensions of the CDA and CDS applied in Management), the ‘socially mediated’ aspect constitutes the vector through which ideas and discourses permeate society. This aligns with Schmidt’s (2008) notion of ‘transport’, where the metaphysical orders the material. The value of Table 2 lies in its Foucauldian grounding: it recognizes that power has a non-repressive, productive character.

Consequently, the table demonstrates that logistical transport alone is inadequate. To achieve the objectives outlined in our framework, one must diagnose the environment to exercise a power that compels broad-based adherence. As Foucault (2012, pp. 44–45) argues, power ‘permeates, produces things... [and] forms knowledge’. It is this foundational realization that allows Table 2 to serve as a diagnostic tool for analyzing the ‘power of discourses’, correlating their social permeability with their strategic intent.

Consequently, the classification of dimensions presented in Table 2 was empirically derived from the research corpus. We acknowledge, however, that the 166 articles in our sample transcend these categories, particularly given that

critical discursive scholarship is characterized by profound specificity regarding underlying macro- and micro-sociological dynamics. To address this complexity and ensure transparency, we have organized supplementary datasets, which will be deposited in the Harvard Dataverse repository in due course.

Ideas and discourses matter in management

By examining the many sub-topics and specific case studies within governance and sectoral public policy, we disagree that the influence of discourses on socio-material reality is inexplicable or causally imprecise. Instead, our findings show various explanations for the social and political dynamics involved in conflicts between different actors (agency conflicts) and the dependence on specific contexts (context contingency). These dynamics illuminate the varying configurations of domination and the concrete enactment of power relations.

We reject the premise that political inquiry must be exclusively tethered to the positivist scientific methods found in specialized literature. Although frameworks prioritizing structured execution and decision-making hold significant sway, the ascendancy of the 'linguistic turn' has re-centered ideas and discourses as critical variables. This discursive perspective functions as a vital analytical counterweight, enriching the insights provided by positivist approaches

From a critical-discursive standpoint, management scholarship can better interrogate the role of language—both in its continuous flows and its ruptures—during disputes between political and administrative bodies. By positing political processes as synonymous with argumentative processes, we apply this perspective to policy analysis. Specifically, we employ Norman Fairclough's framework of discursive commodification, tracing the trajectory of policy discourse through its critical stages: production, distribution, and consumption.

Our analysis suggests that these linguistic-discursive mechanisms extend beyond the political sphere to encompass the bureaucratic interface with citizens (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979) and stakeholders (Boje et al., 2021). This points to the emergence of a macro-theory of argumentation, borrowing

its epistemological tools from the critical linguistic tradition rather than management proper.

While often centered on the pragmatics of functional language, this framework provides a robust basis for theorizing—and generalizing—political and administrative disputes. By recognizing that ‘argument is central to all stages of the political process’ (Majone, 1989), we facilitate a deeper understanding of discursive construction. Accordingly, we delineate four distinct rationales for this centrality:

- Identification: argumentation is the primary tool used to recognize and define issues as public or organizational problems.
- Urgency: communicational discourse is the mechanism that reveals the severity and public nature of these problems.
- Mobilization: the sharing of meanings creates a sense of alarm and highlights the collective responsibility to solve these conflicts.
- Evaluation: analyzing the logic of arguments establishes the objective criteria necessary to evaluate public problems (Stone, 2002).

Future Directions and Concluding Reflections

We consider it particularly important to clarify that our article does not aim to reinforce a rigid structure of knowledge based on the social constructivist approach. Although we are clear about the subjectivity in how discourses are structured, our purpose was to organize the discussion beyond simply understanding the state-of-the-art literature. We thus seek to reaffirm social construction assumptions using innovative and recent approaches by highlighting the rising prominence of the ‘discourse’ variable.

We recognize that including discourse as an explanatory variable is not a novelty *per se* in the literature. However, the growing use of this variable highlights the limitations of positivism, without declaring its nullity or endorsing the “all-or-nothing” dichotomy that more extreme research insists on promoting. Our intention is not to advocate for the complete reconciliation of approaches, but rather to identify trends that our study revealed and which, in our assessment,

remain solid even after scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts. Therefore, we state our contribution to a constructivism in Administration that values and reinforces the use of the concepts and analysis strategies presented throughout this study.

We move forward by proposing four key assumptions to explain why the concept of discursive commodification in management is central. Our approach is propositive, not merely descriptive, as we organize the existing academic production into specific dimensions (Table 2). We acknowledge that prominent scholars like Fairclough, Van Dijk, Van Leeuwen, and Wodak were key figures in critical discourse studies between 2011 and 2020, as highlighted by Xiao and Li (2021, p. 492). Our research builds upon this by explaining *why* this group is so central. Specifically, we found that studies citing Fairclough's (1993) work, *Discourse and Social Change*, often integrated his concept of intervention in social reality (or social change) alongside discursive commodification. We argue that these two concepts are strongly linked to the socio-material dimension because they work together to drive specific, non-generic social change.

We agree that social change, as manifested in these discourses, often contests the material resources that perpetuate social injustice. It does so by questioning the unequal and arbitrary use of such resources, thereby challenging the ideological foundations (ideas) that sustain the status quo. When applied to policy analysis, this means that research uses ideas (Schmidt, 2008) and discourses (Tafon, 2018; Jarvis, 2014; Leipold & Winkel, 2017; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Newman, 2017; Taylor, 2011; Wang et al., 2018; Knox, 2016; Wideman & Masuda, 2018; Wood, 2015; Visseren-Hamakers, 2018) to address a public problem by recognizing and balancing both the material world and the ideational world (ideas/concepts). We term this process the ideational social dimension that characterizes this body of scholarship. Finally, our study has two main limitations: we relied solely on one international database, and we focused only on scientific articles, excluding books, book chapters, and technical reports. While we attempted to mitigate the second limitation through a meta-analysis of references, future research could conduct an exhaustive survey dedicated specifically to analyzing these non-article types of academic publications.

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