# Critical Discourse Analysis and Economy: An Interview with Michał Krzyżanowski

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## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

Krzyżanowski, Michał — Machin, David (2017): Critical approaches: media analysis in/and critical discourse studies. In: Colleen Cotter — Daniel Perrin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Media*. Abingdon — New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 62–76.

Krzyżanowski, Michał (2016): Recontextualisation of neoliberalism and the increasingly conceptual nature of discourse: challenges for critical discourse studies. *Discourse and Society*, 27(3), pp. 308–321.

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A complete list of Michał Krzyżanowski's publications is available at <https://goo.gl/79ehG4>.

## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ECONOMY

*Discourse analysis can be used to study various areas of life including the economy. What new insights could discourse studies bring to us in this particular domain?*

I think that discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis (or CDA) in particular, can make a great contribution to the study of economy. The first problem which it is important to tackle is how we understand economy. I do not see economy as essentially separate from the rest of society. It is very important and probably still remains the most dominant sphere in today's society. But I see it in a much more Luhmannian way and take the much more systemic view that it is one of society's systems which has a very profound impact on the others. This is very vital for me, because the discourse analysis with which I actually work is a discourse analysis very much focused on the diffusion of discourse through space and time. The discourse-historical method looks at how things circulate across and within social fields. That's why I think it's probably very difficult to speak of economy rather than political economy these days, because all of economy is essentially political, and all politics is somehow related to the economy, or is at least economically-based. I don't see it as something essentially separate. If we also speak of Bourdieu for a little while, I think it's vital to keep in mind what he says about the heteronomy of social fields. Economy is just like, for example, the media which Bourdieu himself described as not being a homogeneous field. It's a field which very much relies on other social fields, and of course, permeates the other social fields quite deeply and sometimes very forcefully.

Unlike a lot of work which exists in the study of economy, and especially political economy, critical discourse approaches can help advance the understanding of economy as a social process. The crucial issue here is the matter of ideology, which is the central analytical object in critical discourse studies, or CDS. But I think that economy is very often of interest to CDS because we see economy as a behaviour, something like a practice, a certain form of performance, and hence we need paradigms such as CDS to relate different — in our case economic — practices within and across different fields and to look at them in a strongly critical manner.

But I think what we lack, and what we often don't see, is the whole socio-political-economic ontology that is behind contemporary social processes. Where did they come from and where are they headed? And I believe that this is vital because what critical discourse analysis does, and especially the kind of critical discourse analysis that I work with, is that it looks at things from a historical perspective, and even more specifically it examines a certain historical logic of discursive evidence, and a certain historical continuity which takes place in and across things. And we often fail to see those things. We often think that economy is just a matter of the given moment, just a matter of present-day logic or strategy — and we fail to see where things are coming from and where they are actually heading.

Another very important issue is that of agency. A great deal of discourse that we now encounter, especially discourse which is or might be classified as discourse about neoliberalism, for example, is somehow increasingly deagentified. It is presented as something that just happens, as a natural cause of development, in a certain sense. I recently published something in a special issue of *Discourse and Society* about theories and concepts in critical discourse studies,[1] and I spoke about the neoliberal

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1   See *Discourse and Society*, 2016, 27(3): Special issue: theories and concepts in critical discourse studies.

discourses specifically.[2] One of the most crucial things is to see agency in political economic processes, such as that which can be seen in the frame of neoliberalism. To understand that there are always agents who are driving change and agents who carry ideologies and want to see those ideologies introduced and transformed into social practice. This is a very viable contribution of critical discourse studies. Another point is that critical discourse studies, especially as advocated by people such as myself, draw a connection between the macro and micro levels of social life. Ruth Wodak spoke of this as "macro-micro mediation" in critical discourse studies, and labelled it as one of the most fundamental components. Therefore, it is vital not only to see the broader issue of ideologies, ontologies, and of a wider historical context, but also to bring it all down to the level of a systematic analysis of discourse and of the actual articulations of agency, to the actual discursive practices that carry modes of economic behaviour at the macro or, indeed, at the micro level too. This is where I see this manifold contribution of CDS: at the micro/macro level, within the ideological aspect, within the ontological aspect, as means of exploring agency (or lack thereof) and especially within the area of interdiscursivity and connecting different discourses across time and space. The latter is also an aspect which allows us to create links between discourses of economy or political economy as a social field with other discourses, spaces, and so on.

## REGULATORY DISCOURSES

*In the paper you've just mentioned, you write about regulatory discourses and the regulation of neoliberalism through discourse. Do you think that the nature of regulatory discourses in the economic domain is the same as in the political domain?*

I wouldn't say that they are the same, although they do show a lot of similar logic in how they are constructed and represented. My main argument in the paper is that most regulatory discourses have top-down logic, which is why I also proposed a new reading of the notion of recontextualization — originally derived from Basil Bernstein, whose work I very strongly admire and whose role has been absolutely crucial in the founding of CDS. Recontextualization is not only about moving things around, but also about creating a certain hierarchy of discourses. This is essentially for the central point of regulatory discourses. They become, in a certain sense, matrices, kinds of moulds for ways of thinking which are then projected, decontextualized onto different levels, and even specific practices, in society. So I don't think that they are the same because they are not. But the top-down logic, the hierarchical logic of discourse, is indeed very similar.

Sometimes it is said that economic discourse is much more scientific and reliable. This is one of the very popular myths about economic discourse, and perhaps

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2   See Krzyżanowski, Michał (2016): Recontextualisation of neoliberalism and the increasingly conceptual nature of discourse: challenges for critical discourse studies. *Discourse and Society*, 27(3), pp. 308–321.

one that is not limited only to economic discourse. There are also several types of discourses which, through their apparent close relationship to practice, claim to have more power and claim to be more objective than, for example, discourses in the political realm, which are very strongly constructed, very often ideologized, openly polarized and so forth. Let us refer back to Niklas Luhmann, who used the concept of *Anschlussfähigkeit* (connectivity), which is a kind of ability to interconnect discourse and practice. He argued that some sciences, especially economics, but also law, are among those which always claim or even pretend to be somehow closer to practice. But what they do these days is that they frequently use this cult of the expert and the legitimacy of their own expertise, as if to create and sustain their importance. They do this, of course, because such logic creates, sustains and reproduces the power of economic organizations. And, of course, we see it not only in the international political-economic order, but at the national level too. Basically, economic areas are becoming more and more important, and the economist is always the expert. The economist is always the one who knows the ultimate truth. But I would be careful with this. Economic discourse cannot be easily deconstructed, because it uses a lot of those elements which traditionally seem objective — numbers, tables, bullet points. It also draws heavily on various types of expertise, thus becoming quasi-objectified. So, it creates not only the language, but also the whole visuality of facts and factuality. But what's especially important is to deconstruct that as a form of power which is, of course, discursively constructed.

## METAPHORS IN DISCOURSE

*One typical feature of economic discourse is the overuse of metaphors: we are told that the government's budget is just like a family budget, so the government should cut back in tough times; we are told that the central bank throws the drowning economy a lifebuoy etc. What do you think about the analysis of metaphors in this particular domain?*

I treat metaphor as a part of argumentation. Metaphor is in fact one of the elements supporting argument-making and claim-making. So, if we speak of the government as a family, or something similar, much more important than the metaphor itself are the questions: Who is saying this? Why are they saying it? Why do they perhaps want to humanize the government in our eyes? Were their — i.e. the government's — previous actions problematic? In a certain sense: Where is the whole discursive ontology that leads us to the points before and after that particular metaphor?

Another aspect is the issue of concepts. I think that they can be closely related to metaphors, but I think they must be seen in a slightly different instance or aspect of discourse. For me, the problem with concepts is that they are becoming the key element of discourse these days. All of discourse is built around concepts and the re/conceptualization of certain things and ideas which are supposed to operationalize certain policies and ideologies, turning them into actions.

I think the reason why metaphorical aspects are overused is, once again, very strategic. Metaphors are essentially strategies because they support certain claims. They

are supposed to cloud the discourse with certain features which are perhaps sometimes more or less acceptable. But I think that they are supposed to appeal to selected conceptual areas which are familiar to us in a certain sense. I don't even necessarily mean family, but something like rising, failing, floating, swimming, or anything else depending on the metaphor. So, I see it as a really vital element, but also certainly as a very problematic element which needs in-depth analysis and deconstruction.

As I've shown in my recent work on neoliberalism, the problem is that there is a lot of discourse being created now that is supposed to obscure agency, being vague about who actually undertakes certain processes and who is behind everything. Metaphor is one of the ideal ways of doing that because it creates language which very often resonates with us. We understand it, we can relate to it quite well and quite easily, yet it still does not demystify anything more than we need it to. It still creates a certain myth of economy as something that is not accessible to everyday individuals, as something that can only be done by experts, by knowledgeable people. Also, we shouldn't forget that metaphorical language is very frequently used in all types of organizations to sustain the power of the entire hierarchy on an everyday basis; it's not so much the case of actual ideas being conveyed. In any case, it's an interesting issue which is certainly worth being looked into.


## THE CONCEPT OF CRISIS

*Speaking of overused concepts, let us now move on to crisis. This concept seems to be very strong in terms of what has been happening in the economy over the last decade. It has been labelled the economic crisis, or financial crisis. Or what is happening now, in terms of people coming to Europe, has been labelled the refugee crisis. Do you think that the concept of crisis has some analytical significance?*

It is indeed a very complex concept and it's difficult to have one clear idea about it these days. I work very closely with the field of conceptual history, and there they have a very specific perception of crisis as something which profoundly changes the social reality. Traditionally, they viewed these huge socio-political crises as moments of extremely significant socio-political economic transformation and change, and as something where, very importantly, there is no return to the previous order. So, for example, they focussed a lot on the French Revolution. If we take what happened in our lifetime, 1989 was probably a case of crisis in that sense. It meant the end of the previous reality almost completely but also opened new opportunities for the arrival of new social, political and economic systems.[3] But not opportunities for everybody; some people won, some people lost in the process of transformation.

The other problem is that in semantics there is a concept which is called semantic bleaching. It means that if concepts are used too much, or used too frequently, they sure have the tendency to become very popular, but they also have the tendency to become empty of meaning and lose their mobilising potential as described by Kosel-

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3    See KOSELLECK, Reinhard (2006): Crisis. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67(2), pp. 357–400.

leck. They gradually become an empty signifier, if we are to use the words of Ernesto Laclau. What is important here is that the term crisis has become just that. If we consider that many people, especially economists, have been telling us that for the last decade we have in fact been living in a situation of economic crisis, it would be very easy to believe in some cases and much more difficult in others. Of course, for many people life has changed very profoundly in the wake of the huge crisis of neoliberalism that we have witnessed — we have seen the growing division between rich and poor, and certainly the development of levels of poverty we have never seen before. But for many other people, life didn't really change at all. In that case, can we refer to all of this as one crisis? If so, what is the meaning of it (and does it really have a meaning)? Is it really something that affects everybody, and possibly in equal measure? It is difficult to assess that, and so once again we need in-depth analysis to see how context- and actor-dependent, and indeed polysemous, the meaning of crisis really is.

From my perspective as a critical discourse analyst, I would not really strive or attempt to operationalize crisis as an analytical concept. It is something that can definitely help us explain certain issues but doesn't necessarily have to be very systematic in nature. But, on the other hand, the term crisis is used a lot in the media and in politics these days, but there is also a good reason for it. If one identifies certain an action, practice, event or occurrence as a crisis, what happens is that it provides an excuse, it becomes legitimate to take special measures, and to undertake actions which otherwise would not have the necessary validity and which would not gain public support. Therefore, speaking about crisis is again ultimately related to the issue of power and ideology. Consider the example of the "refugee crisis", which is a concept that has been used so widely in the media and politics in recent months and years, and also something I have been working on extensively.[4] It represents a huge and unprecedented human tragedy which is absolutely unbelievable in the 21st century. But the politicians and the media who labelled it a "crisis" were not driven by compassion or willingness to give humanitarian help. No. It was a strategic move. It allowed the politicians and the media — especially nationalist and populist ones — to argue for "special" measures against immigration since the situation was apparently so "critical" that only "radical" measures could be taken and put in place. Probably the last time we had such a discussion about a "refugee crisis" in Europe was in 1989/1990 when we witnessed the huge transformation in Central and Eastern Europe and later the — in some cases violent — split in the Balkans, all of which resulted in large scale migration within/across Europe. So, what we are looking at with the "refugee crisis" is again a case of recontextualization which is and was strategic and has ideological aims. You can be sure the aim is not to help migrants and refugees but indeed to politicise and ideologize their plight, and to gain political support for racism and xenophobia against them.

So, all in all, "crisis" is a concept which is indeed very problematic because it has become more and more ideological and ideologized these days. It is no longer just

4 See Mediatisation and politicisation of the refugee crisis in Europe, double special issue of *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, forthcoming (with Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruth Wodak).

a description or label. It becomes something which I refer to in one of my works as pre-legitimation.[5] It's not legitimation of something that has already happened, but it is an act of preparing the ground for actions which are to come, often controversial and indeed otherwise unacceptable actions. "Crisis" is hence often used for legitimization already in the process of planning political and economic actions and practices, and is very salient in, for example, policy-making, and in the process of creating a political as well as an economic response.

## IDEOLOGY

*You have talked about ideology, and one wonders how we as researchers can resist the ideological influence, how we can separate ourselves from ideology. Is it possible, in your point of view? Or should we accept that we are also influenced by our ideology in the analytical process?*

It's a difficult question because thirty or so years of critical discourse studies still haven't helped to solve this puzzle. It's always going to be present, but maybe that's good too... Ideology has been a very contentious subject among the different research traditions. The most radical and most vocal is, of course, Norman Fairclough's approach. Norman Fairclough sees ideology everywhere. He claims that both at the level of text and discourse, and the wider discourse and even socio-cultural practice, we can find and identify ideology. I don't think that this is necessarily the case, because what we find and what we study are very often "just" communicative practices. It's only in the process of wider interpretation that we can interpret them as forms of ideologically driven action, and so on and so forth.

But having said that, I think I most agree with Teun van Dijk. His idea of ideology is very simple. It's just a description of ideas plus actions. But what is really relevant in van Dijk's perception is his argument that nobody is non-ideological, i.e. that everybody has some sort of ideology. For example, that both racism and anti-racism are ideologies, although of course of very different social value, with one being negative and the only positive for the development of a just and equal society. We therefore need to acknowledge that there are ideologies out there calling for different models of society, with different ideas about the world. I think this is a crucial point because it also says something that I quite strongly believe: that there is no such thing as value-neutral research. We always do research because we are interested in certain things, and we especially do research because we see a problem, or a challenge in something. When we can say that there is something wrong with the picture, there's reason for us to study it, and that's why we do these things, because what we've found interests us.

Of course, the problem that has been present in critical discourse analysis for a long time and has also been a reason for the criticism of CDA, is that demystifying ideology can also be accused of being ideological in itself. One of the possible

5 See Krzyżanowski, Michał (2014): Values, imaginaries and templates of journalistic practice: a Critical Discourse Analysis. *Social Semiotics*, 24(3), pp. 345–365.

solutions to this problem is the radical division between analysis and interpretation which people like me have been advocating.[6] One thing is the analysis, where we take systematic steps, because we want to conduct the analysis along clear paths that other people can follow. So, if we afterwards took the same material and the same analytical categories, we would be able to come analytically to the same set of findings. However, after that each of us would interpret those findings very differently, just because we have different ideas in our heads, different political opinions, different experiences, different histories, etc., and also because we often approach research with very different sets of questions which should always be normative at least to some extent. That would perhaps be the ideological moment: because, to use the same example, in order to deconstruct racism as an ideology we also must know what anti-racism essentially is as an ideology. Therefore, the interpretation will always need to remain ideological, because the main way to demystify and analyse ideologies is to recognize their counter-ideologies and visions of society which represent an alternative to what we are looking at (so anti-racism as an antidote to racism, etc.).

## PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

*Nowadays, we're increasingly coming to observe phenomena which are on the borderline between public and private. New media communications could be an example of this. How do you understand the concept of public discourse in this context?*

I understand public discourse more or less traditionally, in a way closely related to the Habermasian conception of the public sphere; as something where you reach beyond the intimacy, beyond your own interests and you reach out into the areas of common collective concern much more. In social media, which you mentioned, defining it is actually very problematic, because we must answer the question of what it is, essentially. Is it a private discourse? Is it a discourse of self-disclosure? What is it really? So, I would like to see it, as many people still would, in a conventional, 1960s way: public versus private, collective versus individual. But the thing is that nowadays we can no longer speak of opposites, but instead we must understand that between the public and the private there is a huge continuum of practices which are "semi" public/private, etc. Indeed, I think the ideas which were around in the 1980s and 1990s regarding semi-public, semi-private discourse are becoming much more relevant now, because these days it's becoming increasingly difficult to find any genres or discourses that would be strictly public or solely private. I've always had a problem with the category of private discourse because, to me, every moment of articulating something to another individual is already in itself an act of creating society — just like it was asserted by Goffman and the symbolic interactionists, who looked upon even the most simple and mundane one-to-one conversations as microcosms of society.

6   See Krzyżanowski, Michał (2010): *The Discursive Construction of European Identities: A Multi-Level Approach to Discourse and Identity in the Transforming European Union*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, chapter 2.

But the moment when we shift from micro to macro is of the utmost importance. The logic of dissent is such that social protest is not conceived on the streets where we eventually see it. No. Social protest starts in everyday conversations, at family dinners. When one partner tells the other: "we don't have enough to eat", "you work all day or all night, you do long shifts but we still don't have enough money to pay the bills, feed the kids etc." — this is where dissent really starts. Then they talk to another family and realize that their experiences are the same, and then the process is repeated, and that is how we eventually reach social protest. In this way, small-scale articulations of dissent eventually become big, developing from micro to macro. And this shows that, as Wodak rightly says, "every instance of language use makes its own contribution to changing society and culture" — meaning that it is not only those macro-level articulations that matter, but also the small and mundane moments of discourse.

So, coming back to what we were talking about, the notions of the public and the private are changing as we speak and the divisions between them are, as I said, becoming less and less obvious. And I think that it is necessary to stop perceiving them as opposite poles and to start seeing them as a continuum of practices. If we look at what happens with self-disclosure and celebrity culture, self-mediation through social and online media, this exactly shows us: many discourses are private in their form but are essentially and explicitly directed towards the public, towards self-mediation but also towards self-publicity. It is actually the same story with politics, and I believe that a lot of this is being used strategically and ideologically these days, because politicians want us to see who they "really" are. But of course, all of this is a construction, a performance. It's not about self-disclosure. It's about showing that they are nice people, just like us. Of course, in reality they are convincing us and making political arguments, or producing something which would be most characteristic of public types of discourse. We can also see paradoxes — like when multimillionaires such as Donald Trump become champions of public discontent among the less affluent sections of the electorate with whom they have no ties and whose lives are so very profoundly different from theirs. So, it's a very difficult question and I think that it's undergoing some major changes right now.

*Emotions seem to play an important role in politics these days. How should emotions be treated within discourse studies?*

I really enjoy the discussions about emotions taking place in social sciences these days, but I also think that it's a very difficult area to grasp in a systematic, analytical way. That's why I've always had certain reservations, although I still think that there are many foundational concepts for how we think about politics and how we see politics, such as the idea of charisma which we have known so well since Max Weber. It is among those concepts which are and have always been not only about articulation, not only about performance, but also about the appeal to emotions and their deployment.

I think that critical discourse analysis, for example the discourse-historical approach, or DHA, has had some categories which at least attempted to incorporate the

emotional aspect. Therefore, issues such as the intensification or mitigation of expressions — listed as one of key DHA categories or discursive strategies — has been very closely correlated with the emotions that you want to evoke in the recipients of your text. But I think that there is a bit of a problem with emotions in critical discourse analysis, because over the years critical discourse analysis has had to struggle with accusations of not being systematic enough, sometimes of being too subjective and too ideological. I think that this is the reason why it does not really rush into researching emotional aspects, because this would further add to the problem of trying to grasp something that is not entirely analytically graspable, and something that is perhaps first and foremost a key element of social and political context in the social production and reception of discourse — whether at the individual or collective level — rather than of the discourse itself.

It would also be dangerous to distinguish between emotional on the one hand and categorically strategic and ideological on the other, because I think that emotions are being widely used to cover discursive strategies and specific actions, and to facilitate their pragmatics. That's why I think this is a difficult aspect. But we know that in German sociology, for example, emotions are a huge concept now, attracting a great deal of interest and being studied in many research centres. But I would say we are still far from a systematic, critical and qualitative social science methodology to deal with this. But maybe that's another thing we must do and focus on that in the future.

## LOOKING FORWARD

*Besides emotions, what are, in your view, the most promising research topics within discourse studies? What should be focused on in a systematic way?*

It's difficult to predict, of course. I think it's important to observe processes which never took place before, things that are new in discourse, things that are, in a certain sense, unprecedented. Nevertheless, it should also be about processes that are highly complex and multifaceted and will have long-term implications, or topics that are challenging and maybe, referring to what we spoke about earlier, we might even find an actual crisis to analyse.

From current event, Brexit will probably prove to be a good example of such a crisis.[7] This is something that has never happened before, and something where the issue of the emotions you mentioned becomes so salient. It is a political process of potentially huge social impact — but only very little of it is based on the rationality which has always been the key to at least the traditional understanding of politics, and so heavily based on emotions. It also shows how politics becomes even more powerful than the social reality and how the arguments which have otherwise almost always had some corrective power — such as those about economic costs/benefits — completely lose their strength. So we are in a new era, an era of "post-truth" politics,

7   See "Brexit" as social and political crisis? Discourses in media and politics, special issue of *Critical Discourse Studies*, forthcoming (with Franco Zappettini).

which certainly requires us as critical discourse analysts to remain very active and, most importantly, critical of what is going on.

I think that it's also very interesting how certain processes seem completely new, but at the same time they carry so many elements which we have known about and seen coming for a long time. It's also very interesting how things are, nevertheless, often presented as something which supersedes imagination and is beyond all expectations. The so-called "refugee crisis" — which we spoke about before — is a good case in point. It is something which, we have been told, was "sudden" or "unexpected". But the "crisis", as it was eventually called, could have easily been predicted, if there had been enough wisdom and political willpower. Plus, as a huge "crisis" — or "human tragedy" — it does not come out of the blue and is, in fact, related to and coincides with other crises which have been going on for decades: the crisis caused by the demise of the neoliberal order, the crisis of global and postcolonial politics, the crisis in European and Euro-Atlantic politics, crises on national levels and also on the supranational level, but also the crisis of an open and inclusive society which, as we all know, has been a very widespread problem. And this what I find really interesting and where I see we have to contribute. To be able to show how many of those overlapping ideas and meanings there are, and how much diffusion and recontextualization there is.

*Facing the complexity of social phenomena, researchers could find themselves caught in a sort of dilemma between developing a focused analytical scheme and combining existing methods and approaches. What methodological strategies do you pursue in your research?*

I think it's essential to start with the problem and from there to begin defining the rest of the research, whether you use one methodology or several methodologies. And it's important to do things right: we must have good theorization, a good set of perspectives, we have to be aware of what others have studied before, we have to be aware of other niches and other good practices in research that we can follow. The second important issue is to always keep the problem in context; do not decontextualize it, do not to turn it into an experiment, but instead keep it in touch with its social roots and always see its relation to the wider society. The third issue is obviously to be analytical, to be systematic, and to be as reliable as possible in the process of analysis. I think those are the things which I always consider to be the most important. That's my checklist.

*Arguably, social problems are discursively constructed by people in specific contexts. Do you think that discourse analysts should do more fieldwork in order to grasp these meaning-making processes?*

Overall, yes. If there's a problem where you can see that the contextualization requires even further exploration, and especially where the relationship between the context and the discourse as such is not clear to you, then fieldwork should always be the right response. I think it's always necessary to have some sort of multi-method approach, and to have an approach whose methods deal with significantly different

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aspects of the problem, and not only the purely textual aspect. If there is a problem that is, as you say, strongly socially constructed and prone to different negotiations and conflicting practices, then fieldwork and ethnography would probably be a valid response. It very much depends on what you want to do and what sort of aspects of research you want to cover. In any case, I think the socially constructed aspect is very relevant because it allows us to move between the micro and the macro level; it allows us to connect the different levels of discourse through the logic of practices, and ethnography is often the key entry point.

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