

## **Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis: A Communication Approach to Analyzing Talk**

Karen Tracy  
*University of Colorado-Boulder*

*Action-implicative discourse analysis (AIDA) is an approach to discourse that is particularly communicative in thrust. AIDA describes the problems, conversational strategies, and ideals-in-use within existing communicative practices. It melds the analytic moves of discourse analysis—giving attention to the particulars of talk and text—with the goal of constructing an understanding of a communicative practice that is action-implicative. It is a type of discourse analysis that has been influenced by conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and critical discourse approaches; at the same time, it is quite distinct. In this paper I describe how AIDA is similar to and different from these approaches. In addition, drawing on studies of several communicative practices (e.g., school board meetings, citizen-911 telephone exchanges, and academic colloquia), I make visible the kinds of questions AIDA is particularly well suited to address.*

### **1. Overview<sup>1</sup>**

How does a school board deal with dissension as it seeks to craft a policy about a controversial issue?

How do citizens design calls to the police when they are reporting a problem with a close other?

What dilemmas do academics face as they participate in departmental colloquia?

How is an organization's status as an alternative institution (e.g., hospice in the medical system) displayed in its staff meetings?

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from an essay that will be forthcoming as a chapter in the *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, edited by Kristine Fitch and Robert Sanders.

How do the communicative ideals used by negotiators during a crisis situation differ from those that are espoused in its training documents?

The above questions illustrate the kinds of concerns action-implicative discourse analysis has been used to address. As a set, the questions make visible a focus that distinguishes action-implicative discourse analysis (AIDA) from other kinds of discourse analysis: attention to describing the problems, interactional strategies, and ideals-in-use within existing communicative practices. AIDA is an approach that melds the analytic moves of discourse analysis—giving attention to the particulars of talk and text—with the goal of constructing an understanding of a communicative practice that will be action-implicative. It seeks to construct a view of the problems, strategies, and ideals of a practice so that a practice's participants will be able to reflect more thoughtfully about how to act. AIDA is rhetorical in thrust: it presumes that people are choosing how to act in order to achieve or avoid certain outcomes. It is also normative. AIDA takes usefulness (for thinking and acting wisely) as the most important criterion for assessing an analysis, rather than, for instance, its descriptive adequacy or explanatory breadth.

This essay begins by detailing AIDA's parentage. I show how it is a child of two cultures: the family of approaches known as discourse analysis, and practical theory, an approach that has developed in the field of communication. In the paper's next section, AIDA studies of particular practices are introduced. The studies are organized to illustrate several distinctive features of AIDA, including its focal unit and aims, its methodological profile, and its rhetorical and normative stance. The paper concludes with one extended example of an AIDA project.

## 2. AIDA's Parents

### 2.1. *Discourse Analytic Approaches*

As many scholars have noted (e.g., Cameron, 2001; van Dijk, 1997) discourse is a term that gets used in quite different ways. My usage of it is similar to that found in linguistics (e.g., Schiffrin, 1994) where "discourse" is paired with the term "analysis" and treated as an umbrella term that refers to a variety of approaches to the study of talk or text. Whatever the differences among DA approaches, and there are significant ones, discourse analysis always involves study of particular segments of talk or text where excerpts are used to make scholarly arguments.

Besides this first meaning of "discourse," there is another one. The second meaning, informed by the work of Mich  l Foucault (1972)—what Gee (1999)<sup>2</sup> refers to as big-D discourse to be contrasted with little-d discourse—refers to complex constellations of beliefs and actions that comprise social practices, as for example if we referred to the discourse of medicine or education. In some DA research (e.g., critical DA approaches such as Fairclough, 2001; Wodak, 1996), there is a concern to connect the little-d discourse (particulars of talk and text) with the big-D discourse (larger social practices). However, many DA approaches have other foci, and it is important to keep these two meanings of discourse clear.

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<sup>2</sup> A second set of terms that Conely and O'Barr (1998) use in their analysis of language and law is macrodiscourse (ideologies and larger institutional practices) and microdiscourse (talk and text).

To describe AIDA's first parent as the DA community is a bit like characterizing the ethnic-national pedigree of a fourth or fifth generation American—1/4 Irish, 1/4 Italian, 1/2 Mexican. AIDA's first parent is a blend of multiple nationalities, quite difficult to characterize in her own terms without referring to features associated with grandparents or great-grandparents who themselves have intermarried. Over the years I have attempted to describe the intellectual impulses that have shaped the development of AIDA (see Tracy, 1991, 1995, 2001). These descriptions, and to a certain degree the discourse analyses themselves, have changed as AIDA has become a clearer, more distinctive practice. At this point, I would describe AIDA's discourse analytic parent as equal parts conversation analysis, anthropologically-influenced speech act traditions, discursive psychology, and critical discourse analysis. Let me say a bit about the features each ancestor contributes.

From conversation analysis (for overviews see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Have, 1999) AIDA takes the commitment to study everyday interaction and the practice of repeatedly listening to exchanges that researchers have transcribed where they attend to many particulars, including intonation, abrupt word or phrase cut-offs, and repetition and vocalized sounds (uh, um, eh). Moreover, although not accepting the CA principle (Schegloff, 1992, 1998) that the building of an interpretation should only use what is visibly displayed in a next response, AIDA does share the CA view that how an interactional partner responds is an important resource for anchoring proposals about participant meaning. In addition, the conversation analytic ideas of noticeable absence (culturally expected sequences can make visible certain actions as "not there"), conversational preference (preferred kinds of responses such as accepting an offer can be done straightforwardly while non-preferred ones (declining an offer) will be done with pauses, uhs and ums, and accounts) and the membership categorization device (different terms for referring to individuals and sets of people that produce different inferences) are particularly helpful resources in analyzing problematic practices (see Sacks, 1992).

The second ancestor, anthropologically-influenced speech act traditions, involves several strands. A first is Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory in which discourse practices are described in terms of how they function to support positive face (e.g., presume common ground, "we need to ...") or negative face (e.g., indicate reluctance, "I hate to ask this of you but ..."). From politeness theory, AIDA adopts the move of arguing the possible. That is, AIDA studies frequently argue that a specific discourse move is a routine practice for accomplishing a more general interactional goal. Of note is that such a claim does not absolutely hinge on whether in an examined episode the move was functioning in that manner. In addition, AIDA draws upon politeness theory's focal interest in face and extends this concern to identity issues more broadly. Other strands in the anthropologically-focused speech act tradition include cross-cultural analyses of speech acts such as requests and apologies (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), and ethnographies of national or ethnically distinct communities with a focus on ways of speaking (e.g., Hymes, 1974; Philipsen, 1992). From this work AIDA assumes the importance of recognizing that evaluation of conversational action is always a culturally inflected judgment. Finally, in line with interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) AIDA is primarily interested in studying interaction between persons from different communities. But, rather than attending to interactions between different nationalities, AIDA is more interested in interactions between persons of different institutional categories (e.g., citizens and police; parents and school board officials).

The third ancestor is discursive psychology (Billig, 1987; Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton & Radley, 1988; Potter, 1996). Discursive psychology contributes to

AIDA in two important ways. First, the notion of dilemmas as articulated in this tradition (Billig et al., 1988) offers an especially helpful way to conceive of the character of the problems participants face in important social practices. Thinking is fundamentally dilemmatic; so too is much of social life. People invariably are pursuing aims that partially or strongly are in tension with each other. Discursive action is all about navigating these competing commitments and concerns. In addition, discursive psychology offers guidance as to how rhetoric can be adapted to the study of ordinary institutional practices. Edwards and Potter (1992), for instance, illustrate how a rhetorical approach can be taken to spouses' participation in family counseling or reporter-politician encounters in a news interview.

The final contributor to AIDA is the family of critical discourse approaches (for an overview see Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Like critical discourse approaches AIDA has a strong ethnographic component. Instances of transcribed talk are the focus of analysis, but they are interpreted within an institutional frame that is informed by participant observation, interviewing of members, and study of organizationally important documents. Second, as is also true with critical discourse approaches, AIDA is interested in connecting little d-discourse with the shape of big-D discourses. AIDA is committed to developing ideas that have the potential to improve the social practices that are studied.

## 2.2. *Practical Theory*

In a series of articles Robert Craig (1989, 1992, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b; Craig & Tracy, 1995) has argued for the desirability of conceiving of communication as a practical rather than a scientific discipline. A major challenge for the communication field, as Craig sees it, is how to unite the technical and productive (*techne*) side of communication with its moral and political (*praxis*) aspects. Rather than assuming that the goal of inquiry is to produce general explanations of phenomena, as is the case when communication is conceived as a scientific discipline, a practical discipline would take its goal to be the development of normative theories. Normative theory is "centrally concerned with what ought to be; it seeks to articulate normative ideals by which to guide the conduct and criticism of practice" (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 249). Toward this end practical theorizing seeks to reconstruct communicative practices. Construction, or more aptly reconstruction, is a scholarly activity in which a practice is re-described in less context-specific terms. This re-describing has an idealizing component in which principles implicit in a practice are formulated explicitly, and standards are articulated for judging what is reasonable and desirable in a practice.

The art of rhetoric as it has been conceived and practiced historically provides an especially useful analogy for thinking about communication as a practical discipline (Craig, 1989). Similar to rhetoric, a practical discipline of communication would be interested in developing proposals as to what are practically and morally desirable ways for people to conduct themselves when doing certain activities. However, in contrast to rhetoric's focus on significant public events, a practical communication discipline would concern itself with a broad range of practices, including intimate conduct, institutional activities, and actions in public life. In addition, rather than anchoring itself centrally in Greek and Roman conceptions, it would seek to take seriously beliefs about conduct and persons held by members in the variety of speech communities being studied. Out of such study would emerge proposals about reasonable conduct in the practices and "universalized accounts of the rational principles and values that undergird them, as well

as arguments among these accounts revealing their contradictions and penetrating ever more deeply the inevitable problems and ultimate paradoxes of communication” (p. 101).

Grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995) provides methodological guidance for the doing of practical theory.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, researchers would seek to reconstruct communicative practices at three levels. The first and most crucial level would be the problem level. Within any complex practice, participants will experience tensions and face problems about how they ought to act. Reconstructing the problems, or dilemmas, would be the key first step in reconstructing a practice. Following this step, reconstruction would proceed both more concretely and more abstractly. More concretely, reconstruction would seek to describe the specific conversational techniques and strategies that were employed to manage focal problems (the technical level). More abstractly, reconstruction would seek to specify the ideals and principles that shaped rationales of how to address the problem (the philosophical level). In particular, the philosophical level would be grounded in situated ideals, the beliefs about good conduct that could be inferred from patterns of praise and blame about actual situations made by participants in the practice.

Grounded practical theory shares commonalities with other interpretive approaches (Craig, 1989; Craig & Tracy, 1995) and especially other practical theory approaches (e.g. Cronen, 1995, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Penman, 2000; Shotter, 1993). A difference, though, between grounded practical theory and other practical theorizing approaches is the focus on studying actual practices in order to develop ideas to contribute to reflective thought about the practice. This focus on reflection is a contrast to seeing practical theory as the intellectual work of applying a pre-existing theory to a practice, as, for example, Cronen (2001) does with therapy. It also contrasts with the view that regards practical theorizing as a kind of activism, a way for researchers, themselves, to intervene in and transform practices (Barge, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, AIDA is an offspring of its parents, adopting the goals of one, and pursuing them in a methodological style that characterizes the other. It is a discourse analytic approach that is available for anyone who finds it useful. It is also a Tracy-inflected idea, the end product of my own reading, conversations and research in which I have been seeking to turn inchoate intellectual concerns into a namable activity. This personal connection is made visible in citations; the remainder of the paper, however, downplays it to draw attention to AIDA’s public face as a language and social interaction tradition of potential interest to scholars and students from a variety of backgrounds.

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<sup>3</sup> Grounded practical theory has similarities with Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) well-known approach of grounded theory. Both approaches are committed to developing theory through immersion in the field and by working from the ground up. They differ, however, in what each counts as theory. The goal of grounded theory is to develop explanatory theory, similar to what is tested in many behavioral quantitative traditions. In contrast, grounded *practical* theory seeks to develop normative theories.

<sup>4</sup> Grounded practical theory is a metatheoretical stance toward inquiry that is compatible with interpretive methodologies other than discourse analysis. For instance see Ashcraft’s (2001) ethnographic work and Goodwin’s (2002) rhetorical criticism.

### 3. Distinctive Features of AIDA

#### 3.1. *Focal Units and Analytic Aim*

AIDA has a focus on communicative practices in institutional sites with an analytic aim of reconstructing the web of actor problems, conversational moves and strategies, and the situated ideals in that practice. An obvious question becomes, then, what is a communicative practice? Practice, I would suggest, is a usefully elastic term. It can be used to refer to communicative forms that cut across sites as, for instance, is true for “negotiation.” Negotiation is a routine kind of work that attorneys do when they plea bargain, a focal activity in labor-management discussion, or what law enforcement officers do in hostage or other crisis situations. Practice is also a way of referring to activities that occur in an identifiable place among specific kinds of people. That is, practice is another way to refer to a speech event (Hymes, 1974) or what participants take to be a situation’s frame (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993). Ordinary names given to practices often call up a constellation of site-people-purposes connections. “School board meetings,” “departmental colloquia,” and “classroom discussions” are examples of easily recognized practices related to educational settings. Practice, then, is a way of unitizing the social world to enable analysis.

Practices can be named in different ways and the name that is chosen will be consequential. Although there is no single correct way to name, some names will direct observation and reflection into more useful channels. For instance, academic colloquia might be thought of as instances of “science talk,” “professional socialization,” or “intellectual discussion” (Tracy, 1997a); school board meetings could be conceived as the practice of public deliberation or as decision-making among persons who have been elected and others who have been appointed. Labeling a practice and its function one way rather than another will yield different interactional problems, conversational strategies, and situated ideals about conduct. Thus, a first level of reconstruction in AIDA is the unitizing and naming of a practice.

Institutional practices almost always involve multiple kinds of people who are positioned differently within the practice. An upshot of this rather obvious fact is that the problems of a practice will differ with a participant’s positioning in that practice. Getting a handle on the interactional problems from the points of view of the main categories of participants is an aim of AIDA. Often this aim is pursued across multiple studies; on occasion it may be the focus of a single analysis.

Tracy and Agne (2002), for instance, sought to label the problems and identify the conversational practices for both citizen callers and police calltakers in domestic dispute calls (incidents involving verbal disagreements or physical fighting between intimates). The focus was on calls that did not involve serious violence, a type of call quite common in calls to the police.<sup>5</sup> From the police calltaker point of view a problem in this kind of call is how to be helpful to citizens, their institutional mandate, but how to do so quickly and without violating other policies, such as the requirement to avoid giving advice in matters of civil and criminal law. It is also the case that the kind of help that police calltakers can provide for citizens is circumscribed by a complex set of institutional commitments. In

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<sup>5</sup> Our evidence for saying this arises from examining our call base (650 calls) and field notes of other observations (another 350 calls). Serious violence reports occurred less than a handful of times; these hard-to-classify domestic disputes occurred about 3-4 times more often.

these not highly violent domestic dispute calls where intimates are in the midst of a conflict and the help they are seeking is for the police to take their side, being helpful is especially difficult. Police calltakers are neither trained as counselors nor is it desirable for them to talk as if they were. At a more general level the police calltaker dilemma can be reconstructed as how to be helpful to citizens while adhering to the complex institutional commitments.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence that calltakers do experience this dilemma is seen in their responses. Analysis of this type of domestic dispute calls show that police calltakers tend to honor one or the other horn of this dilemma: Either calltakers avoid giving legal advice and do so quickly, but their responses seem unhelpful. Or calltakers display a good amount of interactional concern, but they take a long time and the calls are peppered with moments of discomfort as the conversational help gets close to what might be seen as legal advice or taking one person's side. For instance, in response to a man who had called about his common-law wife returning to their apartment to steal his wallet, checkbook and food stamps, the calltaker said, "what you need to do is cancel those documents if you don't want to use them, get new ones. Call the bank, go to motor vehicle, get some new ID, get some new checks, get a lawyer. You need a property settlement." Telling a person living on the financial edge to get a lawyer and property settlement is unlikely to be helpful but it does address the problem quickly and it does attend to the policy of not giving legal advice.

Contrast the above response to another calltaker's in which a caller was asking for advice about how to deal with her drinking and sometimes physically abusive husband. This call involved multiple indicators of calltaker concern. The calltaker allowed the caller to tell her story in the detail that the caller desired without redirecting her talk. The calltaker also used multiple continuers (13 instances of "mm hmm") and other tokens that marked appreciation of the caller's difficulty (e.g., "wow", "it's a hard one"). On the other hand, the call was long by institutional standards (7 minutes and 10 seconds) and within the calltaker's comments were a large number of restarts, other kinds of repairs and multisecond within-turn pauses, typical markers of discomfort. In addition, in her talk the calltaker repeatedly referenced the other institutional goal of avoiding the giving of inappropriate advice.

- (1) Excerpt 1 (Tape 8, Call 359, 146 lines)<sup>7</sup>  
 Line 33 "the only thing I can say is the police...."  
 Line 37 "but as far as, I mean I can't really give you advice on (.) going home"  
 Line 60 "cause we can't give any advice out like that um"  
 Line 62 "I mean you are putting yourself into a danger and if you go back and he's drunk, I can say that"

<sup>6</sup> This dilemma has a family resemblance to one Erickson and Shultz (1982) describe for academic advisors in community colleges. Being fair gatekeepers and being helpful and friendly pull communicative action in different directions.

<sup>7</sup> Transcript notation is a simplified version of the Jeffersonian system used in conversation analysis (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Punctuation reflects intonation; colons = extension of a sound; hyphen = an abrupt cut-off; underlining = stress; caps = loud speech; greater than and less than symbols enclose stretches of fast speech; brackets mark overlapping talk; and parentheses with numbers (2.4) = the length of a pause and those with a period (.) indicate a short pause of about .2 seconds. Italics are used to draw attention to a segment that is the focus of commentary.

Many domestic disputes do not readily fit the police intervention script. The categories of “victim,” “wrongdoer,” and “crime” are difficult to apply and this makes police calltakers’ managing of these calls challenging.

At the same time, although for different reasons, domestic dispute calls of this type are problematic for the citizens who place them. Describing police-relevant trouble in one’s own close relationship, whether the speaker is the “victim” or the “instigator,” makes inferable an array of identity-negative implications about the kind of person that a speaker may be (Bergmann, 1998). Additionally, citizens themselves often recognize that the help they are requesting from the police may not be help that can be provided. Consider how the woman in the above call began.

- (2) Excerpt 2 (Tape 8, Call 359, female C, female CT)
- CT: Citywest police Agent Phillips
- C: uh yes I just need to ask somebody some questions
- CT: uh huh
- C: u::m I’m like in, like a domestic thing here?

Of note in this opening is how it differs from most calls to the police (Zimmerman, 1984, 1992). Rather than straightforwardly labeling the problem that motivated the call, the caller refers to the problem as a “domestic thing.” In formulating her trouble as, “I’m like in a domestic thing here” the caller’s vague label (“thing”) where a more explicit one would be expected, cue that the situation she is calling about is too complicated to name straightforwardly. Her emphasis on “thing” further highlights this. As the call unfolds it becomes apparent that the domestic thing is a dilemma the caller is facing about the best way to deal with her drinking husband who is presently in a different location from her own. Furthermore, her initial comment (“I just need to ask somebody some questions”) previews that a complicated situation needs to be described. From the opening moment, then, using a variety of strategies, citizens (see Tracy & Agne, 2002) calling about domestic disputes make visible that their call will not be business as usual. In their call opening citizens display that they need to tell a complicated, not-straightforward narrative before they can make their request for help.

In addition to the problem of setting up a not-typical problem, callers also are concerned to manage the moral and self-presentational implications of what they are saying. They do this through the descriptive details that are provided or omitted. At one point in the above call, for instance, the woman says of her husband, “I mean he he slapped me or hit me whatever the hell you wanna call it.” In problematizing what the husband’s acts should be labeled, the caller makes visible the non-transparent nature of any description. Her difficulty in selecting a label is understandable when we consider the potentially negative implications of each description. Putting up with “hitting” frames a speaker as a victim, not a desirable identity; on the other hand, calling the police for a “slap” may implicate a person as vindictive and seeking police intervention when it is unwarranted.

To summarize, one distinctive feature of AIDA is the attention it gives to identifying the problems of a practice and the conversational moves that reveal or manage the problem for key categories of participants. Other AIDA studies have investigated the dilemmas of and conversational practices used by (1) staff in hospice team meetings as they work to live up to an alternative holistic philosophy, while also being competent health care professionals (Naughton, 1996; Tracy & Naughton, 2000), (2) College teachers

committed to student discussion and student learning (Muller, 2002), and (3) academic colloquia (Tracy, 1997a).<sup>8</sup> In the study of academic colloquia, interactional problems were reconstructed from the point of view of presenters versus persons doing the questioning, graduate students versus faculty members, and individual participants versus the group as a whole.

Consider now how AIDA research proceeds methodologically. Exactly how does AIDA go about the process of reconstructing a practice's problems, conversational strategies, and situated ideals?

### 3.2. *AIDA's Methodical Profile*

Having identified an interesting, important practice a next question becomes how to study it. AIDA is a type of discourse analysis that is also ethnographic. To reconstruct a communicative practice well demands that a researcher have an extensive knowledge about the routine actions and variation in it. This requires the analyst to do sustained observation of the practice. It also requires analysts to develop an understanding of both how participants talk with each other in the practice (the focal discourse) and how they talk (or write) about each other and themselves as a group (meta-discourses). What exactly will be the necessary ethnographic components will depend on the practice being studied. Consider three examples.

In the study of domestic dispute calls reported above, and the other analyses that have been done on these citizen-police exchanges (Tracy, 1997b; Tracy & Anderson, 1999; Tracy & Tracy, 1998) the focal discourse data were 650 telephone calls made to the police and 911. These calls were selected from a several-month time period and were downloaded from police call archives. Analysis of these calls was informed by approximately 100 hours of field observation carried out by a two-person team over a 10-month time period.<sup>9</sup> Field observations were primarily focused on police calltakers at one emergency center while they worked on the telephone and with their computers. Also included, however, were observations of police dispatchers and other emergency personnel working in the center (firefighters and paramedic dispatchers), informal outside-of-work socialization, a stress management workshop for staff, a ride-along with a police officer, and observations at other emergency centers. Field observations included the kinds of note taking that are standard part of ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Spradley, 1980). In addition to observations, a small set of interviews was done with call-takers, and institutional documents (training, and policy and procedure manuals) were collected and studied. Much of this background information remained purely that—background—but some particulars became important pieces of evidence for anchoring proposals about the practice's problems or recurring conversational strategies (see particularly Tracy, 1997b).

A second quite different combination of materials is seen in Driscoll's (2002) study of three 30-minute cockpit conversations recorded during aviation accidents. Besides the

<sup>8</sup> Reports on the colloquium research may be found in journal articles (Tracy & Baratz, 1993; Tracy & Carjuzaa, 1993; Tracy & Naughton, 1994; Tracy & Muller, 1994) or in an expanded form in a book (Tracy, 1997a).

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Tracy, at the time a graduate student, was the other person of the team beside myself. She is an organizational communication ethnographer. Elsewhere (see Tracy & Tracy, 1998) the fieldwork part of the project became the central data to examine issues of emotion labor.

focal exchanges (transcripts from the voice recorders), Driscoll's analysis was informed by knowledge about standard cockpit practices that she developed through involvement as a communication trainer at a major airline, through ongoing conversations with a pilot informant, and by studying the aviation reports released by the federal aviation agency.

The third example, a project on which I am currently working, is a study of the practice of school board meetings. For this project the focal discourse data are 250 hours of one community's school board meetings downloaded from a local cable broadcast and collected over a several-year time span. In addition to the focal discourse, only a small proportion of which will be transcribed, are the following kinds of data: notes taken from viewing the televised meetings, several observations of the meetings on site, agenda, minutes and other documents related to particular policy discussions, local newspapers articles and editorials about Board activities, and interviews with a variety of participants. Moreover, since all of these materials come from one community, and the interest is in school board meetings in general, a final activity will be to observe meetings in other communities.

Thus, a first step in action-implicative discourse analysis is to develop extended knowledge of a focal practice. This is accomplished by taping (or getting access to tapes of) a goodly number of hours of the central discourse activity, and by building up a portrait of the scene, the people and the practice drawing on whatever additional materials are relevant and accessible. A next step for AIDA is to identify the segments of a focal practice for transcription and analysis.

At the selection and transcription stage AIDA differs from conversation analysis, the language and social interaction approach that has been most thoroughly described, in two ways. First, AIDA would never begin with discourse moments that before analysis, as Harvey Sacks would advocate, seem to be "utterly uninteresting data" (1992, p. 293). While there is no dispute that such analyses can be valuable, for AIDA not all moments of interaction are equally promising places to start. In AIDA, selecting stretches of discourse to be transcribed is a theoretically shaped activity. Since one goal is to understand the problems of a practice, moments in which participants seem to be experiencing discomfort, tension, or conflict are especially likely for focus. In other words, AIDA begins with materials that do seem interesting: moments in which participants' emotions are being displayed. Since another goal is to understand the situated ideals of a practice, instances where participants express evaluation of other people's actions is a second type of talk likely to be selected. Finally, segments of interaction that seem at odds with how an institution describes its aims and practices, or how different categories of participants characterize their intents or actions, is yet another criterion that guides selection.

Second, AIDA studies typically work with relatively long segments of interaction and gives limited attention to timing and prosody. The reason for this choice flows from the AIDA commitment to develop ideas that contribute to participants' reflection about a practice. It is certainly the case that small changes in prosody, the length of a pause and the exact point at which overlapping speech occurs shape interactional meanings. At the same time, these kinds of action are not easily controlled or strategically employed; these kinds of actions are difficult to reflect about and change. For this reason action-implicative discourse analysis gives primary attention to the aspects of communication about which people are most able to reflect: choices about wording, speech acts, arguments, and speech or story organizations. Positively stated, in transcribing AIDA seeks to capture full words and those that are cut off, repetitions and restarts, and ums, uh huhs, and other vocal

sounds. These talk particles are treated as important resources for building interpretations of a practice's problems.

One example of this is seen in an analysis of a faculty member's (FM) question to a graduate student (GS) presenter in the study of departmental colloquia (Tracy, 1997a, pp. 52-53).

(3) Excerpt 3

- FM: Uhm, this is a kinda follow up, I guess on the perceptions thing. *Did you, are you aware, I would assume that*, that studies looking at self attributions and other attributions of competence generally show a pretty high correlation?
- GS: hmm mm
- FM: That, that is generally true? That the person's own self rating of competence correlates pretty highly with ratings of those surrounding?

In analyzing this excerpt, attention was drawn to the fact that the faculty questioner begins the question in two different ways before settling on a third and final version (see italics). Each formulation of the question projects different assessments of what the graduate student presenter should reasonably be expected to know. The strongest expectation is projected by the first formulation ("Did you") If FM had continued with this initial formulation, he is likely to have asked something like "Did you look at the relationship?" To ask a speaker if she did something, with no mitigating details such as "By any chance did you" or "I was wondering if you" carries a strong implication that it is an activity she should have done. FM's second formulation suggests that he wants to avoid this implication. In saying, "are you aware" FM makes more reasonable a response in which GS has not done this additional statistical analysis. Nonetheless, his second formulation still projects that the information he is after is a kind of information that well-informed others should possess. FM's last formulation ("I would assume that") conveys the weakest implication that GS will have done or knows about a particular finding. Rather than asking her for a particular piece of information, FM's "question" became a comment to which the presenter could offer a wide variety of appropriate responses.

Analysis of this excerpt was used to help build a picture of the identity sensitivities that are routinely present in the questioning period of academic colloquia. Questions make visible an asker's expectation of whether a presenter should know, may know, or reasonably will not know a particular piece of information (see also Pomerantz, 1988). In the academic setting where being smart, knowledgeable, and "good with questions" is valued, the difficulties that questioners face in selecting the right implication becomes apparent when we look at their on-line editing of questions.

A final methodological point about AIDA. Communicative practices vary in the degree to which they are interactive or monologic, and AIDA is equally useful for analyzing either kind. Events that include a fair frequency of mini-speeches (academic colloquia, school board meetings) are as suitable practices for AIDA as those that are more interactive such as divorce mediation (Tracy & Spradlin, 1994) or interviews (Agne & Tracy, 1998).

### 3.3. *AIDA's Rhetorical-Normative Stance*

AIDA is one among several discourse analytic approaches that takes a normative stance. Studies of argument discourse in the normative pragmatics tradition (for a review see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002) and critical discourse analyses (see Fairclough & Wodak, 1997 for a review) are also normative. Similar to normative pragmatics, AIDA has frequently selected communicative sites for analysis (e.g., community meetings and academic colloquia) in which the activity of arguing is and should be central. In addition, both approaches seek to develop rational-moral principles for the critique of interaction. But, instead of beginning with a priori, philosophically derived principles about rational action, as normative pragmatics does, AIDA begins by examining actual exchanges in focal sites, seeking to take the legitimate, often contradictory, aims of the practice seriously. AIDA does not presume that there are known principles of good conduct that are universally applicable.

Similar to critical discourse analyses, AIDA works to make visible unfairness and problems in existing communicative practices. AIDA differs, however, from critical discourse approaches in the normative principle that guides its critique. Critical discourse analyses are centrally committed to exposing social inequality and the invisible practices of power. Although recognizing that power inequities are frequently problems in situations, AIDA does not regard power differences and lack of equality, in and of themselves, as problematic. Power and status differences are a reasonable, often desirable, part of institutional life. It is only when these differences are used to support morally or practically unreasonable processes and outcomes, that they are wrong. AIDA's normative stance, therefore, is more complicated or, one could say, messier than either critical discourse analysis or normative pragmatics. What, then, does AIDA use to judge?

AIDA draws upon the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis*—good judgment, prudence, practical wisdom, sound and thoughtful deliberation, reasonableness—as its key concept. Admittedly, *phronesis* is not an abstractly definable, self-contained judgment principle. As Jasinski (2001) notes, *phronesis* is “not a simple process of applying principles or rules to cases that leaves the principles or rules unchanged; in prudential practice, there is a negotiation between the case and the principle that allows both to gain in clarity” (p. 463). Within AIDA the central starting point for development of normative proposals is to identify the practice's situated ideal(s).

Situated ideals are participants' beliefs about good conduct that can be reconstructed from discursive moments in which they praise and criticize. Situated ideals capture the complex prioritizing of competing concerns and values that not only will but should be part of actual practices. A practice's situated ideals may be reconstructed in several ways. One way is to interview participants and ask them explicitly to describe their notion of appropriate conduct (their espoused ideals) as well as to reflect about good and bad things that happen in ordinary parts of the practice. Although participants' espoused ideals are rarely the same as their situated ones, having a sense of what they espouse can aid an analyst in focusing attention on stretches of talk that capture the more complex weighing of multiple principles that is the hallmark of situated ideals.

An example of this is seen in one interview (see Tracy, 1997a) with a faculty member about academic colloquia. When asked what role she saw for praise in intellectual discussion, she responded, “If you define praise as reinforcing people for ideas, uh, then I would say none.” About 30 minutes later in the interview she was asked to describe the

differences she saw in colloquia where the focus was discussing a common reading versus discussing the research of a member of the group. To this other question she responded,

- (4) Excerpt 4 (Excerpt 138, Tracy 1997a, p. 143)  
 You discuss the idea in a way that allows the person to save face . . . it's also important to do praising at some point. It was a good paper and an interesting argument. Or what a well par- well-crafted paragraph. Because there is so much at stake in presenting your own work that the absence of praise would be noticed even if it's perfunctory.

These two excerpts, then, along with others become the grounds on which a situated ideal for academic colloquium was constructed. Participants' situated ideals, as these two examples begin to show, reflected that colloquium participants should take ideas seriously, separating them from their speakers and examining them on their merit. At the same time, participants recognized that intellectual discussion was talk among people, an activity in which it was reasonable and right that discussion gives attention to participants' desires to be appreciated and approved of (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Participants' situated ideal for intellectual discussion involved navigating a dilemma—ideas matter and people count. This situated ideal for colloquium, I would argue, requires phronesis and is a good normative principle to guide conduct. Faculty and graduate students should use this dilemmatic ideal to reflect about future participation, and to critique past interactive moments.

Situated ideals may be reconstructed from analysis of participant interviews, as was seen in the analysis of academic colloquia, or they may be developed from study of interactive moments in conjunction with institutional documents or other segments of interaction. In studying negotiations at Waco, Agne (2003), for instance, examined negotiation texts used in law enforcement crisis training, the after-the-fact documents reporting FBI next day strategies, and actual negotiation episodes to identify differences between the participants' situated and espoused ideals.

### 3.4. *An Extended Example: School Board Meetings and Barbiegate*

In the United States policies about education—the label we give to the messy tangle of issues about children, schools, and learning, with their accompanying and usually implicit civic, moral, and economic values—are decided by multiple groups. Particularly important is the local school district, an institution overseen by a small group of elected officials. School boards are responsible for democratically making a myriad of decisions that involve allocation of limited resources and taking stands on volatile symbolic issues (Taylor, 1992). At the broadest level, then, the goal in this AIDA project, one in which I am currently immersed, is to connect the big-D discourse of democracy to the little-d discourse of meetings.

As described previously, the school board project is ethnographically informed, drawing on extensive observation of the institution, its participants, and documents. In studying this practice, named and framed most often as school board meetings, civic group deliberation, or ordinary democracy,<sup>10</sup> a first goal has been to understand the communicative problems and the conversational strategies. What are the problems that

<sup>10</sup> Ordinary democracy is the label I have given to the working of groups shaped by the ideal of democracy. In ordinary democracy groups enact, espouse, and subvert the ideal of democracy.

key categories of participants—the elected officials, the professional educational staff, and the citizens speaking out at meetings—face and how are these problems manifested discursively? Consider one answer to these two questions, addressed especially from the point of view of citizen participants.

One type of problem that citizens encounter in participating in public meetings is how to express their opinion on socially controversial issues. The challenge that citizens face is complicated. Not only will they be seeking to present themselves as persons who are morally reasonable, holding defensible positions (Bergmann, 1998), but they will also be seeking to enlist the sympathies of the board and the listening public to persuade them to think favorably about the actions advocated or implicated by their position. In general, to enlist others to support a preferred course of action, it is wise to avoid attacking them. When an issue is controversial this is difficult; when the “them” to whom one is speaking are multiple parties, this is doubly difficult. Consider a strategy that one citizen used to present his opinions on an event, dubbed *Barbiegate*, that touched on the appropriate treatment of children in elementary school science, race and fairness, and freedom of speech. The precipitating event involved an elementary school pulling a white third grade girls’ science project from the school fair. The school refused to include the girl’s poster in the fair because school officials judged the project to be racially discriminatory. The project had asked adults and children in the girl’s predominately white community whether a Black or White Barbie doll in dresses of two colors was prettier. Most of the children identified the white Barbie as the prettier one.

Following the school decision to remove the project, the girl’s father came to the next board meeting and spoke out angrily about the decision. The event was picked up by local and national media. At the next board meeting two weeks later, a range of individuals and representatives of different groups came to present their views on “the issue.” Of interest, although the word “issue” was used frequently (42 times) in the hour-long meeting, what its actual referent was varied enormously (Craig & Tracy, in press). One of the presenters was an African American representative of the Million Man March. Consider how he opened his remarks to this almost entirely white audience.

(5) Excerpt 5 (BVSD Million Man March Representative)

Good afternoon, good evenin (1.8) u:m (1.0) hh it’s a long drive up to Boulder, almost dinn’t get here, couldn’t find my way, y’all had no si:gns to tell us where we’re to go: what’s up with that? ((audience laughter)) Lemme u:h uh begin by saying uh >my name is Alvertis Simmons< (.) >I’m the executive director of the local organizing committee of the Million Man Ma:rch< in Denver. U:h many of y’all have heard of us and those who haven’t (.8) .hh will be hearin of us (.) because we are u:m takin this issue very serious .hh I’ve got several phone calls from (.4) African American parents in the Denver community and uh (.) I don’t know if Boulder knows (.) about us but uh (.8) we are very (.) hurt by what has happene’ (.) here in Boulder. U:m (.6) the question beco:mes (.8) how can a um and we not angry with dat y- little girl, with dat young lady, we’re not angry with her at all (.6) because (.) som- she had to learn that from somebody (.) or from somewhere. We:: want t’ say to the school board we stand behind you (.) our African American community stands behind you, do not shuffle. Do not go backwards. Keep (.) your faith. We believe (.4) you are right on this issue.

Let me begin by asserting a commonplace: In American society, publicly expressing opinions on issues that link to race is conversationally sensitive, with the particular sensitivities shaped by a speaker's race, the race of the audience, and the position a speaker is expressing. How do speakers manage this interactional sensitivity? One conversational device visible in Simmons' comment is his repeated use of the place terms, Boulder and Denver, a conversational move I would describe as his use of a SSTIR (Social Scene Terms that are Inference Rich). But what exactly are these terms doing? In social life, both in people's actual experiences and their cognitive maps of it, places-persons-acts-assessments exist as bundles where one category goes with particular others. To use a place term, then, much as Sacks (1992) showed for membership terms, is an indirect way to set in motion inferences about who, what, and why. In other words, a speaker can invoke an entire social scene with just one or two terms. Admittedly, these inferences will not be set in motion for all; they require in this case, for instance, knowing the racial make-up of Boulder and Denver. If listeners have that knowledge, something reasonable to expect for this audience, then the place terms will call up an affluent white community (Boulder) with few Blacks that is also marked as inhospitable to a Black man (a racist community, perhaps?). Using a SSTIR, then, in conjunction with some humor, enabled this African American speaker to express something more critical and negative toward his audience than he was explicitly saying. Put another way, the use of place terms may allow a speaker to be highly critical and, at the same time, avoid directly attacking his audience.

#### 4. Conclusions

With an understanding of the problems of a practice, the conversational moves that reveal them and the strategies that manage them, and the practice's situated ideals, an AIDA scholar is ready to tackle the final step—developing implications for action. The final step, not necessarily present in any individual study, is to propose ideas about how participants might better reflect about a focal practice so that they act in a more effective and morally reasonable manner. This final normative step, requiring *phronesis*, takes account of and prioritizes among the multiple aims of the focal institutional practice. Without a doubt this judgment process is difficult; at the same time, making this kind of judgment is just what participants do all the time. Developing ideas to aid participants' judgment making, then, is the action part of AIDA.

Implications for action tend to be practice specific; nonetheless two conclusions can be gleaned from AIDA studies of different practices. First, one important implication observed across several practices is that naming of problems is especially consequential. Problems are often treated as obvious and self-evident, not requiring reflection about how they ought to be named. Yet as John Dewey (1989, p. 123) noted, "the nature of the problem fixes the end of thought." Problem formulations carry blame pointers, directing attention toward certain things and away from others. In the school board project (Tracy & Muller, 2001) the community's naming of the problem that was occurring in its school board meetings—"poor communication"—led to a focus on the-then Board president's actions. At the same time it led to ignoring how meeting structures and routine expressive patterns during public participation and Board discussion also contributed to the group's difficulties. Similarly, in the FBI negotiations at Waco (Agne & Tracy, 2001) it was shown how the FBI's labeling of the trouble they were experiencing—dealing with Koresh's "bible babble"—made invisible the FBI's own conversational practices that were contributing to problematic exchanges.

A second implication is to be cautious about dismissing recurring communicative actions as bad and dysfunctional. Common conversational practices may serve valuable and hard-to-name functions. Folk theories about what is bad communication, such as arguing about words, are often at odds with what folks actually do. It may be that people are failing to do what is best and need to try harder. However, it may also be that people's choices are wiser than they have explicitly realized. People keep doing things, such as arguing about words, because it is the only way to manage a difficult dilemma. Speaking in platitudes during public debate, another conversational practice that is routinely derogated, is an activity that under some circumstances is not only an effective move but is a morally reasonable one. As argued elsewhere (Tracy, 1999), when a deliberative group's issue is some particular member's conduct, the speaker's own conduct in expressing that concern can become an issue. In delicate situations platitudes are useful. In public argument contexts, proposals such as "it's important to listen" and "we need to respect each other" enable participants to render evaluation of their fellow members' conduct, to mean considerably more than they explicitly say, and to do so without being nasty and attacking. In sum, reconstructing communicative practices using AIDA is a way to develop useful ideas that can aid communicators as they reflect about how to conduct themselves more wisely in the practices about which they care.

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Department of Communication  
 University of Colorado-Boulder  
 UCB 270  
 Boulder, CO 80309  
 Karen.Tracy@colorado.edu