

Discourse, Identity and Christian Formation

Tamara Warhol
Graduate School of Education
Educational Linguistics

<warholt@dolphin.upenn.edu>

This pilot study uses ethnographic methods and discourse analysis to illuminate how divinity students use language to represent their own identity and to participate in biblical exegesis, an important skill of their future profession as theologians and/or ministers. Scholars have suggested that language is a tool for the social construction of identity and the conscious choice of a particular discourse may indicate different presentations of self. Early Christians struggled continually to craft distinctive identities. The basic questions they faced were not difficult. Who am I in relation to others? Who are we in relation to other groups of people? Early Christians' resocialization was complicated as believers abandoned accepted Greco-Roman and/or Jewish practices and invented new ones. Similarly, students at professional schools, like seminaries, are faced with acquiring the discourse of their profession (their new group) while constructing their own identity. At seminary, students must negotiate between becoming part of a wider Christian community that spans over 2000 years and preserving their individuality. This study examines a spring 2004 seminar in which the students are studying when and how early Christians crafted their distinctive identities. Specifically, the study explores how the divinity students position themselves linguistically vis-à-vis biblical texts as well as one another. When do individuals adopt a group identity and through what language? When and how does each student socially construct him/herself as an individual? Discourse analysis reveals that students use different language to identify as an individual, a class member or part of the wider Christian community.

Key terms: ethnographic methods, discourse analysis, social constructionism, identity construction, language and the professions