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Reproducing Gender Inequality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Turkish Adult Literacy Textbook

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Abstract: *Based on Critical Discourse Analysis of a prominent adult literacy textbook in Turkey, this paper discusses the text's two main Discourses: (a) a normative parenting Discourse that assigns mothers responsibility for childrearing and caretaking, and fathers responsibility for discipline; and (b) a Discourse of the sexual division of labor that associates the outside, public world with men, and the private, domestic world with women.*

Adult education curricula such as literacy textbooks present blueprints for living, including ideals concerning gender identities and roles, thereby reinforcing or undermining dominant ideologies. In this way, power inequalities between men and women are ideologically sustained and reproduced by textbooks (van Dijk, 1993). However, the underlying assumptions about gender in such texts have rarely been examined, especially in international adult literacy programs (an exception is Ahearn, 2001). The persistence of gender inequity in Turkey and around the globe warrants closer scrutiny of gender ideologies in literacy texts. The purpose of this study was to examine how a new adult literacy textbook in Turkey depicts the identities of men and women. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyze how gender roles and identities were portrayed in visual images and reading passages. Since People's Education Centers (PECs), the state-funded adult education provider in Turkey, adopted this textbook as the primary curriculum in 2008, it will profoundly shape the gender identities that thousands of adult learners envision for themselves and for others.

Theoretical Framework

This study frames textbooks as sites of power and struggle. The study's theoretical framework is rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA (Gee, 2005; Meyer, 2001; Rogers, et al., 2005). What makes discourse analysis *critical* is the focus on how language produces and reproduces domination and abuse of power, engendering injustice and inequality (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). In the same spirit, this study focuses on the ideological effects of the textbook's portrayal of gender. Specifically, we draw upon Gee's (2005) conceptualization of discourse/Discourse, literacy, and identity. *Discourse* refers both to language and cultural models, that is, "ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular socially recognizable identity" (p. 21), such as "woman" or "father." The linguistic elements (e.g., reading passages) associated with such Discourses are known as *discourse*. Following Gee (2002) and New Literacy Studies scholars such as Street (2003), we view literacy as a social practice that mediates different socially and historically situated identities. Finally, identity refers to different ways of participating in social groups, cultures, and institutions (Gee, 2005), for example, ways of being a "good wife" or "caring mother." Accordingly, identity—including gender—is constructed and continuously renegotiated through interaction with people and texts such as those examined in this study.

Background and Methods

Few adult literacy textbooks have been published since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Gümüőğlu, 2007). Historically, these textbooks have been prepared by volunteer academics and authors (Noahl & Saylan, 2004). In 2008, however, the Ministry of Education published a new textbook and student activity book, *Yetiőkinler Okuma Yazma Öğretimi ve Temel Eğitimi Kitabı* (Textbook for Teaching Literacy and Basic Education) (Keskin et al., 2008). Sponsored by the Support to Basic Education Program, a cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the Turkish Ministry of National Education, the curriculum aimed to improve access to education, especially for women, and to increase the quality of formal and non-formal education (EU Support to Basic Education in Turkey, 2007). We selected this textbook because of its stated purposes, its widespread use, and its EU and Turkish government sponsorship. With its emphasis on phonemic awareness (sound-symbol correspondence), the textbook illustrates the view that literacy is a set of cognitive skills to be mastered. We focus here, however, on the textbook's transmission of gender ideologies.

The following research questions guided the study: How does the text construct ideal male and female identities? How does the text reinforce or challenge prevailing conceptions of gender in Turkey? Analysis began with a thematic inventory of the text's 54 reading passages and poems; each passage was assigned to one or more thematic groups, such as family, workplace, and health, and the themes were continuously revised. We selected for further analysis segments of text that (a) included more than one sentence and (b) were organized around the same theme(s). Gee's (2005, p. 15) analytical strategy of listing other ways a sentence could have been written was a useful way to envision alternatives and ask why a passage was written in a particular way. The visual images included 339 photographs and popular education-style drawings. They were first categorized into two groups: (a) those depicting an interaction between two or more people; and (b) those that only showed only one person or only artifacts. The focus was to observe how gender roles were negotiated through interaction. We kept asking the CDA questions proposed by Gee (2005), comparing the way women and men were depicted in the text to traditional conceptions associating men with paid work and the public sphere and women with caretaking work and the private sphere (O'Neill & Guler, 2009).

Findings

The study shows that there were two main gender Discourses in the textbook: (a) a normative parenting Discourse that assigns mothers responsibility for childrearing and caretaking, and fathers responsibility for discipline; and (b) a Discourse of the sexual division of labor in which the outside, public world is associated with men and the private, domestic world with women (Moser, 1993). Both Discourses were evident in the text and accompanying images. As in virtually in all Ministry of Education prepared or approved textbooks, the Discourse of Kemalist ideology—veneration of the founder of the Turkish Republic—was also apparent. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

Of the 339 visual images in the text, 70 depicted interactions among people. In every instance where a child, toddler, or baby appears, s/he is portrayed next to a woman, possibly a mother, older sister, or other relative or caretaker. Of the 16 images where children are depicted interacting with others, all but two include an adult female. When a family is pictured, both a

man and woman (presumably the father and mother) appear with the children. Not one image, however, depicts a father spending time with a child or attending to his or her needs. These results suggest that embedded in the images is a parenting and gender Discourse that assumes mothers are mainly responsible for raising children, a view that reinforces contemporary gender ideologies in Turkey (O'Neill & Guler, 2009).

This normative Discourse is closely related to the second, in which men are the breadwinners in the household. Men are depicted outside, while women are mainly portrayed in closed spaces. For example, the text shows men outside performing a variety of activities such as working at a construction site, selling merchandise in the market place, working in a factory, or picking trash in a forest. On the other hand, women are portrayed in the kitchen, sitting around a table and eating, watching TV, attending the needs of a baby, shopping in the market place, walking on the street, and kissing an elder's hand (a sign of respect in Turkish culture) at a family gathering. Such depictions are congruent with traditional Turkish conceptions of men devoted to work in the public sphere and women to caretaking in the private sphere.

The depiction of women as housewives and caretakers is reinforced not only by the images, but also by the reading passages, several of which portray cooking and cleaning as feminine activities. Three passages describe women as cooking for their "mates." In one passage, Çiçek makes strawberry marmalade (reçel) to surprise her husband, who during breakfast the day before murmured, "I wish there was reçel." In the passage about Pınar, who cooks leek for her "mate," the husband's contribution to dinner is limited to setting the table with his wife. Men's limited role in cooking is exemplified well in a third reading passage in which Abdi (the man) asks Birsen (the woman) to make a salad to have with their green beans. Birsen responds, "Wash the tomatoes. You should make the salad." In these passages, Turkish men expect their spouses to cook for them. However, they have changed slightly as they now help their wives set the table and occasionally make the salad. With their detailed descriptions of cooking, the texts on leek and strawberry marmalade read more like recipes, suggesting that an underlying purpose may be to provide recipes to participants. This is significant considering that most of literacy participants are women, and it is women who are doing the cooking in the texts. Thus, the assumption may be that the participants will use these recipes at home. In another paragraph-long passage, readers are introduced to Ülker, a woman who washes the dirty tulle curtains in a washing machine, dries them on a clothesline, and then irons them. Doing laundry is a quintessentially female household task, which is a labor intensive chore in a country where driers are scarce and washing machines have been widely available for only two decades.

Four reading passages depict men as the financial provider in the relationship. In two passages, the men buy jewelry for the women; in the third the man is the newlywed husband, and the last indicates nothing about the nature of the relationship. Although buying jewelry does not necessarily correspond to providing for the family, this activity is significant because none of the reading passages describe women giving objects of material value to men. In the third story, Hayriye convinces her husband to buy a new carpet, stating that it would be embarrassing for guests to see the old one. At first, the husband replies, "We do not need a carpet," but then is convinced because of Hayriye's "explanations." That the husband needed to be persuaded suggests that he exercised more authority over household spending.

Even when the women in these passages do provide for themselves financially, they are still expected to continue performing unpaid housework. Thus, the text both reflects and reinforces the second shift (Hochschild, 2003), an inequitable division of labor that remains "deeply entrenched" in Turkey (O'Neill & Guler, 2009, p. 171). In a passage about Ferhat, a

young woman who works in a textile shop, we learn that when women have a job and contribute economically to the household, they also do the housework. Because the text describes this situation in a matter-of-fact manner, it does not appear to be making a value statement. However, the failure to mention the unequal sexual division of labor—we have no idea what men do once they are home, for instance—implicitly validates this as a natural, fair arrangement.

Similarly, the textbook transmits conventional ideas about what kind of paid work is appropriate for men and women. In “Phone Call,” two women talk about a handmade tablecloth. One of the women, an artisan who creates home decorations, writes down the size of the tablecloth being ordered. The association of crafts with women is also evident in a five-sentence passage about Eda and her grandmother who weave a kilim (a rug traditionally hand-woven by women). Note that Eda was not described as, say, a shop owner who sells kilims to tourists in Istanbul, in which case she would enjoy significantly higher earnings. The women’s informal economic activities contrast sharply with the story of Zeki, a man who, upon completing a literacy course, enrolls in a computer course and, to the surprise of his friends, goes on to “work on computers.” We learn at the end of the story that “Zeki now wants to work in a private company.” By choosing to portray women as craftspeople, a poorly paid informal economic activity, and men as professionals working in relatively well-paid fields such as technology, these passages tacitly condone gender stratification in economic activity.

In addition to providing financial stability and pursuing professional careers, men are portrayed in the textbook as authority figures, both in and outside of the family. For instance, in a short reading passage about two friends who share their troubles, the female character only listens when the man is talking. After sharing her worries, the female character receives “wisdom” (*ondan akıl aldı*) from him. Although there are passages in which men and women interact, none depicts a female character providing advice to a man. In “Rights and Responsibilities,” a passage about a family that is relocating due to the husband’s job, the father is described as the disciplinarian. The children do not listen to their mother and assist with packing. Instead, they ignore and talk back to her, saying, “What’s your problem this early in the morning?” Only when the father threatens to cut their allowance and “playing privileges,” do they start packing for the move. The text states that the children “did not have the courage to ask [their father] the reason”; they simply obeyed. Here, the father is depicted as the authority figure in the family, paralleling traditional Turkish notions of masculinity.

Finally, by presenting communication as the solution to overcoming troubles in romantic relationships, the literacy primer ignores the systemic gender inequities that contribute to such problems. For instance, the last sentence of the passage in which the woman convinces the man to buy a carpet states, “They were both content as they could solve this problem through talking.” The emphasis on communication is more significant in the passage, “Communication in the family.” After establishing that “the most important communication in the family is between spouses,” the text advises readers to be honest in expressing their feelings; to make use of tactile communication; to refrain from making generalizations, lecturing their spouse, and blaming them in expressing frustrations; to maintain eye contact; and to try to understand each other’s viewpoints. Both of these passages imply that communication skills are the underlying cause of, and solution to, relational problems. Although communication is vital to healthy relationships, this focus obscures the structural causes of relational strife. In a country where physical violence against women is common, where women have less decision-making power in the household, where women have primary responsibility for childrearing and domestic work, and where

women's sexuality and physical mobility are controlled by men, it is unrealistic and misleading to claim that adopting a particular style of communication would resolve such problems.

Discussion and Conclusion

In a textbook with chapters by different authors, a variety of discourses may coexist or clash with each other. Despite the text's diffuse authorship, we found two primary Discourses that reinforce predominant conceptions of gender in Turkey (O'Neill & Guler, 2009; Parla, 2001; Sahinoglu Pelin, 1999). The normative parenting Discourse designates mothers as caretakers of the children, and fathers as discipliners, whereas the Discourse of the sexual division of labor connects the men to the outside, public world, and women to the private, domestic world. The reading passages and images in this text depict not only how the world is, but also how it ought to be. In so doing, they transmit ideologies that justify gender hierarchies as natural. Yetişkinler Okuma Yazma Öğretimi ve Temel Eğitimi Kitabı is now the dominant textbook in Turkish adult literacy programs. Moreover, the majority of Turkish literacy participants are women. As such, this text's gendered discourses have the potential to shape how both male and female literacy participants view masculinity and femininity, childrearing, and gender roles and responsibilities in the family, society, workplace, and other institutions, how they enact their identities as men and women, and the kinds of identities they envision for themselves in the future.

The Discourse of the sexual division of labor in the textbook does not challenge gender stratification in the Turkish labor market, such as women's low rate of participation in the paid labor force and their longer duration of unemployment compared to male counterparts (Gürsel, Darbaz & Güner, 2009). At 26.1%, Turkish women's labor force participation is the lowest among European countries, nearly 25% lower than Italian women (Gürsel, Uysal-Kolaşın & Dinçer, 2009). Even though the assumption of these labor market participation studies is that increasing the number of women who are actively employed in Turkey would reduce poverty and increase national economic output, the textbook we studied depicts a world where women are mainly restricted to the privacy of home. Gürsel, Darbaz and Güner (2009) posit that female earnings are considered additional income since men are the primary breadwinners. When evaluating a possible job opportunity, women take into account the value of their domestic work as an alternative, which might be socially preferred to working. Lack of affordable childcare makes the situation for urban working women especially difficult. This adult literacy textbook, then, does little to help women imagine new occupational possibilities. Similarly, the Discourse that associates childrearing and caretaking with mothers and discipline with fathers is also congruent with existing gender roles and identities in Turkey. Despite recent changes in attitudes among some Turkish women, the dominant view is that women are largely responsible for childcare and housework even when they work outside the home (O'Neill & Guler, 2009). Furthermore, at least one of the passages suggests that children look up to their fathers rather than their mothers as a legitimate source of authority.

Together, the Discourses in the literacy textbook reinforce prevailing gender ideologies in Turkey, which hold that "Men are responsible for family decisions and finances and remain in control while women take care of the house and children regardless of whether or not they are also in the paid work force. (O'Neill & Guler, 2009, p. 171). This study indicates that the textbook does not expose or challenge existing gender hierarchies. This does not necessarily mean that literacy participants passively accept such messages or that the material is useless, as it could hypothetically be used in classrooms with a critical perspective. Should adult educators

wish to question the assumptions about gender in the literacy curriculum and society, this study offers insights that can aid such a critical reading.

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