

## **“Where I’m Coming From”: A Discourse Analysis of Financial Advice Media**

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*In this paper we conceptualize different understandings and positions taken in conflicts over finances in family and couple relationships. We see these as informed by discourses found in popular and professional media. Discourses, as we describe them, are cultural ways of understanding and acting – where “we are coming from,” in this case, relates to finances and financial management. We turn to various media (magazine advice articles, self-help books, professional and research literatures) using discourse analysis to identify distinct discourses regarding how finances are to be regarded and managed. We then link these discourses to discourse positions, or positionings, that partners and family members present that could be relevant to concerns about finances presented to relational therapists and financial therapists. We offer questions and other ways of avoiding “capture” in discourse positions that can be harmful to relationships, including the therapeutic relationship.*

*Keywords: discourse analysis; financial therapy; families and couples; media; self-help*

“Debt is the new fat” (Atwood, 2008, p. 41). Financial talk is everywhere in popular media. With a quick scan of newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, one can see titles calling readers to consider, discuss, and possibly argue over finances. Reading the headlines of the popular online media sources such as *New York Times*, *National Post*, *Time Magazine*, and *Macleans*, one finds that personal finances, government debt, and investment are very hot topics. For example, in the *National Post*, a popular national Canadian newspaper, there are now sections including: “Young Money,” “Personal Finance,” and “Investing.” CNN.com devotes an entire weekly show dedicated to “the best advice on getting out of debt, finding jobs, securing a better mortgage, saving for college,

paying off student loans, managing your retirement dollars, and a whole lot more,” and Oprah’s popular website has an online course called “America’s Money Class” ([www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com)). This proliferation of financial information and advice is important to attend to because differences over finances in couples and families are often informed and galvanized by such information and advice. This paper highlights support for a way of thinking about differences over finances that might be helpful to the conversational practice of couple and family therapy. Specifically, the analysis offers financial and other therapy professionals understanding of how financial discourses feature in various media, and how these discourses may feature in couple and family conflicts. Finally, examples are provided for how professionals can navigate these sometimes conflicting discourses in their work with clients.

When people say or imply, “Here is where I am coming from” (as this paper’s title suggests), most often one considers such statements as revealing something about their personality. Inside a couple’s argument over finances, it is particularly easy to attribute such differences to one’s partner’s personality, or fault his/her logic or depth of understanding. This paper suggests that the positions people take up in conflicts are often traceable to similar positions articulated in popular media, including financial literacy resources, newspapers and magazines, and financial help books. In other words, people’s differences over finances can be seen as being at least partly related to positions found in popular media.

“Positions” is a term adopted from discourse theory and discourse analysis (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Fairclough, 1989; Harre & van Langenhove, 1999; Illouz, 2008; Lock & Strong, 2010). Discourses can be seen as culturally recognizable, yet distinct ways of understanding, communicating, and evaluating phenomena such as finances and financial decision-making. In a family seen at Calgary Family Therapy Centre by one of the authors, a child was expected by her parents to invest most of her allowance, setting her apart from her peers who could use their allowance to go to movies or buy clothes. Animating this conflict were different discourse positions, including the parents’ discourse of entrepreneurial self-management, and a consumer discourse taken up by the child’s peers. As discourse-informed practitioners, the authors see therapeutic possibilities when they locate a source and perpetuation of interpersonal conflicts in such media-proliferated cultural discourses.

The approach taken in this paper is agnostic as to which financial discourses and financial decisions are generally superior. Discourse positioning refers to recognizable, culturally situated, and value-based ways people understand, evaluate, and act upon phenomena and experiences—in ways consistent with a cultural discourse. Current discourse positions over the United States’ budget and finances point to how differently people often understand, discuss, and evaluate what ostensibly could be regarded as the same phenomenon. Enacted culturally and politically, differences over such positions have costs to not only the U.S. economy, but to how people relate as they interact from the truths of “their” positions. Scare quotes are used around the word “their” to challenge the notion that a person’s discourse position equates to fundamental aspects of their personality.

Conflicts occurring over finances are common in families (e.g., Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Vogler, Lyolette, & Wiggins, 2008). Such conflicts often owe something to the discourses people turn to in order to make sense of and decide financial matters (Sonnenberg, 2008). Further, families can be harmed by conflicts over differences in discourse positions, differences that they often take to couple and family therapy (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009). Therapists and other professionals not only draw from discourses from the media as well, but also from discourses learned in their training programs, clinical textbooks, and professional literatures (cf. Paré, 1996). The purpose of this study was to identify, in popular media and professional resources, accessible and recognizable discourses that inform understandings, decisions, and interpersonal relations with respect to finances and financial decisions.

Why look at popular media and professional literatures for financial discourses? Are the opinions and values shown in conflicts over finances not those of the individuals involved? The answers to such questions might derive from a view that social and cultural influences inform, and to some extent promote, conflicting positions at an interpersonal level (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Deciding to take a family vacation this year or to put the same money down to more quickly pay off the mortgage are differences people justify to themselves and each other. Differences in understandings people associate with positions taken up in recognizable cultural discourses. Self-help books and financial literacy resources, and the financial and psychological experts who write them, tend to crystallize these discourses as “common sense”—even if there are conflicts between authors over what is commonsensical. In many cases, arguments a couple may have over finances can mimic conflicting positions taken in the discourses of various self-help book authors (cf., Starker, 2002). Michel Foucault (2004) turned to such expert discourses to understand how sexuality and other aspects of being correct or appropriate as a human were described (as well as prescribed) from antiquity up to the recent past. This project was focused on discourses people might turn to for their sense of right and wrong when relating to financial matters. Popular media can be seen as furnishing these positions of right and wrong in financial matters and have elsewhere shown how recognizable cultural discourses regarding finances feature in the conflicts that couples present to therapists (Strong, Wulff, St. George, Mudry, & Sametband, in press).

This paper links conflicts over finances to differing positions conversational partners take up with each other on financial matters. Discourse analyses (Fairclough, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of recent popular self-help books, financial literacy resources, clinical handbooks, academic literature, and newspaper and magazines, is used to highlight some of the most commonly recognizable discourses on finances found in these media. Further, the analyses focuses on how discourse analysis can inform the conversational practice of therapy (e.g., Lock & Strong, 2012) when financial differences occur, indicating kinds of questions that invite consideration of alternative and mutually agreeable ways to converse and to make financial decisions.

## **CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS AND RELATIONAL CONVERSATIONS**

Seen one way, reading is a form of conversation (Ong, 1982), albeit a form lacking in the usual immediacies one associates with face-to-face dialogue. Authors of the self-help genre conversationally engage readers in making sense of important aspects of human life. Their writings crystallize professional and cultural understandings, suggesting how people should evaluate and respond to such human concerns (Illouz, 2008). In reading financial self-help books, or other textual media, readers find and take up discourse positions they may bring to their relational conversations. Discourses, in this sense, are like closed conversations, conversations within which one finds a refined sense of what is appropriate to say, think, and do. For example, consider the previous discussion of financial conversations in U.S politics, suggesting a tax increase at a Tea Party rally, or suggesting cuts to the social “safety net” at a social justice convention are examples of speaking in ways inappropriate to a discourse position.

A common cultural and professional discourse suggests that finances are a purely rational matter to be appraised objectively and managed as such. Foucault (2008) referred to people subscribing to this discourse as “homo economicus” (e.g., p. 249). Treated rationally, in this (homo economicus) manner, there is an ascertainable correctness to such decision-making and conversing about finances. This paper does not share this view, but instead recognizes that multiple competing views exist for what is real or good (Foucault; Gergen, 2009). The therapeutic issue is how these competing views can be either negotiated or coordinated.

## **METHOD**

The purpose of this project was to examine the common discourses featured in academic, clinical, and popular media, as these discourses furnish professionals and prospective clients with ways of understanding and talking about financial matters. Clients may come to a family, couple, or financial therapy session and talk about finances in particular ways, such as how financial matters should be handled in a family, having read self-help books or seen articles in their national or local newspaper. Similarly, financial and other therapy professionals might have encountered academic articles and books written for clinicians that position financial matters in particular ways about how financial matters are handled in families, which could influence what they say in the therapy session or alter how they conduct therapy.

For example, in couple therapy, a husband might state that his wife complains about him not making enough money to support the family. The wife might contend that her husband resents her for being the primary breadwinner in the family. She may have encountered this discourse in a newspaper article she had read the week before, which argued that men feel emasculated when their wives make more money than they do. In the same therapy dialogue, the professional might align herself with the wife’s discourse position, having recently read a book about finances in therapy, which highlighted power differentials in couple relationships where financial inequity is apparent. In examples such as these, one wonders about the origin of these discourses. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine how popular and clinically-oriented media represented finances in family and couple relationships.

### ***Discourse Analysis***

With these wonderings in mind, Discourse Analysis (DA) was used to identify the common discourses that were featured in the media of interest. Although many styles of discourse analysis can be found in the literature (e.g., Edwards, 1997; Fairclough, 1993; van Dijk, 1997), one common feature in these variations is the premise that language is central to meanings of the human world. Thus, language used in social interactions (e.g., family members' interactions about finances, media information on financial management, etc.) may provide insight into how social practices around understandings of "money" are organized. DA is a useful method to identify and examine how different cultural discourses on finances are produced, maintained and reproduced, and practiced in social interactions. Thus, DA can be seen as having a dual focus on the practices (how language is used) and the resources (social discourses) that are drawn on in those practices (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Further, DA can be helpful in reconstructing how discourses are produced and what is gained (and by whom) by looking at how speakers orient to each other by performing particular discourses in accomplishing socially acceptable tasks (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992).

In specific terms, the goal of this project was to identify differences in the language used by various media to represent finances and financial advice. Such differences in language are traceable to recognizable cultural discourses; a discourse of financial restraint often differs from a financial discourse focused on well-being. Such differences in language use are recognizable and classifiable as discourses and often present strikingly different takes on finances and financial advice. The therapeutic significance of these differences arises when people put the taken for granted truths of their conflicting discourse positions before their relational well-being (Winslade & Monk, 2008).

Analysis focused on how financial discourses that were featured in the literature invited readers to particular "positionings" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). That is, readers oriented to understandings on finances from particular stances (e.g., saving money versus spending money) that in turn invited certain interactions or relational patterns (e.g., arguing over the management of the money, agreeing on a budget) (Tomm, St. George, Wulff, & Strong, 2014).

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

With these wonderings in mind, an academic literature search was conducted through PsycINFO (an academic search engine), using the following keywords: (a) self-help books, (b) therapy/counseling, (c) financial/finances, and (d) marital/family conflict. These keywords were chosen to identify academic and self-help literature, which may be used by professionals or scholars. Conversely, financial literacy resources and popular media articles were located by searching common Canadian media (*Reader's Digest, Macleans, Chatelaine, Globe and Mail*), using the following terms: (a) household finances, (b) personal finances, (c) budget and family, and (d) money and family. These terms were chosen to tap into more common language used by the lay public who might search these topics. In total,

the literature searches yielded 221 articles and chapters, 79 of which were included in the review. The publication dates ranged between 1967 and 2012. Literature was excluded if it did not contain both finances and relationships (family or couple), or was not written in English.

It has been argued that discourse analysis begins with having sensitivity towards how language is used (Widdicombe, 1993), or an ‘analytic mentality’ (Schenkein, 1978) as a way of looking at material. Drawing on this analytic mentality, the first step of analysis involved three research assistants (RAs) carefully reading through the literature and completing annotated bibliographies, which highlighted financial discourses, marital, and family conflicts presumed to be related to financial differences, the authors’ main perspectives and language used, and advice or strategies provided by the authors of the texts. Verbatim quotes from these literatures were recorded. The annotated bibliographies in the domain of financial literacy (n=13), popular media (n=28), self-help books (n=3), clinical handbooks (n=8), and academic literature (n=26) were combined to form our data corpus (see Appendix 1 for the references in categories).

Two RAs coded and analyzed the data discursively by identifying and highlighting major cultural discourses in the notes and quotes from the literature. They followed steps six and seven of Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) steps for coding and analysis. First, in the “coding” stage, they highlighted keywords and areas of focus in the content of the text. For example, if the article talked about how men and women were different with regards to finances, the RAs coded this as “gender.” The RAs coded the annotated biographies separately first, identifying and highlighting the sections of text that were relevant. Next, the RAs met with the rest of the team to corroborate and decide upon labels for discourse and sub-discourse categories based on the data and language used in the texts. When there were differences between what the RAs identified as discourses or sub-discourses, the team worked through consensus about inclusion.

The data was then “analyzed” as a team, where the following questions were asked of the data (the discourses identified and corresponding texts they fit within): Why am I reading the passage this way? What might the intention of the author be? How might the reader interpret the messages? How do financial discourses function in this text? How might these discourses be used and drawn from in a family setting or a therapeutic setting?

### **FINANCIAL DISCOURSES IN THE LITERATURE**

Elsewhere (Strong et al., in press), authors have discussed how people’s use of discourses and language in their conversations (financial conflicts included) are borrowed from discourses circulating in the wider culture. This view is less psychological (that people develop their own language for what they say) and more sociological in that discourse analysts understand people’s values and ways of making sense as being shaped by their engagement with these larger cultural discourses (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourses do not determine people’s responses to each other, but might be used in people’s communications as if they were the only “truth,” way to understand a situation, or justify one’s response to it. Thus, the current analysis offers useful information on financial

discourses in family and financial therapy, and a way to identify financial discourses in cultural circulation that clients might have problematically taken up.

Through the current discourse analysis of the various media, 34 distinct sub-discourses were identified and categorized under nine larger cultural discourses: (a) *gender discourses*, (b) *financial literacy discourses*, (c) *deficit discourses*, (d) *pathologizing and medicalizing discourses*, (e) *universality discourses*, (f) *therapy discourses*, (g) *relational discourses*, (h) *values discourses*, and (i) *fear mongering discourses*. Family members can be seen as potentially drawing from these discourses and sub-discourses in how they position themselves in relation to others on financial matters. Similarly, authors of these media also use particular discourses to write about financial content, positioning themselves as experts, drawing from discourses themselves in how they provide advice and information about how one should view and manage their finances and relationships. While space does not allow for a thorough explication of each discourse identified, instead, an in-depth example of our analysis and findings with regards to authors' positionings and gender discourses in a self-help book is provided. The remaining discourses identified in the other types of media are briefly reported upon to demonstrate the pervasiveness of financial discourses in popular and professional/academic media. Finally, the analyses show how these discourses and positionings are often drawn from in conflicts with others and in the therapeutic conversations between financial or therapy professionals and clients.

### **DISCURSIVE POSITIONING IN SELF-HELP MEDIA**

This paper includes an in-depth discourse analysis of a self-help book to demonstrate discursive positionings for a few reasons. First, self-help books are in the public domain and are drawn from by lay readers to assist them with navigating life problems and concerns, such as finances and relationships. Second, these books are longer than newspaper and magazine articles, providing more content examples and space for the authors to establish their positions using particular discourses. Third, self-help books are often written by experts (in some content area), and are assumed to provide the answer or correct way of addressing the concern of interest. Finally, relationship self-help books have been a focus of discourse analysis in previous years (Crawford, 2004; Hill, 2007), and this was an opportunity to expand this literature to specifically examine self-help books concerned with relationships and finances. The self-help book titled, "Our Money, Ourselves for Couples: A New Way of Relating to Money and Each Other" (Ealy & Lesh, 2003) is used to outline an example of the analysis. In this analysis, readers are invited to notice how the authors write from particular positionings in discourses (with a focus on gender discourses).

#### ***Gender Discourses***

Through the examination of Ealy and Lesh's (2003) self-help book as well as the other literatures examined, the following sub-discourses were identified in the gender discourse category: (a) *women naturally earn less than men, women's financial success undermines the marital relationship*; (b) *women are emotional and irrational when it comes*

*to money, men are rational; (c) love, sex, and money get messy; and (d) women are disadvantaged in comparison with men and need to educate themselves about finance.*

As is common in the self-help literature, the authors (Ealy & Lesh, 2003) initially positioned themselves as experts in the content area, and established the legitimacy of their expertise (Potter, 1996). In the case of Ealy and Lesh (2003), both have Ph.D.s and are “therapists and devout observers of human behavior . . . [who became] aware that a lot of people were increasingly interested in investment possibilities” (p. ix). Both disclosed they were experiencing issues with money when starting their private practices. By disclosing this information, the authors seemed to be letting the reader know that they understood what the reader is going through. Within the first paragraph of the book, Ealy and Lesh (2003) presented a gendered financial discourse: “women seemed especially vulnerable to the gather-information-about-money-then-sit-on-it trap” (p. ix), hinting toward inherent differences between women and men when it comes to money or financial matters. The authors positioned themselves as therapist-experts who see gender as an important factor in couples’ finances, and indicated that they wrote this book for “opposite-sex, same-sex, and business partners” (p. x), although most of the examples they provided pertained only to heterosexual romantic couples.

**Women naturally earn less than men, women’s financial success undermines the marital relationship.** The use of gender discourse (among other discourses) is evident throughout Ealy and Lesh’s (2003) book. For example, in a chapter called “Cultural Messages,” Ealy and Lesh included a section called “Patriarchal legacy – Who earns more?” In this section, they cited research indicating that less than half of men believe women should provide equal amounts of money to the family budget, and quote a financial expert who stated that being the “breadwinner” is “ingrained” in the DNA of men (p. 39). They also provided examples of their own participants expressing discomfort about women earning more than men, and contended that marriage and family therapists reported, “the issue of women outearning men is one that frequently contributes to marital discord” (p. 39). They countered these contentions with the “reality” that “one in three married women does make more than her partner” (p. 39). By describing these financial differences between men and women, Ealy and Lesh set up a dilemma for the readers. Not only are women earning more than men, women’s financial success will likely undermine the marital relationship and cause relationship problems.

This sub-discourse was echoed in other media as well. In *Macleans* magazine, there was an article titled, “The richer sex. One-third of women now earn more than their husbands, and not everyone is happy” (Gulli, 2012). In this article, the author explained:

problems also arise if the man feels threatened, or that he’s not fulfilling the provider role. . . [and] men who are totally economically dependent on their wives are five times more likely to cheat than husbands who earn the same as their spouse; they are least likely to cheat when their wives earn 25 [percent] less than them. (Gulli, 2012, para. 16)

In both the self-help book and the magazine article, the authors using this discourse positioned themselves in a few different ways. The authors proposed couples’ finances as

an arena of competition or power struggle between men and women, which invites readers to consider their partner as a rival rather than, for example, a collaborator. First, they assumed that there would be conflict in marital relationships when women earn more than men. Secondly, their underlying message seemed to be that a wife earning more than her husband is a concern.

Why is this important to the average individual, or why is it important in therapy settings? Well, to start, an individual reading these sources may become armed with, and use this discourse, in his or her relationships. Take a scenario where a woman is earning more than her husband, and has been experiencing some relationship trouble. Upon reading this book or *Macleans* article, the wife may begin to hypothesize that this, too, may be the case in her situation. In the couple's therapy session, she may bring this hypothesis to the therapist and her husband. The therapist may also draw on this discourse in her interpretation of their situation. How might the husband position himself in relation to this discourse? How might the difference in positions fuel or extinguish the conflict?

**Women are emotional and irrational when it comes to money, men are rational.** Ealy and Lesh (2003) also used gender discourses in their section, "The patriarchal legacy – Who saves, who spends?" In this section, they argued that women are more "now-money oriented" and men are more "future-money oriented." They cited research demonstrating that women use shopping to celebrate or make themselves feel better, in an impulsive manner, whereas men are more likely to save with a future orientation, and are more comfortable with money and confident in investing. Similarly, another self-help book author utilized this discourse when she wrote that she and other women are "failing when it comes to managing money's emotional impact on our relationships" (Timmons, 2010, p. xi). Again, Timmons associated women with failure to manage the emotional impact of money, or not approaching relationships and money rationally. In both cases, rigid gender categories were presented by how men and women relate to money: Men are rational, whereas women relate to money emotionally.

Returning to the example of a couple in therapy, if the husband in the dyad aligned himself with this discourse, what positions might be taken up in discussions about family finances? Perhaps he might argue that he should handle the family finances, as he is a man and is much more rational than she. He might provide examples of how good a saver he is, and how she likes to go on shopping sprees. How might this discourse be compatible or at odds with his wife earning more than he earns? What positionings might she take up in responding to him? How might the professional's position in this discussion be relevant? Would the professional's gender play a role in the sessions with this couple?

**Love, sex, and money get messy.** Ealy and Lesh (2003) dedicated an entire chapter entitled "Love, sex, and money" using this sub-discourse named the same. In this chapter, Ealy and Lesh (2003) covered all of the ways in which love and sex get mixed up with money. They utilized the following subtitles: (a) paying for companionship; (b) confusing love and material goods; (c) staying together for all the wrong reasons; (d) paying to be free of a relationship; (e) buying forgiveness; (f) the money/sex connection; (g) money, sex, and business; (h) breaking the money/sex connection. While in the first few sections the

authors cited examples of both genders paying for companionship, confusing love with material goods, staying together for the wrong reasons, and paying to be free from the relationship, the authors introduced gender discourses in the latter sections. For example, they contended that women are more likely to accept gifts as tokens of forgiveness, offer sex in response to receiving gifts, and spend their husband’s money when they are mad at him. Similarly, they discussed the money/sex connection, whereby, women exchange money or gifts for sexual favors, sometimes as a kept woman.

Ealy and Lesh (2003) described the dark side of this arrangement in which men feel that they are owed sex in situations leading to rape, and shared an account of a woman whose sex life began to diminish as soon as she started to earn more money than her husband. In the money, sex, and business section, they discussed how business relationships could become messy when sex becomes involved, suggesting that the stereotype of a woman sleeping her way to success is perpetuated in the business world. While the authors contended that this is a harmful stereotype, at the same time they reaffirm this common gender distinction between men and women.

**Women are disadvantaged in comparison with men and need to educate themselves about finance.** While Ealy and Lesh did not utilize this discourse, other authors of the analyzed media did. For example, Vance (n.d.) wrote an article in *Reader’s Digest* called “7 financial tips every married woman should know.” In the intro of this online article Vance wrote, “when divorce rears its ugly head, most people—especially women—aren’t ready.” In a later section, she continues, “your husband can always change his mind about his desire to be married to you, and if he does, your life can change in an instant” (p. 2). The underlying message seems to be that women should carefully manage finances while married, just in case of divorce, as women traditionally do not manage their finances. This message is in line with the notion discussed above that women are not as good at managing their money as men. Compare this sub-discourse to the sub-discourse of women’s financial success undermining the marital relationship. Users of these discourses can be interpreted as being positioned precariously: While women ought to prepare for possible divorce by carefully managing their finances, they must also be careful not to out-earn their husband.

While it could be argued that Ealy and Lesh (2003) subtly deconstructed these cultural discourses about gender and brought them to light so that readers can then either take them up or challenge them, at the same time, their uncritical use of these discourses functions to perpetuate them. Such discourses matter-of-factly describe “inherent differences” between genders with regard to finances and relationships, making them seem obvious and commonsensical. Ealy and Lesh positioned themselves as agreeing that discourses reify how gender plays a complicating role in the management of finances within a relationship. How might a position such as this be potentially problematic? It is not so much the fact that the authors positioned themselves; we can never escape being positioned in some discourse—speaking or writing as we do from some discourse position. What might become problematic, and of particular interest, is that these positions are taken as objective Truth, as the only possible way to respond when written in a self-help

book, and these positionings and discourses are taken up by the reader and used in the communications with others.

### **IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT GENDER: OTHER DISCOURSES IN THE MEDIA**

While the scope of this paper does not allow for the reporting on every discourse and positioning from the analysis, a brief list of examples of identified discourses across the various media is provided. The following discourse categories are highlighted: *(a) financial literacy discourses, (b) deficit discourses, (c) pathologizing and medicalizing discourses, (d) universality discourses, (e) therapy discourses, (f) relational discourses, (g) values discourses, and (h) fear-mongering discourses.* The in-depth analysis and smaller analysis (which follows) might be helpful for financial and therapy professionals to consider how these discourses and positionings could play out within relationships and within their therapy sessions. Questions and ideas for these professionals to consider are articulated at the end of each section to elicit reflection about the discourses and positions and how they might be relevant to their practice.

#### ***Financial Literacy Discourses***

Within the analyzed media, the content often focused on “knowledge” about finances and the responsibility to use this knowledge, as demonstrated in the following four sub-discourses: *(a) financial literacy or education is all that is required; (b) there are “correct” ways to manage money; (c) good money health takes work; and (d) it is the parents’ job to teach kids about finances.* In addition to the financial literacy scholarly literature, popular media also utilized financial literacy discourses. For example, in a popular Canadian women’s magazine, *Chatelaine*, two articles focused on the parents’ role in teaching children about finances. One article was titled, “How to Raise a Money-Wise Preschooler” (Cakebread, 2010, November 11), and another titled, “Five Things I Want My Kids to Know about Money” (Cakebread, 2011, February 24). In these articles, parents are invited to teach their children to engage in a “healthy relationship” with money. Cakebread (2010, 2011), presented as a specialist in investor education and financial literacy, aligned with the assumption that a “healthy” relationship with money is based on individual responsibility (having savings, spending wisely) and that it is the parents’ role to educate their children in this manner.

Perhaps this is sound advice. However, is this the method for learning about finances? How might this advice be used? As a financial or therapy professional, how might these discourses feature in family, couple, or financial therapy? Could parents have divergent views about their role in managing their children’s relationship to money? How might a professional position himself or herself using this discourse? How might coaching about parenting or financial management involve the use of these discourses?

#### ***Deficit Discourses***

Coupled with a discourse on “correct” or “healthy” ways to relate to money, there were also discourses discussing effects of low financial literacy—or not knowing the correct way to manage finances. The term “deficit discourses” was used to categorize the following four sub-discourses utilized in the literature: (a) *poverty as connected to low financial literacy and poor decisions*, (b) *support networks as key to reducing poverty*, (c) *government as having a role in financial literacy*, and (d) *mental health associated with poverty/poor people cannot be healthy or happy*. In a financial literacy article associating positive outcomes with financial literacy, the authors cited improved relationships, parenting, and overall quality of life as indirect outcomes of financial literacy education (Social and Enterprise Development Initiatives, SEDI, 2009). Similarly, in an academic journal article published in *Family Relations*, Dyk (2004) argued that low-income and working-poor families are vulnerable to family chaos, poor decision-making, and the inability to plan beyond immediate needs. Thus, these discourses stipulate both a correct way of relating to finances, but also highlight the consequences of not engaging in such practices.

A sense of individual responsibility pervaded these articles: it is a person’s responsibility (e.g., a parent) to educate his/her children, or to engage oneself “correctly” regarding finances. Our two examples were taken from academic and government media, a readership primarily composed of various therapists, financial experts, and policy makers. What discourses might these professionals draw from in relating to individuals who are living in poverty? What discourses would individuals living in poverty be more drawn to? What positions in those discourses might they take up? Would they be similar or at odds? How might these discourses influence beliefs about responsibility, change, and self-efficacy? Might there be a potential for a position of victim-blaming? In what ways might these discourses influence policy?

### ***Pathologizing and Medicalizing Discourses***

Closely related to the deficit discourses category were pathologizing and medicalizing discourses, where authors were *associating mental illness with bad decisions and financial problems*. In an academic review written in the *Journal of Family Social Work*, Frankel and Frankel (2006) reviewed various studies associating poverty with poor mental and physical health. These studies highlighted financial strain and perception of a stressful neighborhood environment as leading to anxiety, depression, anger, decreased positive parenting behavior, and poor adolescent adjustment in families. Many studies reported that children from poor families tend to instigate conflict among peers or family members more than at middle and high-income levels. From their study of 51 couples in therapy, Dakin and Wampler (2008) reported that low income was significantly associated with less marital satisfaction and more psychological distress than was found in couples with more adequate means.

While these studies highlight a need to address financial struggles in family, couple, and financial therapy, there is also a risk in blaming those who are living in poverty for their mental health and relational problems. Rather than highlighting other contextual events that may influence people in impoverished circumstances or other resources for

dealing with poverty, it can be argued that positioning clients by accounting for their circumstance using this discourse could be further disempowering. How might financial or therapy professionals introduce alternative discourses on mental health diagnoses for clients' consideration? How might they interact with low-income clients if they adopt this discourse?

### ***Universality Discourses***

Within the discourses of universality, there were four common sub-discourses: (a) *money as representing society's "cravings"* (Madanes & Madanes, 1994), (b) *family finances are widespread and predictable*, (c) *individuals go through predictable transitions or life stages that can cause financial issues*, and (d) *family-of-origin determines one's relationship to money*. Authors using these sub-discourses proposed a common path or common experience individuals usually have or should have with regards to finances.

In a book written for therapists, Madanes and Madanes (1994) outlined pre-determined stages that couples will inevitably go through during their life cycle. For example, they noted that young couples need to balance individual success (e.g., financial success) in their relationship, suggesting that partners' financial differences will threaten their relationship. They also argued that equal relationships between spouses are altered when a child enters the life of a couple. Such discourses position family members as developing a kind of financial maturity, which they need to show, learn, teach, and practice with other members of their family. How might family members respond to professionals who adopt this discourse? How might these professionals position themselves in terms of financial maturity? How would a professional structure sessions based on a discourse that aligns with a stage-theory of family life cycle?

### ***Therapy Discourses***

Therapy discourses also featured in the media analyzed: (a) *expert help and financial therapy were required to overcome financial issues*; (b) *there are right and wrong ways to address finances in therapy*; (c) *money talk is taboo, but shouldn't be*; (d) *money metaphors and financial discourses can be useful in therapy*; and (e) *therapists should run their practice in a fiscally responsible manner*. The most common sub-discourse in this category—*expert help and financial therapy are required*—was illustrated in an article in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper entitled, "I Need Financial Therapy" (Cooperberg, 2010, February 11). In this article, Cooperberg discussed how childhood experiences impact adults' relationships with money and suggested using financial therapy to more adaptively restructure their thought patterns. This discourse could be seen as calling the reader to position himself or herself as being helpless in finding his/her own solutions and requiring the help of an expert. How might therapy discourses influence the therapeutic process and therapists' participation in it? How might it influence one's decision to enter therapy? How might these discourses impact the client's sense of agency in overcoming his or her financial problems?

### ***Relational Discourses***

Relational financial discourses, linking money and money issues with relationship problems and health, were categorized with seven sub-discourses: (a) *couples should share management of money and should discuss money*; (b) *couples will undoubtedly fight over finances*; (c) *patterns of arguing are universal*; (d) *it is never just about money, there are underlying issues*; (e) *people/couples need to “work through” financial values*; (f) *there are always power dynamics in regards to money*; and (g) *cultural discourses/messages about money play out in relationships*. For example, an entire self-help book, “Financial Intimacy: How to Create a Healthy Relationship with Your Money and Your Mate” (Timmons, 2010), was written in alignment with relational discourses. Fitting within the fourth and last sub-discourse listed (i.e., sub-discourses d and g), Timmons (2010) outlined what a healthy relationship looks like. She wrote, “money is never just about money” (p. xvii), and described an emotional relationship to money shaped by personal choices, experiences, family background, and interactions with society.

Authors drawing from relational financial discourses outlined how relationships organize around finances, and provided guidelines for how individuals might work through their financial issues. Financial or therapy professionals positioning themselves in these discourses might see these discourses and guidelines for correctly conducting therapy as truth, and the only way to conduct therapy. How might the therapeutic process be influenced by a professional adopting the discourses of “it is never just about money, there are underlying issues” or “there are always power dynamics in regards to money”? What types of questions might they ask? What is the effect of the professional inviting clients into these discourses? Can a financial problem simply be a problem of finances?

### ***Values Discourses***

The term values was used to describe the following three sub-discourses: (a) *anti-materialism*, (b) *money is constructed to mean many things*, and (c) *non-traditional relationships should be avoided*. An example of the anti-materialism discourse was identified in an academic article in which the authors reported that materialism negatively affects marital quality, even if the couple shares the same materialistic values (Carroll, Dean, Call, & Busby, 2011). This anti-materialism/consumerism sub-discourse may have been constructed in response to a dominant North American cultural discourse encouraging consumerism and materialism, which runs counter to a discourse position of financial responsibility. The anti-materialism sub-discourse is easily identifiable in some of the positions that may be adopted by family members. Consider an adolescent girl who has a taste for designer fashion and how she might respond to her mother, who favors purchasing secondhand clothing and bargain shopping. How might these positions be performed and negotiated in a family, couple, or financial therapy context? How would the professional’s own position in relation to materialism influence how the conversation unfolds?

### ***Fear-Mongering Discourses***

A final group of discourses called fear-mongering discourses, included the following two sub-discourses: (a) *bad money decisions can be dangerous, deviant, and secretive*; and

(b) *financial strain is increasing*. These sub-discourses appeared to function to scare the reader into living by financially responsible behaviors that would help to ward off poverty. For example, a *Macleans* article called “Awash in a Sea of Debt: Oblivious to the Risks, Canadians Are Piling on Record Debt Loads,” the author wrote that Canadian families continue to pile on mortgages and consumer loans at an alarming pace even though we might be in living in a “housing bubble” (Kirby, 2010, February 2, para. 3). The author used alarming language combined with striking statistics and quotes from experts in the field, which can be seen as inviting the reader to join him in worry and fear of debt.

In a different use of this discourse, in *Chatelaine*, Cakebread (2011, February 24) acknowledged the sub-discourse *bad money decisions can be dangerous, deviant, and secretive*, when she shared a story of her growing up in a household with bankruptcy in the background, where there was “an overwhelming fear that money has the power to destroy people” (Cakebread, 2011, February 24, para. 2). She contended that she wanted her children to have a “healthy relationship with money that doesn’t involve fear or secrecy” (para. 3). It should be noted that Cakebread is a specialist in the area of investor education and financial literacy. Reflecting on the power of such expert discourses in the mainstream media, how might fear-mongering or refuting such discourses influence the behavior of the reader? What actions might result from reading these media? How might the reader react? How might a financial therapist or other professional react?

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this discursive analysis was to draw attention to the various financial discourses that are present in our media. Money and finances can be seen as functioning as a conversational object (Silverman, 2001) around which families and couples interact in their conversations, both inside and outside of therapy. Family members and partners draw from these various discourse positions when relating to each other in their discussions, in ways that are too often conflictual in nature. While individuals are always using discourses to communicate and understand one another, discourses enable as well as constrain possibilities for understanding and communicating, extending to communications with so-called disagreeable partners or family members. In this paper, the case is made that viewing particular discourses as inherently *truthful* can limit the discursive and relational flexibility and collaboration between users disagreeing about the discourses, or positioning themselves in opposition. Similarly, a financial or therapy professional also positions himself or herself within a discourse, which ultimately serves to structure how therapy might look. Disagreement with a client’s discourse around financial literacy and responsibility could lead the professional to label the client as “resistant,” when the client does not follow the professional’s advice. It is common for relational patterns of conflict, anchored in differences in discourse positions, to develop in ways that convince partners and family members that each other’s personality traits, instead of interactions from recurring discourse positions, are the issue (Tomm et al., 2014).

### *Implications for Practice*

The findings from our analysis draw attention to the multiplicity of discourses available in the media and our inescapable use of these discourses in our work with clients. While particular discourses are neither good nor bad, they function in particular ways. Thus, it is important for professionals to be aware of discourses in therapy sessions, evaluate their own discourses, and draw attention to these discourses in their work with individuals and families. Discursive therapists are interested in questions that invite consideration of alternative and mutually agreeable positions from which to converse and decide on finances. Drawing from a study of financial talk in family therapy sessions (Strong et al., in press) and the current study, the following hypothetical questions are offered for a financial or therapy professional to consider and use to draw attention to discourses and discursive positioning in work with families and couples. These questions are devised to help professionals draw attention to and work with discourses, discourse positioning, and alternative discourses with regards to finances.

1. How did you come to understand and act on finances?
2. Do you act from the same understandings, with regard to other concerns, like discipline, leisure time or something else?
3. What other ways of understanding and acting on financial matters have you considered?
4. What other ways have you been able to talk about differences over money issues?
5. Is it possible that you and your partner may both disagree with these outsider viewpoints?
6. Does everybody want these things?”

When financial or therapy professionals feel that they might be rigidly positioned within a particular financial discourse, such as those reported upon earlier, and want to move the conversation to a more relational stance, they may want consider the following questions for use with clients:

1. Would downsizing some activities and expectations so that there is less need for money be helpful for your family?
2. What does this financial disagreement lead you to think about your relationships?
3. What do you think that this financial dilemma says about you as a couple, parents, and household managers?
4. What is your track record or experience of solving something of this caliber?
5. Where would you say your family’s idea of success comes from?

This study was undertaken to address concern that discourses, which inform where clients and professionals “are coming from,” may be helpful or unhelpful in overcoming intractable financial differences presented in therapy. From a discursive view of therapy (e.g., Lock & Strong, 2012), people are sometimes “captured” (Strong, 2014) by discourses, such as those identified in this paper. Capture refers to understanding and reacting from a discourse position as if it was the only discourse (*Truth*) for relationally going forward. This can be a recipe for disaster in couple and family relationships, as intractable conflicts often persist when partners or family members fail to coordinate their different discourse positions. Sometimes such coordination is as basic as turn-taking (her choice this time, his

choice next) or a case of living with such differences, but with an agreement to avoiding such things as debt. When differences in discourse positions are presented as potential therapy issues, it is important to help clients locate the origins of such differences in discourse positioning. Media are one such source, as are the discourses taken up in one's family of origin. This said, however, therapy can be used as a context in which clients can help to reflect on such differences in discourse positioning, consider the cost of capture for themselves and their relationships, and conversationally find new ways to move beyond being captured by financial discourses.

### **BIASES AND LIMITATIONS**

By a discourse view of theory and practice (Lock & Strong, 2012), there is no escaping bias when humans communicate, be that through conversation or through media representations. Thus, what is important for discourse analysts are analyses that are credible and plausible in the eyes of readers, and of use to practitioners (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The scope of this modest project allowed for a small examination of only a portion of the available literatures on financial discourses in therapeutic and professional settings. There might be unexamined literature and discourses different or contrary to the ones identified in the current study. Similarly, this project primarily focused on Canadian popular media; media published in the United States, Europe, or other parts of the world may read very differently.

The authors of this paper are all discursively-oriented family therapists; therefore they are attuned to noticing discourses and how discourses may influence client behaviors and interactions. The categories and discourses identified in the literature were a function of the researchers' education and clinical background as therapists and postmodern practitioners. All of the researchers (with the exception of one) have limited expertise in financial therapy, but have training and expertise in discursive approaches to couple and family therapy. Therefore, seeing "gender" discourses, for example, could be more salient for the authors of this paper than for others who were trained differently. In addition, implications provided come from a frame of a discursively-oriented family therapist, rather than a therapist trained differently. Despite these biases and limitations, this paper offers an alternative, discursive way of viewing media concerning marital and financial conflict, and provides ways for therapists to intervene using this alternative methodology.

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