

Book review

Wegner, D. (2020). A Genre analysis of social change: Uptake of the housing-first solution to homelessness in Canada.

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Diana Wegner's analysis of the movement of Housing First (HF) principles through the genre ecologies of homelessness is an important (and fascinating) contribution to our understanding of genre, uptake, and genre memory. The multi-year study detailed in *A Genre Analysis of Social Change* was developed in response to a homelessness discourse that emerged in Canadian media and public discourse during the lead up to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, British Columbia. Observing a new and focused interest in governmental neglect of unhoused communities, Wegner looked for and found almost no references to homelessness and homeless people in the Official Community Plans (OCPs) of British Columbian municipalities themselves struggling with homelessness. Turning then to homeless advocacy groups in 'Vancouver, Wegner focused on an HF model that first emerged in California and is now a fundamental approach to homelessness in North America, Europe, and Australia. In general, HF prioritizes "barrier free" permanent housing over targeted services. Wegner's tracing of the adoption of HF from activist communities to the Canadian government illustrates the significance of a rhetorical genre approach to uptake. This includes how "the resources and affordances" (p. 41) of activist, research, and government genres are engaged and mobilized in multifaceted contexts. Ultimately, Wegner provides a case study for how the power relations of uptake, particularly of low-level genres (activist genres) by high-level ones (legislation), can remain out of step with practices at the level of action (such as the lack of homelessness in OCPs) and lead to "disruptive" outcomes.

Wegner's introduction to this 76-page book begins with the Canadian government's adoption of the HF model into legislation and the homelessness advocacy community's initial elation and then dismay at how the strategy was "remembered" in the legislative context. The response of activist

communities and the content of HF legislation are at the core of Wegner's claims about the relationship between genre and uptake. In particular, the primary role of genre memory in whether that uptake results in "non-problematic" or "disruptive effects" (p. 4). The three introductory chapters of the book thus orient the reader to the context including a short history of the HF model, Wegner's definition and adoption of the concepts of genre, uptake and genre memory, and a detailing of the study's application of rhetorical genre theory, discourse analysis, and ethnographic methodologies (such as Wegner's immersion in the monthly meetings of homelessness advocacy communities and interviews with stakeholders).

Uptake, genre memory, and genre stability are given their own introductory chapter as key concepts that Wegner further theorizes and then later mobilizes to understand the "mediations" between advocacy and government in creating social change. Genre in Wegner's approach is understood as a "socio-cognitively shared blueprint for social action" (p. 12) involving both the motivations and goals of that action. Uptake then is "the dynamics—motivations and strategies—set into play when discursive entities cross genre boundaries" (p. 4). For example, when the genres of homelessness advocates—such as definitions of HF and who qualifies—are translated in the uptake of HF by governmental bodies—such as legislation. A genre approach to uptake, as illustrated by the example of HF, is particularly useful at capturing the power dynamics of genre interactions and the uptake (often selective) of one genre by another. Wegner first situates uptake in relation to Charles Bazerman's (1994) "genre systems" and Spinuzzi and Zachry's (2000) "genre ecology" (p. 12) and problematizes previous understandings of uptake as a unilateral or even bilateral process. In order to understand Wegner's later distinction between a deep and shallow genre memory, it is necessary to understand her situating of uptake in relation to the suggestion that "genres are only ever 'stabilized for now'" (Shryer as cited in Wegner, p. 5). Within genre ecologies, uptake becomes a process that both destabilizes and stabilizes. Genres remember their past in each new situation and can, as illustrated through Wegner's research, continue to be shaped and mobilized even after their own uptake by another (potentially more powerful) genre.

According to Wegner's findings as detailed in Chapter 4, "The Discursive Chain of HF Uptake: Advocacy, Policy, Research, Governance, Advocacy," the uptake of HF from activist genres into legislation resulted in unforeseen (and unwelcome) outcomes. The government genre's forgetting of key aspects of HF's history is an example of a "disruptive" uptake that is the result of what Wegner describes as two kinds of genre memory: a deep, "ramified" and "active genre memory" (e.g., of activist groups) and a "shallow, fossilized or abbreviated genre memory" (E.g. of government) (p. 16).

Wegner is clear that her distinction between these two kinds of genre memory is closely related to the distinction made by Giltrow (2016) between “shared and unshared consciousness” (Giltrow, as cited in Wegner, p. 74). The government’s shallow memory of HF included fundamentally economic motivations for the uptake of HF and the lack of understanding (and subsequent forgetting) of HF’s roots in homeless activism.

Wegner’s concluding chapter further discusses how unproblematic uptakes can be achieved “when facilitated by the historical and mutual investment of values and practices of participants” (p. 8) such as the cooperation between homelessness advocates and service providers who lost their funding through the adoption of HF in legislation. The reuptake of government genres by groups who shared a deep and dynamic memory of HF allowed for a continued expansion of HF and “on the ground” collaborations. Wegner’s findings on uptake and genre memory illustrate “how, even in enactments of social change and resistance, the advocacy genre system can participate productively with a dominant power” (p. 75). It would be useful to extend Wegner’s theorizing of deep and shallow genre memory and the complex power structures of uptake in relation to advocacy genres and government legislation to other similar situations such as the recent legalization of the Cannabis industry in Canada and the activism of Indigenous people for environmental and energy justice.

The organization and flow of Wegner’s prose allows the reader to visualize and move with and within the multidirectional genre ecologies (including the interpersonal networks and exchanges) involved in the uptake of HF. This makes for a compelling read and also highlights the significance of Wegner’s findings both to rhetorical genre theory and discourse studies and to those working at all levels in the areas of social change. Statistics on homelessness in Canada range from 150,000 to 300,000 people who are homeless across the country at any given time (The Homelessness Partnering Secretariat (HPS), as cited in the Homeless Hub, <https://www.homelesshub.ca/>): from people with chronic and periodic lack of housing to those in precarious housing situations. Coupled with the mainstreaming of homelessness discourse in Canadian politics and media, it is clear to many that Canada is in the midst of a housing crisis. Understanding how grassroots and advocacy genres might be mobilized for an unproblematic uptake in research, policy, and legislative contexts includes being able to recognize the power dynamics that might facilitate either collaboration or colonization. Overall, Wegner has successfully illustrated the “usefulness of analyzing uptake as a genre-based phenomenon” (p.76) as well as the adaptability of activist genres systems and their resiliency in the “enduring struggle” (p. 76) to achieve social justice objectives, and create social support and change for the communities they serve.

References

Canadian Observatory of Homelessness. (n.d.). *How Many People Are Homeless In Canada*. The Homeless Hub. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/how-many-people-are-homeless-canada>