

SOCIOCOGNITIVE POLARISATION OF FORMER DRUG USERS IN BRUNEI: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

For former drug users, reintegration into society is rarely straightforward. Despite undergoing rehabilitation, many continue to face social exclusion shaped by how they communicate and how others perceive them. However, limited research has examined how identity is discursively negotiated in post-rehabilitation contexts, particularly through the lens of socio-cognitive polarisation. This research investigates how “Us vs Them” polarisation shapes identity reconstruction in the narratives of former drug users in Brunei. Drawing on van Dijk’s Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research analyses semi-structured interviews with ten former drug users serving as peer mentors at Pusat Al-Islah, Brunei’s primary rehabilitation centre, known locally as mayors. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using discursive strategies, including pronoun use, evaluative language, and narrative framing, organised across four sociocognitive schemata: affective, perceptive, cognitive, and figurative. The findings reveal that sociocognitive polarisation is systematically reproduced across all four schemata. Participants consistently position themselves as reformed and deserving of belonging, while constructing society as judgmental and marginalising. The dichotomy reflects internalised social judgment rooted in shared mental models, through which moral value and group identity are continuously negotiated. The research contributes to CDA by demonstrating that socio-cognitive polarisation is not merely a rhetorical device but rather functions as a structural mechanism that regulates belonging, exclusion, and identity reconstruction in post-rehabilitation discourse.

Keywords: *Sociocognitive Polarisation, “Us vs Them”, former drug users, Post-Rehabilitation Narratives, Critical Discourse Analysis*

Introduction

Language functions as a tool for constructing and negotiating identity within socially situated contexts. From a discourse perspective, these practices actively shape how individuals position themselves in relation to others and, at the same time, reflect internal cognitive structures. Arguably, language integrates conceptual systems within human cognition, thereby revealing processes of identity construction (Kustyarini, 2017). This becomes particularly significant in contexts of marginalisation, where patterns of language use often diverge from superior social

norms. In similar contexts, language also serves as a mechanism for constructing and organising knowledge through patterned lexical and grammatical choices, enabling individuals to articulate experiences shaped by their social realities (Snell, 2014). For former drug users, post-rehabilitation narratives become a critical space for renegotiating identity while navigating societal judgment. Therefore, language operates as a resource through which former drug users reconstruct identity and redefine their sense of belonging. By examining discourse, particularly pronoun usage and evaluative expressions, this research highlights how linguistic choices function as strategies for positioning both ‘the self’ and ‘others’. Consequently, analysing language use provides critical insight into how former drug users in Brunei continuously reshape their identities within socially constrained environments.

Despite the importance of language and cognition in identity construction, the process of reintegration for former drug users remains shaped by sociocognitive mechanisms that reproduce social segregation. Cognition underpins discourse production and interpretation through socially rooted mental processes, including perception, memory, and evaluation (Chomsky, 1976; Costley & Nelson, 2013). These processes develop through interaction with the social environment, where experiences contribute to the formation of knowledge structures and patterns of thought (Sri Muliati Abdullah, 2019). Importantly, cognition is not purely individual but socially influenced by observational learning and interaction (Bandura, 2012). Within this framework, van Dijk (1987) conceptualises ideology as a system of socially shared beliefs that regulate group attitudes and are reproduced through discourse. Critical to this is the formation of shared mental models that structure how former drug users interpret social reality and categorise themselves and others. These models frequently manifest in ideological polarisation through binary constructions such as “Us” versus “Them.” Linguistic strategies such as pronoun selection, narrative framing, and evaluative language serve to construct in-group and out-group distinctions, which are embedded in broader power relations and ideological structures (Fairclough, 1992). However, there remains limited research examining how these sociocognitive processes are linguistically realised in post-rehabilitation discourse, particularly within the Brunei context.

Addressing this gap, this research focuses on the discursive construction of social exclusion and identity among former drug users in Brunei, with particular attention to sociocognitive polarisation. Social exclusion refers to processes that restrict individuals’ participation in social life and limit access to opportunities, often resulting in marginalisation (Room, 1995; Ita Putriani & Novia Juita, 2021). Although previous studies, such as Norhayati Ibrahim et al. (2018), Siti Nurulain Mohd Sobri (2019), and Zulhilmi bin Haji Jaidin (2020), have examined stigma as an outcome, less attention has been given to how exclusion is discursively constructed and negotiated through language. Guided by van Dijk’s Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research investigates how “Us versus Them” polarisation is linguistically positioned in the narrative of former drug users. It examines how they construct themselves as reformed and deserving of inclusion, while representing society as judgmental and marginalising. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to extending SCA in CDA within a post-rehabilitation context, offering a nuanced understanding of how language shapes relationships among cognition, the social environment, and structures of exclusion. Ultimately, this research provides significant insights into how discourse shapes identity, belonging, and social inclusion.

Methodology

This section outlines a coherent methodological framework that aligns the research objectives with the procedures used to investigate sociocognitive polarisation in post-rehabilitation

narratives. The research adopts a qualitative, semi-structured interview to investigate how identity is constructed through the “Us vs Them” dichotomy in post-rehabilitation narratives. This approach is essential because discourse analysis requires sensitivity to both linguistic form and lived experience. By merging research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis, the methodology ensures that interpretations remain grounded in participants’ narratives. Furthermore, the framework justifies each methodological decision, ensuring transparency and validity. The emphasis on discourse as a site of meaning-making highlights the relationship between language, cognition, and social context. This allows the research to capture how identity reconstruction is negotiated through interaction.

At the core of the SCA framework is the assumption that discourse both reflects and reproduces socially shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies. The approach operates across micro and macro levels, where linguistic strategies such as pronoun use and narrative framing (micro) are linked to broader structures of power and inequality (macro) (Alexander et al., 1987; Huber, 1991; Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981; van Dijk, 1980). These levels are formulated through mental models, representations of experience stored in episodic memory that guide interpretation and discourse production (van Dijk, 2012, 2014, 2015). Such models are shaped by socially shared knowledge systems and belief structures constructed in a discourse (van Dijk, 2023). Within this framework, attitudes and ideologies perform as evaluative tools that position individuals within group relations (van Dijk, 2009). As mentioned previously, this research focuses on the “Us vs Them” strategy, which constructs in-group and out-group differentiation and reproduces exclusion and marginalisation. Therefore, SCA allows a comprehensive analysis of how discourse reproduces ideological polarisation and shapes the identity reconstruction of former drug users in this research.

This research manifested a fieldwork approach to explore how former drug users construct meaning through discourse in post-rehabilitation contexts. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium, this research views it as a site where identity, social pressure, and transformation are articulated. This is particularly relevant in investigating how “Us vs Them” differentiation emerges through pronoun use and narrative positioning. Fieldwork was conducted at Pusat Al-Islah in Brunei, the country’s primary rehabilitation centre under the Narcotics Control Bureau. This site was selected due to its direct relevance to the lived experiences of former drug users. Conducting research within this environment enhances contextual validity, as the data reflect authentic recovery experiences. Furthermore, the rehabilitation setting influences how participants interpret challenges, support systems, and the process of identity reconstruction. Thus, the research design ensures that findings are grounded in real-life contexts and meaning-making processes.

The sampling strategy for this research is purposive, involving ten participants, namely the mayors, who are former drug users serving as peer mentors at the centre. This group is selected for their direct engagement in the recovery process and their ability to articulate complex experiences of rehabilitation. In qualitative research, depth of insight is prioritised over sample size, as Dörnyei (2007) emphasises. These participants occupy a one-of-a-kind position that allows them to reflect on both personal transformation and social interaction within the rehabilitation environment. Their narratives often contain evaluative and metaphorical expressions that reveal underlying cognitive and ideological structures. This makes them particularly suitable for analysing sociocognitive polarisation. By focusing on participants with rich experiential knowledge, this research ensures that the data collected are relevant and in-depth. Furthermore, purposive sampling strengthens the alignment between research objectives and participant characteristics. Consequently, the sample provides a robust foundation for examining discourse and identity reconstruction.

Data collection in this research is conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allow for both consistency and flexibility in obtaining participants' narratives. This method is chosen because it enables participants to share their experiences in their own terms while still addressing key research themes (Jasmi, 2012). The flexible structure is crucial, as polarised discourse and metaphorical expressions often emerge spontaneously during storytelling. Moreover, this approach provides richer, more layered data suitable for discourse analysis. It also ensures that the "Us vs Them" dichotomy is captured as it naturally occurs in narratives. Therefore, the data collection method aligns closely with the research's focus on discourse and sociocognitive processes.

All interview data were recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity and detail of participants' speech. Verbatim transcription is essential in discourse analysis, as it captures linguistic features such as lexical choice, repetition, pauses, and emphasis, which carry interpretative significance (Oliver et al., 2005). These features are particularly important in identifying how polarisation is constructed through language. By maintaining the original structure of utterances, the analysis can account for subtle nuances that reflect cognitive and ideological positioning. This process ensures that the data remain faithful to participants' intended meanings. Furthermore, accurate transcription provides a reliable foundation for subsequent analytical procedures. Transcription is not merely a technical step but a critical component of the analytical process. Therefore, it enables a precise and context-sensitive examination of discourse and identity construction.

Finding and Discussion

The analysis adopts a layered analytical procedure, integrating thematic analysis with SCA to examine how sociocognitive polarisation is discursively constructed in narratives of the former drug users. Initially, thematic analysis was conducted using both deductive and inductive principles to identify recurring patterns and categories within the dataset (Kuckartz, 2019). Deductively, the analysis was guided by CDA, particularly foregrounding ideological polarisation and the "Us vs Them" dichotomy (van Dijk, 1993; van Dijk, 2009). Inductively, linguistic markers such as pronoun usage, lexical selection, and figurative expressions were examined as empirical starting points for identifying discursive regularities grounded in participants' lived experiences.

From this point, the analysis proceeds along a structured sociocognitive trajectory. First, at the micro level, agentivity is identified through pronoun usage, which functions as a primary linguistic feature for positioning social actors (Fairclough, 1992; Chilton & Schaffner, 2011; Oktar, 2001; Dunmire, 2005). Second, these pronoun patterns construct a dichotomous relational partition, operationalised through the "Us vs Them" differentiation. Third, these partitions are interpreted through schemata, namely affective, perceptual, cognitive, and figurative, which represent mental models shaped by experience, memory, and participants' socially shared knowledge (van Dijk, 2012; van Dijk, 2014; van Dijk, 2015). Finally, at the macro level, these linguistically encoded schemata are linked to broader social structures, including stigma, marginalisation, and power dynamics (van Dijk, 2009). This analytical flow demonstrates how micro-level linguistic aspects are cognitively mediated to produce macro-level social meanings, shaping identity construction and producing sociocognitive polarisation.

Affective Schema

The analysis of Example 1 begins with a close examination of agentivity, which is linguistically realised through the singular first-person pronoun *aku* (I) and the plural third-person pronoun *dorang* (them). The pronoun *aku* positions the participant as a self-reflexive and accountable agent, while *dorang* constructs society and family as a collective evaluative authority. This asymmetrical configuration establishes a relational structure in which the participant is simultaneously the subject of lived experience and the object of external judgement. The transitive verb *mempercayai* (to trust) further reinforces this grammatical and semantic alignment by foregrounding *kediaku* (me) as the affected participant of trust, therefore encoding the participant as a recipient of conditional or withheld social acceptance (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, 2005). From a linguistic perspective, this clause structure demonstrates how agency is unevenly distributed across participants, with society occupying an evaluative role and the participant an epistemic vulnerability.

Example 1 *Aku pun tahu dorang atu tindakan mempercayai kediaku 100% permulaannya bah. Bah, aku ani bakas dari mana? And ulah ku dulu kan? So, aku yang memainkan peranan sebenarnya kan?* [R5:10]

This agentive structure subsequently develops into a clear “Us vs Them” dichotomy, where *aku* is juxtaposed against *dorang*, forming a polarised relational field grounded in pronoun opposition. The rhetorical questions “*Bah aku ani bakas dari mana? And ulah ku dulu kan?*” (You know where I came from, right? And the things that I do?) function as meta-discursive tools that index reflexivity and self-positioning. Linguistically, these interrogatives do not seek information, but rather signal awareness of pre-existing social judgements, thereby revealing how discourse encodes intersubjective evaluation. At the sociocognitive level, these utterances activate shared memory structures, particularly what van Dijk (2009, 2012) conceptualises as socially shared knowledge and episodic memory. The reference to *bakas* (past identity) demonstrates how historical categorisation remains cognitively prominent within societal perception, reinforcing the persistence of stigma through discourse. Livingston (2020) argues that individuals with stigmatised past identities often anticipate judgment through internalised discourse patterns, reflecting the role of memory in shaping social cognition.

At the level of the affective schema, the discourse reveals an interaction between emotional experience and cognitive evaluation, in which the lexical item *mempercayai* (trust) serves as a key marker of relational tension. The participant’s awareness of distrust reflects an internalised affective response shaped by collective beliefs about drug use histories. This aligns with Coonie, Inga, and Kate (2014), who highlight how disrupted trust undermines interpersonal communication, and Barnard (2013), who demonstrates that substance-related histories continue to affect familial relationships over time. From a sociocognitive perspective, these affective responses are not purely individual but are structured by socially shared belief systems that function as cognitive schemata (van Dijk, 2015). Moreover, Wodak and Reisigl (2015) emphasise that positioning in narratives often reveals deeper ideological structures, particularly in contexts of marginalisation. Thus, emotional expressions of distrust are discursively constructed and cognitively mediated.

At the macro level, this affective configuration contributes to the reproduction of social marginalisation. Distrust was operated as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates inclusion and exclusion. Scepticism, conceptualised as a cognitive filter (Striker, 2001), shapes how society evaluates individuals with stigmatised histories, reinforcing polarised group boundaries. Linguistically, this is sustained through repeated pronoun opposition and evaluative verb constructions that encode relational distance. The findings further support

Norliah binti Md Zain (2015), who argues that trust must be co-constructed through social engagement rather than unilaterally granted. Volkow et al. (2021) also indicate that reintegration processes are significantly hindered when distrust becomes institutionalised within social cognition. Therefore, Example 1 demonstrates that affective schema, realised through agentivity, pronoun selection, and evaluative verbs of trust, function as a central mechanism in sustaining sociocognitive polarisation between former drug users and society.

Perceptive Schema

The analysis of Example 2 begins with a detailed examination of agentivity realised through the perceptual process encoded in the transitive verb *melihat* (seeing). Within the clause structure, *dorang* (them) is the grammatical subject and active perceiver, while *kami* (us) is the object, becoming the entity seen, evaluated, and interpreted. This syntactic arrangement establishes a directional flow of perception in which interpretive authority is asymmetrically distributed, privileging the external social group as the producer of meaning. From a systemic-functional perspective, this aligns with material-perceptive processes, in which the actor retains control over the perceptual act, thereby encoding power relations within grammatical structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The plural pronoun pairing (*dorang* vs *kami*) further expands this interaction to a collective level, transforming individual experience into a socially shared representation of group-based observation.

Example 2 *Macam ke masjid sembahyang Jumaat apa, kadang-kadang dorang melihat kami ani macam kana anu bah, tapi ani perasaan kami saja ni ah, macam belabel wah, 'bekas pengguna', anu kana label sini [menunjuk dahi]. [R5:09]*

This agentive structure subsequently develops into a reinforced “Us vs Them” dichotomy, in which *kami* (us) are positioned as visibly marked subjects in public and religious settings. At the same time, *dorang* (they) serve as observers with the power to define social meaning. The inclusion of embodied gesture, *menunjuk dahi* (pointing at his forehead), extends the linguistic construction into multimodal discourse, emphasising how labelling is not only verbal but also physically enacted. Such multimodal reinforcement intensifies the process of “othering,” as the body itself becomes a site of inscription for social identity. This corresponds with Dilthey’s conceptualisation of perception as a meaning-making process grounded in evaluative judgement (Dilthey, in Mooney, 2015) and is further supported by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), who argue that gestures function as semiotic resources, thereby shaping the construction of social stigma in research.

At the level of perceptive schema, the discourse reveals how the social gaze is cognitively processed and internalised as labelling. The expressions “*macam belabel wah*” (it feels I was labelled) and “*bekas pengguna*” (former users) function as metalinguistic markers that indicate an awareness of categorisation, demonstrating that perception is mediated through socially shared knowledge rather than ordinary perception. The repeated lexical emphasis on labelling constructs a schema in which individuals anticipate judgement prior to interaction, reflecting what van Dijk (2012) conceptualises as mental models shaped by past experiences and collective beliefs. This is consistent with the notion of “post-serenti syndrome” (Dr Al-Zilal Abdul Wahid, 2021), where former drug users continue to perceive themselves through the lens of societal stigma even after rehabilitation. Fraser et al. (2020) and Livingston et al. (2020) further support this by indicating that stigma is sustained through everyday linguistic practices, particularly through repeated acts of naming and categorisation.

At the macro level, the perceptive schema contributes significantly to the reproduction of stigma and social exclusion. The act of being seen in normative spaces such as mosques does not neutralise identity. Instead, it intensifies scrutiny, demonstrating that inclusion in physical space does not equate to social acceptance. The Global Commission on Drug Policy (2017) highlights that such stigmatising perceptions are often perpetuated through discourse, where labels function as tools of social control. This results in psychological consequences such as shame, self-consciousness, and internalised inferiority (Zulhilmi Haji Jaidin, 2020; Tariq & Jameel, 2020). Linguistically, these processes are sustained through pronoun opposition, perceptual verbs, and evaluative labelling, which collectively construct a polarised social reality. Therefore, Example 2 demonstrates that perceptive schema operates as a crucial feature in sustaining sociocognitive polarisation where the act of seeing becomes a form of social regulation and identity construction.

Cognitive Schema

The analysis of Example 3 foregrounds agentivity through cognitive processes, particularly the verb *berfikir* (thinking), which encodes internal mental activity attributed to *mereka* (they). The morphological construction of *berfikir*, through the prefix *beR-*, signals reflexivity and self-directed cognition, indicating that the evaluative process is internally generated rather than externally imposed (Nik Safiah Karim et al., 2011). This positions society as an active cognitive agent responsible for producing interpretations, while *kami* (us) remains the entity subjected to these evaluations. The co-occurrence of *berfikir*, *berhati-hati* (careful), and *berubah* (changing) creates a cohesive semantic field that reflects layered cognitive processes: evaluation, anticipation, and adjustment, therefore illustrating how language encodes complex mental operations (Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Zaharani Ahmad & Nurul Huda Mohd Saad, 2010).

Example 3 *Mereka tetap berhati-hati dengan kitani, dan mereka dengan sekelip mata saja menukar persepsi jika sekiranya satu majlis kebajikan pun kalau mereka berfikir tentang riadah untuk bersama masyarakat dalam majlis-majlis, apabila terserempak dengan orang-orang macam kami ani, instantly fikiran atu berubah ke sanatah pulang. [R1:16]*

This configuration reinforces the “Us vs Them” dichotomy by situating cognitive authority within the social group (*mereka*), while positioning the participant group (*kami*) as the trigger for cognitive recalibration. The lexical item *berhati-hati* reflects a state of habitual vigilance that is historically and socially conditioned (Asmah Haji Omar, 1982), suggesting that societal perceptions are not spontaneous but rooted in the knowledge of past behaviours. Meanwhile, the verb *berubah*, intensified by the adverb *instantly*, emphasises the immediacy and automaticity of perceptual shifts upon encountering former drug users. This immediacy indicates that cognitive processing operates at a rapid, almost unconscious level, aligning with van Dijk’s (2014) notion of mental models as fast-acting interpretive frameworks. Corrigan et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate that stigma-related cognition often produces instantaneous evaluative judgements, particularly in contexts involving socially marked identities.

At the level of cognitive schema, the discourse reveals a dual and interdependent structure of mental modelling. On one hand, society operates within a schema characterised by vigilance, risk anticipation, and defensive distancing. On the other hand, the participants group develops a schema based on the expectation of rejection, self-monitoring, and behavioural adaptation.

The repeated use of *tetap* (remain) indicates the persistence and stability of these cognitive patterns, suggesting that they are deeply entrenched within social cognition. This aligns with studies from DeWall and Bushman (2011) and MacDonald and Leary (2005) on social rejection, which indicate that repeated exposure to exclusion shapes both cognitive processing and behavioural responses. Earnshaw et al. (2020) further suggest that prolonged exposure to stigma can lead to internalised cognitive restructuring, in which individuals anticipate rejection even in neutral contexts.

At the macro level, these cognitive processes contribute to the reproduction of systemic marginalisation by maintaining a cycle of perception and adaptation. Society's cognitive schema reinforces exclusion through continuous evaluation, while the former drug users internalise these evaluations and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This reciprocal dynamic illustrates how cognition operates between discourse and social structure by sustaining polarisation through both external judgement and internal compliance. Linguistically, this is realised through the consistent use of cognitive verbs, pronoun opposition, and intensifiers which encode the immediacy and persistence of evaluative processes. Therefore, Example 3 demonstrates that cognitive schemata function as a central mechanism in sustaining sociocognitive polarisation, as former drug users regulate how they are perceived, and at the same time position themselves within social interactions.

Figurative Schema

The analysis of Example 4 begins with identifying figurative language as a key discursive strategy, particularly through the proverb "*macam talur di hujung tanduk*", which symbolises a state of extreme vulnerability and instability (Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu, 1991). The pronoun *kami* (us) positions the participant group as the experiential subject, while *dorang* (they) denotes the external evaluative group, thus maintaining the agentive dichotomy. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphor functions as a conceptual mapping that translates abstract social experiences into concrete imagery, enabling complex emotional and social realities to be communicated effectively (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this case, the mapping of human experience onto the fragile object, such as *talur* (egg) and precarious position *di hujung tanduk* (at the edge of the horn), creates a vivid symbol of social vulnerability.

Example 4 *Kami ani macam talur di hujung tanduk bah. Inda dapat salah sedikit, pap! Pacah tia! Memang selalu. Walaupun masalah yang kecil kami buat, walaupun salah atu yang kami buat atu bagi kami kecil, tapi bagi dorang basar.* [R4:09]

This metaphor intensifies the "Us vs Them" by encoding asymmetrical power relations within symbolic form. The former drug users are constructed as fragile and susceptible to damage, while society is implicitly positioned as the force capable of causing destabilisation. The clause "*bagi kami kecil, tapi bagi dorang basar*" further reinforces this polarity by highlighting evaluative divergence, where identical actions are interpreted through different cognitive frameworks. This reflects van Dijk's (2009) notion of ideological polarisation, where in-group actions are minimised while out-group actions are amplified. The exaggeration of minor actions into major transgressions demonstrates how social cognition operates through biased evaluative standards, reinforcing inequality in social judgment.

At the level of figurative schema, the proverb functions as a cognitive-affective representation of lived experience, encapsulating emotional suppression, constant vigilance, and anticipatory

anxiety. The metaphor allows the participant to externalise internal states, transforming subjective experience into shared symbolic meaning. This aligns with Bhandari et al. (2015), who highlight the role of social support in mitigating stress, and Yuet-Wah (2005), who emphasises the impact of unsupportive environments on psychological well-being. Thus, figurative language operates as a cognitive tool for meaning making (Demjén et al., 2019). At the macro level, the figurative schema reflects structural marginalisation by constructing a social reality in which former drug users perceive themselves as constantly at risk of failure and judgement. The metaphor does not simply describe vulnerability but actively constructs identity, positioning themselves as fragile subjects under continuous surveillance. This reinforces the broader argument that discourse is constitutive of social reality, shaping how individuals understand their position within society. Linguistically, this is achieved through metaphor, pronoun opposition, and evaluative contrast, which together encode a deeply polarised social structure. Therefore, Example 4 demonstrates that figurative schemata function as a powerful mechanism in articulating and sustaining sociocognitive polarisation.

Discursive Construction of “Us vs Them” Dichotomy

Across all four examples, the findings demonstrate a systematic, layered construction of sociocognitive polarisation, beginning at the micro-level of linguistic features and extending to the macro-level of social structures. The analysis consistently reveals that agentivity, realised through pronoun selection (*aku/kami* vs *dorang/mereka*), serves as the foundational mechanism for constructing relational asymmetry. These pronouns do not merely indicate grammatical roles; however, they function as indexical markers of social positioning, distinguishing between in-group and out-group identities. Through this repeated configuration, discourse constructs a stable “Us versus Them” dichotomy, positioning the former drug users as the evaluated subject. At the same time, society serves as the evaluator, observer, and cognitive authority. This aligns with van Dijk’s (2009) framework of ideological polarisation, in which discourse systematically emphasises group differences to maintain social boundaries.

At the meso-level, these linguistic constructions are mediated through sociocognitive schemata, affective, perceptive, cognitive, and figurative, which represent structured mental models shaped by experience, memory, and socially shared knowledge (van Dijk, 2012, 2014). The affective schema reveals how trust and emotion are shaped by internalised societal judgment, while the perceptive schema demonstrates how social perceptions function as a mechanism of labelling and categorisation. The cognitive schema highlights the role of mental processes, such as thinking, anticipation, and evaluation, in maintaining social distance. In contrast, the figurative schema translates these experiences into symbolic representations that encapsulate vulnerability and marginalisation. These schemata operate interdependently, forming a cohesive system through which individuals interpret and respond to their social environment. Contemporary studies such as Wodak and Reisigl (2015) and Demjén et al. (2019) support this interaction between language and cognition, emphasising that discourse both reflects and reproduces mental models that shape social reality.

At the macro level, the interaction between linguistic features and cognitive schemata contributes to the reproduction of structural marginalisation and stigma. The consistent pattern of pronoun opposition, evaluative verbs, and perceptual processes, together with metaphorical expression constructs a social reality in which the former drug users are consistently positioned as deviant, fragile, and socially risky. This results in a cyclical process in which societal perceptions reinforce internalised stigma, which, in turn, shapes behaviour and identity construction. Volkow et al. (2021) have shown that such processes are central to the persistence

of stigma in post-rehabilitation contexts, where individuals continue to experience exclusion despite behavioural change. Consequently, discourse functions as a reflection of social reality and at the same time as an active mechanism in sustaining inequality and exclusion.

Overall, the integrated analysis demonstrates that sociocognitive polarisation is not a singular phenomenon but a multi-layered process that emerges from the interaction of language, cognition, and social ideology. The findings confirm that identity reconstruction among former drug users is shaped by ongoing negotiation within a polarised discursive environment, where inclusion and exclusion are continuously contested. Through the systematic use of linguistic strategies, individuals both reproduce and resist societal categorisation, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity. Therefore, this research substantiates the argument that sociocognitive polarisation operates as a central mechanism in structuring discourse, identity, and social relations, particularly within contexts of marginalisation within a CDA framework.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the discourse of former drug users in Brunei is systematically structured through the interplay of linguistic choices, sociocognitive processes, and social ideologies, and therefore confirms the centrality of sociocognitive polarisation within CDA. Through the integration of thematic analysis and van Dijk's SCA, the findings reveal that micro-level linguistic features, particularly agentivity and pronoun usage, serve as foundational mechanisms in constructing the "Us vs Them" dichotomy. The recurrence of first-person pronouns (*aku, kami*) and third-person plural forms (*dorang, mereka*) not only encodes relational positioning but also reflects deeper cognitive schemata shaped by memory, knowledge, and shared social beliefs (van Dijk, 2009, 2014). These linguistic patterns are further realised through affective, perceptual, cognitive, and figurative schemata, which function as mental models that mediate participants' experiences of trust, labelling, social judgement, and vulnerability. At the macro level, these discursive constructions reproduce broader social structures of stigma, marginalisation, and exclusion, demonstrating how discourse operates as a social practice that both reflects and sustains power relations. Studies in discourse related to mental health, such as Khan et al. (2022), O'Reilly et al. (2021), and Stangl et al. (2022), further support this finding, emphasising that language plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and reinforcing stigma toward marginalised groups. Thus, this research contributes significantly to the field of linguistic and discourse studies by extending the application of SCA within the context of addiction recovery in Brunei, highlighting how language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a mechanism of social categorisation and ideological reproduction.

In conclusion, this research establishes that sociocognitive polarisation is a central mechanism through which former drug users negotiate identity, belonging, and social acceptance within a stratified social environment. The findings indicate that former drug users are positioned within a persistent cycle of evaluation and self-regulation, where societal cognition, manifested through scepticism, labelling, and perceptual judgement, interacts with individual cognitive and affective responses to produce internalised marginalisation. At the same time, former drug users demonstrated agency by reflexively engaging with these discourses, constructing identities that seek to reconcile past experiences with present aspirations for reintegration. This dynamic reflects a dual process in which discourse simultaneously constrains and enables identity formation. Best et al. (2012), Livingston et al. (2020), and Yang and Kleiman (2008) underscore the importance of supportive discourse and inclusive narratives in facilitating successful reintegration and reducing stigma among former drug users. Therefore, this research not only reinforces the theoretical relevance of van Dijk's SCA for analysing sociocognitive

dynamics but also offers practical implications for policy, rehabilitation programmes, and public discourse in Brunei. By foregrounding the role of language in constructing social reality, this research calls for a more reflexive and inclusive discursive practice that can mitigate polarisation and promote social cohesion, ultimately supporting the long-term recovery and reintegration of former drug users.

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