

Book Review

Beyond chicks, birds and the generic male

Weatherall, A. (2002)

Gender, language and discourse
London: Routledge. 177 pages

Reviewed by Virginia Braun

There seem to be popular conceptions that a) women have achieved equality with men, or perhaps even overtaken men, so that we live in a women's world now, and b) feminism is something in the past, and not much relevant to the (liberated, equal) lives women, or certainly western women, live these days. However, this book shows that gender and sex still matter. Constructions of gender still impact on women's, and men's, lives. Gender and gendered power relations still structure the fabric of our social order, and thus the interactions, experiences, and relationships we have in everyday life.

This book, a recent addition to feminist psychology scholarship from New Zealand, offers interesting and insightful examinations of the (ongoing) influence of language and discourse on gender. Theoretically, the book is situated within a social-constructionist/discursive approach to psychology, and is informed by poststructuralist theorising (e.g., Weedon, 1997), where language and discourse are seen not as reflecting a neutral, pre-existing order, but as central to the production of social reality, subjectivity and identity for people. Within this framework, something like 'gender' is not seen to reside *within* individuals, and to be an essential, stable quality people possess (whether it is theorised as originating in biology, society, or both). I think it

is important to note that Weatherall's theoretical positions are broadly consistent with my own, and so any of the typical positivist critiques of this sort of research or approach will not be found here.

Gender, language and discourse takes the reader on a (to some extent chronological) journey through theoretical and research developments in the area of gender and language, finishing with a range of questions for the future of the field. It is a well written, highly accessible, useful book – Weatherall clearly knows her material, and presents it in a way that combines enthusiasm with critical insights. A key theme “is to show how language is key to understanding gender and challenging sexism” (p. 1), and she achieves this well. This book offers a perfect introduction to someone new to the area, as well as working as a handy resource for those more familiar with the issues. It succeeds in linking two previously somewhat separate fields – gender and language research, and feminist discursive psychology. As such, I can see that it would be an excellent teaching tool. For psychologists in particular, it is useful in that it summarises the breadth of psychological work in this area, while also drawing more diversely on sociological, linguistic, and anthropological work, as well as on feminist theorising and research. The

diversity of theoretical material drawn on is a strength of this book and reflects feminist psychology's tradition of looking beyond psychology. However, the book remains firmly directed towards psychology, with one chapter, for instance, specifically addressing the topic of language, discourse, and gender *identity*.

Weatherall situates issues related to gender language and discourse within the broader domain of the social construction of gender. From a social constructionist position, language is crucial in terms of gender, because “language and discourse are the meaning systems that produce (rather than reflect) gender as an important and salient social category” (p. 85). However, although this position is a major theme throughout the book, it is not the theoretical position that informs most of the early work she discusses. Early research on gender and language was broadly focused around two areas, which were, until recently, largely separate domains: gender bias in language, and gender differences in language use.

The journey through gender and language research starts with debates about language and sexism (bias). Weatherall identifies feminists as central in identifying language as “important in social and political change” (p. 11), and social psychology as a key player in “demonstrat[ing] the non-triviality of feminist concerns about the impact of sexism in language” (p. 31). The use of masculine 'generic' pronouns (e.g., he, his) and masculine forms (e.g., man policeman, chairman), for instance, has been found repeatedly to actually be taken as *masculine* referents. So sexist language can produce a cognitive bias against women. This research has been significant in the development of non-

sexist language policies and practices adopted by schools, universities, government departments, and many other areas - but not always the media, or wider society. As critiques about such things as 'PC' language continue to haunt us, it is important to remember such research. Weatherall points out that a key contribution of the research on sexist language, overall, has been "to highlight that the relationships between words and the world are not neutral but deeply ideological" (p. 147).

Weatherall gives considerable attention to the issue of gender-difference in speech styles, and in voice, and demonstrates that despite a popular perception that men and women really do communicate differently, a "massive research effort" (p. 150) in this area has failed to demonstrate gender differences in speech styles. This has not stopped the popularity of the idea that men and women 'communicate across cultures' - evidenced in the work of pop psychologist John Gray and his 1993 bestseller *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. What Weatherall (and others) point out is that a focus on gender difference obscures the many similarities in the ways that women and men use language, and indeed, the enormous differences *between* different women and men. She identifies that "a requirement of future work on language use is to attend to the diversity of speech styles amongst women and amongst men and to consider the similarities in the talk of the two groups" (p. 154). The question of why (gender) difference is so important to us, and what the implications of this might be, is one that goes well beyond the focus of this book.

As well as considering this more 'traditional' psychological research on gender and language, the book also comprehensively covers work situated within the 'discursive turn' in social and feminist psychology. It thus effectively traces the "profound theoretical shift[s]" (p. 11) in the area of thinking about gender and language, and in social psychology more generally. Weatherall argues, convincingly, that the discursive turn allows for a conceptualisation of the two separate research traditions - of representation of women (and men) in language, and of the (gendered) speech practices

women (and men) engage in - as not being so separate after all, but as both centrally part of the social construction of gender in/through language and discourse. For instance, a discursive approach shows that the perception/construction of gender difference in speech, quite apart from whether there might be some 'real' difference, also has material impacts on women's (and men's) lives. One example she cites is the work of Ros Gill (1993) looking at how radio broadcasters accounted for the exclusion of female DJs. Notions of women's voices, as inappropriate for radio because they are either too 'shrill' or 'husky', were drawn on.

A shift to viewing gender not as fixed essence, but rather as social construction, as "a social process" (p. 85), something that is 'done' (e.g., Kessler & McKenna, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987) in interactions, requires a radically different research agenda around research and language, and a considerable part of the book focuses on this. This can be seen clearly in the following quote about 'speech styles':

Gender is something that is done in social interaction. So, from a social constructionist approach, women's (or men's) speech styles are no longer seen to be derived from the social identity of those who use them, but are treated as a discursive or ideological-symbolic concept available to construct one's self as a man or a woman. Thus being a woman or a man is a matter, among other things, of talking like one. (p. 85)

Weatherall covers research on gender from the two main 'styles' of discourse analysis - those that focus more on "the broader meaning systems invoked in talk" (p. 89), loosely termed a 'poststructuralist style' and those that focus on "the structural articulation" (p.89) of those meanings - influenced more by conversation analysis (CA) and ethnomethodology. With this latter approach, the focus is on "what the participants themselves demonstrate is relevant to them in an interaction" (p. 98), so gender is analysed *only* if it is demonstrably relevant to the participants in a conversation. In terms of each tradition, Weatherall provides

a brief but good introduction to each approach, before considering how and what each can tell us about gender and language. Neither approach is above criticism, which Weatherall discusses. Her comment that with CA approaches, "limiting analyses to where gender is explicitly relevant may limit an understanding of the importance of gender as a category that structures people's lives and social interactions" (p. 121), is, from my perspective, an important issue that needs further exploration.

Overall, discursive analyses reveal the complexities and contradictions of language and the multiple uses to which similar bits of talk can be put. Weatherall argues that these analyses suggest that a more complex analysis is necessary, particularly if social change is our agenda. In relation to research on women's name changes in marriage, she writes:

a single or simple explanation of naming practices, while compelling, may be inadequate for promoting social change. Instead an understanding of the discursive fabric of the issue may be an important step in constructing convincing arguments to support social changes that benefit women (p. 94)

So the discursive turn brought a "radical transformation" (p.156) to the issue of language and gender, and how this relationship is conceptualised, and theorised and researched. And also to how we think about the issue of social change - a key concern for many (feminist) psychologists. Importantly, it also offers a way of seeing language as imbued with "ideological power" (p. 8) so that "language reflects and helps to perpetuate a social system that, on the whole, benefits men more than women" (p. 8). In short, "language issues are political issues" (p. 2). This identifies and locates language and discourse as a viable, and indeed crucial, site for social intervention and change.

This book, both implicitly and explicitly, points to the fact that knowledge is not neutral - knowledge serves purposes: "far from being neutral, widely accepted conceptions of the material and social world tend to be

consistent with the values associated with the dominant moral order" (p. 88). Through her examination of research around gender, Weatherall considers how psychology, as a scientific discipline, is also involved in the (re)production of ideas about gender in everyday life, through the knowledge it produces. This fits within a tradition of feminist social psychologies, which have looked "beyond the confines of psychology as an academic discipline, addressing the power it has in shaping everyday understandings and in producing real, material effects in the world" (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 4).

Overall, although this book is oriented towards the question of gender, the 'introduction' it offers to a range of social constructionist and discursive takes on psychology should be generally widely accessible to an audience well beyond that interested in the topic of gender, specifically. It is one of the strengths of the books that it considers these issues in relation to a specific research domain, because I think it works to make the ideas more accessible. Social constructionist/discursive/poststructuralist work can be incredibly inaccessible to those who are not familiar with the approaches, or their central tenets, even with good introductory texts available (e.g., Burr, 2003; Gough & McFadden, 2001; Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). The accessibility of these ideas, particularly when shown in contrast to more traditional/mainstream psychological approaches, is one of the features that I really liked about the book. And in writing in this way, Weatherall has proved that you can write about these issues in a straightforward and accessible way, without 'dumbing down' the key ideas.

That the implications of this book spread beyond the realm of research on gender and language, is evident in relation to the theorising of the meaning of (the categories of) gender. Weatherall states "the idea of gender as a product rather than a cause of language challenges the assumptions upon which the vast majority of psychological work on gender and language rests. Furthermore, it strikes at the very heart of everyday, common-sense notions of what it means to

identify as a woman or a man" (p. 154). These 'common-sense notions' are part-and-parcel of much psychological research, and discursive work around gender, which challenges the idea of gender as stable categories of being, questions the basis of work which looks to find gender-difference on a whole host of psychological variables. It also cautions us to consider how searching for those differences works to reify the notion of gender/difference. Thus the implications of this book for psychologists who want to grapple seriously with issues of gender go far beyond the area of language.

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