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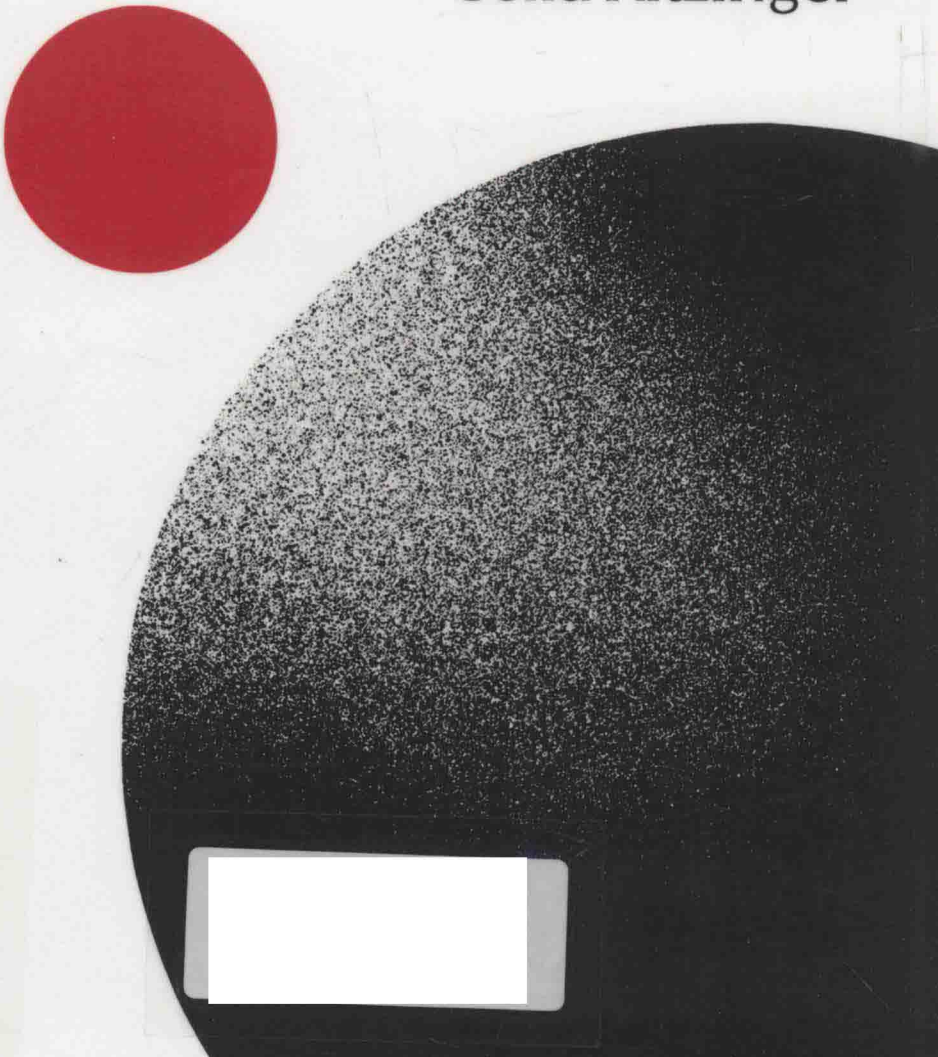
Feminism and Discourse

Psychological Perspectives

edited by
Sue Wilkinson and
Celia Kitzinger



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Feminism and Discourse

Gender and Psychology

Feminist and Critical Perspectives

Series editor: Sue Wilkinson

This international series provides a forum for research focused on gender issues in – and beyond – psychology, with a particular emphasis on feminist and critical analyses. It encourages contributions which explore psychological topics where gender is central; which critically interrogate psychology as a discipline and as a professional base; and which develop feminist interventions in theory and practice. The series objective is to present innovative research on gender in the context of the broader implications for developing both critical psychology and feminism.

Sue Wilkinson teaches social psychology and women's studies at Loughborough University. She is also Editor of *Feminism & Psychology: An International Journal.*

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Rosalind Gill is a lecturer in sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is editor (with Keith Grint) of *The Gender–Technology Relation: Contemporary Theory and Research* (Taylor & Francis), and author of *Gender and the Media* (Polity Press, forthcoming).

Christine Griffin lectures in social psychology at the University of Birmingham. Her research interests include the transition to adulthood, especially for young women; uses of qualitative methods in social psychology; and feminist perspectives on issues of gender and power. She is one of the founding members of the journal *Feminism & Psychology*, and is a member of the independent UK-based Alliance of Women in Psychology. Her main publications include *Typical Girls?* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) and *Representations of Youth* (Polity Press, 1993).

Julie Hepworth is a research associate at the Centre for Cultural Studies, University of South Australia, Adelaide. She completed her doctoral thesis on poststructuralism and eating disorders at the University of Birmingham, which she is currently preparing for publication as *The Discovery of Anorexia Nervosa: Discourses of Science, Medicine and the Body* in Sage's Inquiries in Social Construction series. Her research interests include postmodernism and psychology, qualitative methodology and public health, social representations of the body, the construction of medical discourse and psychopathology, and narrative therapy.

Wendy Hollway is a reader in gender relations in the Department of Applied Social Studies, University of Bradford. She has researched and published on questions to do with subjectivity, gender, sexuality, the history of work

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Celia Kitzinger is director of women's studies at Loughborough University and the author of *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (Sage, 1987) and *Changing Our Minds: Lesbian Feminism and Psychology* (with Rachel Perkins, New York University Press, 1993). Her edited books include *Heterosexuality: A 'Feminism & Psychology' Reader* (with Sue Wilkinson, Sage, 1993).

Kathryn Matthews Lovering is a senior lecturer in psychology and co-ordinator of the Women's Studies Programme at the University of Plymouth. Her current research interests are in the psychology and history of the female body and menstruation, especially in relation to adolescence. Having been a youth worker, teacher and educational psychologist, she completed her doctorate on 'Discourses of Menstruation: Girls, Menarche and Psychology' in 1994.

Corinne Squire is with the Women's Studies Program at Trenton State College, New Jersey. She researches and writes on HIV/AIDS and on popular culture. Her publications include *Women and AIDS: Psychological Perspectives* (edited, Sage, 1993) and *Morality USA: Representations of Morality in Contemporary Culture* (with Ellen Friedman, Minnesota University Press, 1996).

Alison Thomas is a senior lecturer in the Department of Applied Psychosocial Studies at the University of East London. Her research interests include gender and identity; gender relations and the social construction of sexual harassment; and she is currently engaged in a comparative study of the development and implementation of university sexual harassment policies in Canada and the UK. She is joint editor (with Celia Kitzinger) of *Sexual Harassment: Contemporary Feminist Perspectives* (Open University, 1996).

Margaret Wetherell is a senior lecturer in social sciences at the Open University. She is the author of *Discourse and Social Psychology* (with Jonathan Potter, Sage) and *Mapping the Language of Racism* (with Jonathan Potter, Harvester Wheatsheaf). Her main research interests lie in the development and application of theories and methods of discourse analysis to the fields of gender and 'race'. She is currently working (with Nigel Edley) on a project on the discourses of masculinity and has recently published a text reviewing the major theoretical perspectives in work on masculinity, *Men in Perspective* (with Nigel Edley, Harvester Wheatsheaf).

Sue Widdicombe is a lecturer in social psychology at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include the current debates surrounding the concept of self, identities and subjectivity; language; youth subcultures; and the relationship between culture and self, especially in Arab societies. She is author of *The Language of Youth Subcultures: Social Identity in Action* (with Robin Wooffitt, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995).

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Introduction

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger

The 'turn to language' is a defining feature of contemporary social science; and central to it is 'the emergence of a discourse framework' (Parker, 1992: xi). Discourse analysis has been described as 'a new wave of research sweeping across social psychology', and one which is currently 'almost synonymous with "critical" and in some cases "feminist" research' (Burman and Parker, 1993: 1, 9). Given the long history of feminist concern with language, from the nineteenth century on (see Cameron, 1990, for an excellent review; also the 'landmark' texts by, for example, Lakoff, 1975; Thorne and Henley, 1975; Spender, 1980; McConnell-Ginet et al. 1980; Kramarae and Treichler, 1985; and Cameron, 1985), it is perhaps not surprising that discourse analysis has become so popular among feminist psychologists (as witnessed, for example, by the numerous discourse analytic papers published in the international journal *Feminism & Psychology*, such as Burman, 1992; Gavey, 1992; Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Chesters, 1994; Crawford et al., 1994). What is surprising is the curious absence of any text dealing specifically with discourse analysis from a feminist psychological perspective.

Forms of discourse analytic work range widely, from the primarily linguistic (such as Stubbs, 1983), through conversation analysis and ethnomethodology (such as Atkinson and Heritage, 1984), to semiotic, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist/postmodernist variants (such as Henriques et al., 1984). Across these forms, however, non-feminist writing on discourse analysis routinely ignores the contribution made by feminists, while feminist writing on discourse analysis often excludes psychology altogether. So, for example, 'feminism' is not indexed in such key mainstream discourse analytic texts as Norman Fairclough's (1990) *Discourse Analysis*; Teun van Dijk's (1985) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*; Deborah Schiffrin's (1994) *Approaches to Discourse*; Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology* or Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter's (1992) *Discursive Psychology*. Even Ian Parker's (1992) *Discourse Dynamics* has only two references in the index to 'feminism and discourse analysis' (131, 140): these pages

briefly mention the work of Walkerdine, Hollway, Squire, Gavey and Haraway as contributing to the development of poststructuralist discourse analysis – and that's all. Similarly, the omission of work by psychologists in interdisciplinary feminist work on discourse is apparent from volumes such as the *Discourse & Society* Special Issue on 'Women Speaking from Silence' (Houston and Kramarae, 1991) which includes contributions from researchers based in sociology, speech and communications studies, women's studies, English literature, linguistics, and adult education, but not one contributor who identifies herself as a psychologist; and the volume in the Advances in Discourse Processes series on *Gender and Discourse* (Todd and Fisher, 1988) which includes only one contribution from a psychologist (Kathy Davis). The omission of psychological perspectives in feminist discourse analytic writing is clear, too, when well-known feminist writers on – and popularizers of – discourse analysis, such as Deborah Tannen (1994), make virtually no reference to contributions from psychologists. There has been no attempt to pull together the diverse strands of feminist psychological discourse analytic research in a single collection; nor to consider in any sustained way the value of discourse analysis for the project of feminist psychology.

This book fills that gap, offering an edited collection of discourse analytic work which is specifically feminist in content – constituting both a 'showcase' for a major strand of contemporary feminist social psychology in Britain, and a critical evaluation of discourse analysis in relation to feminism. This book brings together, for the first time, a collection of original chapters by feminist psychologists exploring the contributions and contradictions of discourse analysis.

The first part of the book, entitled 'Empirical Work', consists of four chapters not primarily concerned with arguing the merits of a discourse analytic perspective, but which – on the whole – simply assume these as self-evident and get on with the work of 'doing' discourse analyses in a feminist context. These four chapters present discourse analytic work on key feminist issues of particular interest to feminist psychologists: adolescent knowledge about menstruation (Lovering, Chapter 1), sexual harassment (Kitzinger and Thomas, Chapter 2), gendered representations of childhood (Burman, Chapter 3), and anorexia nervosa (Hepworth and Griffin, Chapter 4). They include very different kinds of data, analysed at very different levels: data from group discussions with school children, textually analysed with the help of the computer program ETHNOGRAPH (Lovering); data from interviews with adult men and women, thematically analysed with reference to social context (Kitzinger and Thomas); and data based on broader socio-cultural representations,

analysed by deconstructing the discursive imperialism of mainstream institutions, including film, advertising, and developmental psychology (Burman), and therapy, psychiatry, and medicine (Hepworth and Griffin).

It could be argued that it is the *topic* of these chapters that makes them feminist – they function primarily as illustrations of what can be *done* with discourse analysis, in contrast to other theoretical or methodological frameworks. They are united by their shared view of language as an interactive activity, mediating linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, and constituting a site for the construction of identities and subjectivities – and they also see language as a key site for feminist resistance.

From a discourse analytic perspective, the language within which experience is framed is seen not simply as describing the social world, but also as, in some sense, constructing it. So, as Hepworth and Griffin (Chapter 4) and Kitzinger and Thomas (Chapter 2) show, respectively, 'anorexia' and 'sexual harassment' are, in part, created by the language that is used to describe them. Such phenomena do not have their origins inside the individual (indeed, the concept of 'the individual' is itself a product of Western discursive practices: Kitzinger, 1992), but, rather, they are constitutive of individuals as social products. In discourse analytic psychology, '[i]nstead of studying the mind as if it were outside language, we study the spoken and written texts . . . – the conversations, debates, discussions where images of the mind are reproduced and transformed' (Burman and Parker, 1993: 2).

In this way, the discursive location of the individual frames his/her 'personal' experience of self and subjectivity: 'What it means to be an individual person in the "modern" world involves taking on *as our own* the very discursive practices through which we are constituted' (Davies, 1990: 506, italics in original). So, Lovering's (Chapter 1) analysis of 'the transformation of the girl-child into the bleeding woman' rests centrally on the ways in which girls' subjectivity is shaped by the available discourses, practices and meanings surrounding menstruation. (The theorization of subjectivity is taken further by Hollway (Chapter 5), in the second part of the book.)

An attention to discourse facilitates a historical account of psychological (and other similarly hegemonic) knowledges, and mounts a critique of practice derived from such knowledges by challenging their truth claims. So, Burman (Chapter 3) shows how prevailing Western discourses of childhood (in both popular and psychological texts) are deeply gendered, while Hepworth and Griffin (Chapter 4) examine the discursive continuities and disjunctures between nineteenth-century texts about anorexia and feminist

analyses over one hundred years later, and the inter-relationship of such discourses in interviews with British health care workers. Indeed, it has been argued that the current popularity of discourse analysis owes much to the ways its analytic tools can be used to inform political practice and struggles (Burman and Parker, 1993): the chapters in Part 1 *demonstrate* its utility in the pursuit of feminist goals (while chapters later in the book *debate* its utility for feminism).

In the first two chapters, the authors (Lovering; Kitzinger and Thomas) document moves from positivist agendas (exposing negative attitudes and ignorance about menstruation, and developing a 'watertight' definition of sexual harassment, respectively) to discourse analytic ones. However, the authors' subsequent analyses lead them to very different political ends. While Lovering is critical of existing sex education practices in schools, which pay little attention to the meanings of menstruation for young women, Kitzinger and Thomas regard the development of institutional policies on sexual harassment as largely futile. They argue, rather, that the assertion of one view of reality over another is a common technique employed by a dominant group in order to maintain its position of power – and that what is needed instead is a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which sexual harassment is rendered insignificant or invisible (in other words, how it is discursively defined and managed).

The second part of the book, entitled 'Theoretical Advances', consists of five chapters which offer reflections upon the utility of discourse analysis (both as theory and as method) for feminists. The authors of three of these chapters (Hollway, Chapter 5; Wetherell, Chapter 7; Squire, Chapter 8) provide broadly favourable evaluations of discourse analysis; while the remaining two (Widdicombe, Chapter 6; Gill, Chapter 9) express serious reservations.

Key among the issues addressed by these chapters is the status afforded to the 'extra-discursive' – that is, material beyond the discourse analytic text, whether this is primarily characterized in terms of an 'exterior' world of social practices and their material effects, or in terms of an 'interior' world of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. While Wetherell (Chapter 7) worries about the extra-discursive, she clearly privileges the linguistic over the social or the psychological, arguing that '[h]ow social objects . . . are constituted in talk is pivotal to the nature of those objects. Talk about these things does not play a reflective or after-the-event role; it is the medium of the formation of social objects and social practices' (140). By contrast, Hollway (Chapter 5) assumes experience which is extra-discursive: the experience of egalitarian heterosex, for which feminist discourse offers no words (as do Kitzinger and Thomas, Chapter 2, in their discussion of 'unrecognized' sexual harassment).

Hollway argues that the dominance of discursive approaches in social science has led to 'a remarkable avoidance of the extra-discursive'. Further, she contends that 'a recognition of the fact that all understanding of the world is mediated through language has been falsely reduced to a premise that the world can be understood as discursive' (91). Hollway's remedy for this alleged reductionism is to add a psychodynamic dimension to the theorization of subjectivity.

A very different solution is advocated by Gill (Chapter 9), whose conception of the extra-discursive is located firmly in the social world. As part of her indictment of postmodernist discourse analysis as hopelessly relativistic, Gill identifies feminists' need for a vocabulary of value, 'without which we will be left theoretically and politically paralysed in the face of enduring inequalities, injustice and oppression' (165).

Contributors to Part 2 also seek to document the range of different forms of discourse analysis (see, for example, Squire, Chapter 8; Gill, Chapter 9), and sometimes to differentiate between them in terms of their particular advantages or disadvantages for the feminist project. So Gill argues, in relation to the rampant relativism of much postmodernist discourse analysis, that 'the way in which relativists theorize the relationships between politics, personal life and academic research is antithetical to feminism. They explicitly proscribe political commitments in their research . . .' (173). Widdicombe (Chapter 6) is also critical of poststructuralist/postmodernist discourse analysis: specifically of the way in which it is typically used *by feminists*. She takes issue with 'the analytic rush to identify discourses in order to get on to the more serious business of accounting for their political significance' (108), asserting that 'by elevating their own political agendas as the pre-established analytic frame [feminist] researchers may actually undermine the practical and political utility of the analyses they undertake' (111). For Widdicombe, the solution is to favour the 'unfashionable' ethnomethodological variety of discourse analysis, to focus on 'the mundane contexts of interaction [where] institutional power is exercised, social inequalities are experienced, and resistance accomplished' (111).

More generally, there is detailed consideration within these chapters of the implications of discourse analysis for developing feminist theory and politics. While there is, of course, no *necessary* coincidence between the interests of feminists and discourse analysts (as Squire points out in Chapter 8: 145), the potential for fruitful engagement is clear. Wetherell says: 'Together discourse analysis and feminism produce a radical and liberating scepticism' (Chapter 7: 135); while Gill's view is that 'discourse analysis has an enormous amount to offer feminists. It offers a principled and coherent means

by which feminists can study talk and texts of all kinds – shedding light on old questions and provoking new ones. It has the potential to revitalise feminist studies of language . . .' (Chapter 9: 167). Squire presents the benefits of doing discourse analysis for feminist psychologists as (at least) threefold: as instrumentalist (it provides 'a respectable institutional front'); as pragmatic (it offers 'some help in answering questions about method and theory that block their work', together with a 'qualitative yet systematized method'); and as political (it offers 'hope for a radicalization of the discipline') (Chapter 8: 146–7). However, there is considerable debate as to whether there is a *necessary* connection between discourse analysis (as theory or method) and a critical politics (as Burman and Parker, 1993, and Parker, 1992, sometimes seem to suggest); and whether discourse analysis is necessarily of value for *feminist* political purposes.

There is a growing feminist literature (for example, Lovibond, 1992; Soper, 1990; Jackson, 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995; see also Gill, above) arguing that discourse analysis/postmodernism is antithetical to feminism; indeed, although using discourse analysis here in pursuit of feminist goals, Burman is elsewhere (1990; 1991; 1992) quite sceptical about its value for feminists. Many contributors to this volume remain optimistic, however: those who demonstrate discourse analysis in action in Part 1 and, in Part 2, Wetherell, who proposes 'a feminist politics of articulation' (141), and Squire, who exhorts feminist psychologists consistently to conjoin 'narratives of pragmatism' and 'narratives of extravagance' in their discourse analyses (146).

Gill (Chapter 9) is more equivocal. Although, as noted above, she sees great potential for the use of discourse analysis by feminists, she follows Burman (1992) in distinguishing between the *applications* of discourse analysis and the theory itself, and goes on to suggest that it is precisely those features of discourse analysis's *theoretical* commitments making it so productive for feminists, that also make it deeply problematic. The stress laid by discourse analysis on simple 'diversity' masks *power* differences; its notion of multiple, fragmented subject positions can lead to the denial of any single identity around which to organize; its emphasis on the micro-politics of power downplays macro-structural inequalities; and – most importantly – its commitment to relativism disavows the grounds for feminist politics. Ultimately, as a feminist, Gill rejects the postmodernist discourse analytic position on relativism as offering 'no principled alternative to realism by means of which we might make *political interventions*' (171, emphasis in original). She argues, instead for a type of 'passionately interested inquiry' (175);

'a relativism which is unashamedly political, in which we, as feminists, can make social transformation an explicit concern of our work' (182).

In sum, then, this volume highlights the uses of discourse analysis by feminist psychologists and illustrates its applications to a range of feminist topics (Part 1); it also provides a critical evaluation of the theory/method for the feminist project of intellectual, social and political change (Part 2). It is difficult to identify foundational premises or techniques which are specific to discourse analysis, not only because of the breadth and conceptual/methodological 'fuzziness' of the term, but also because of the common ground it shares with other critical approaches in social science (for example, social constructionism, the study of rhetoric, ideology, textuality, critical ethnography – and qualitative methods more generally). Nonetheless, this volume addresses many of the key issues raised by discourse analysis for feminists.

Many feminist social scientists have argued that there is no single feminist method, no one approach to data collection or analysis which is distinctively and inherently 'feminist' (Wilkinson, 1986; Peplau and Conrad, 1989). Thus there is nothing distinctively feminist about the theory or method of discourse analysis. Although not all of the contributors to this book would call themselves discourse analysts, all are feminists and/or are engaged in feminist research – and all have found some aspects of discourse analysis of value in their work. As editors of this volume, we have brought together leading British feminist psychologists working in discourse analysis, and have raised for debate and discussion some of the key issues in the relationship between feminism and discourse. We consider this book to be an essential resource for all feminists, psychologists, and discourse analysts seeking to explore and make sense of the complexities and contradictions of doing feminist psychological discourse analytic research.

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