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Romantic Discourse and Feminist Analysis: Interrogating Investment, Power and Desire

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The object of romantic desire is, by definition, he (or she) who dominates and disappoints. (Lynne Segal, 1990: 274)

This chapter uses romance and romantic discourse as a device for interrogating discourse analysis and its significance for feminism. I want to review some of the distinctive features of discourse theory as it 'takes on' romantic talk and writing, and also highlight some of the dilemmas confronting this approach to cultural representations which have certainly troubled feminist discourse analysts. My aim is not to argue a case about romance, or even to make a serious contribution to feminist scholarship on romantic texts (such as Modleski, 1984; Radway, 1984; Snitow, 1984; Treacher, 1988; Miles, 1991). More speculatively, I want to give my view of some of the crossroads and decision points I think we have reached, or are reaching, in the study of discourse and gender.

I write as a social psychologist and my reference point is thus discourse analysis as it has been developing within that discipline (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Parker, 1992). In more general terms, my topic is my reading of some of the relatively global premises characteristic of discourse work, found also in studies of rhetoric and in the social constructionist movement within social psychology as a whole (for example, Harré, 1979, 1986a; Gergen, 1985, 1991; Billig, 1987, 1991; Shotter, 1993). These premises concern the constitution of identity and subjectivity, the nature of experience and communication, ideology and the role of representation in social life. These basic assumptions will take centre stage in this chapter as opposed to the empirical claims and methods discourse researchers also advance as they develop their analyses of texts and talk (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Three pieces of romantic discourse from three very different genres are presented in Boxes 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 as a stimulus. I have

Box 7.1 Wings of Desire

Marion to Daniel

This, finally, must be serious.
 I've often been alone but I've never lived alone.
 When I was with someone I was often happy
 but it seemed like a coincidence.
 Those people were my parents
 but it could have been others.
 Why was this brown-eyed boy my brother
 and not the boy with the green eyes on the opposite platform?
 The taxi-driver's daughter was my friend
 but I might as well have put my arm around a horse's neck.
 I was with a man, I was in love
 and I might as well have left him
 and walked off with the stranger I met in the street.
 Look at me, or don't.
 Give me your hand, or don't.
 No, don't give me your hand and look away.
 . . .
 I've never toyed with anyone
 yet I've never opened my eyes
 and thought, 'Now, this is serious.'
 At last it is becoming serious.
 I've grown older.
 Am I the only one who wasn't serious?
 Is it the times that lack seriousness?
 I was never alone, neither on my own, nor with others.
 But I would have liked to be alone.
 After all, being alone means to be whole.
 Now I can say it, as from tonight I'm alone at last.
 I must put an end to coincidence.
 The new moon of decision.
 I don't know if there is destiny
 but there is a decision.
 So decide!
 . . .
 We two are now more than us two.
 We incarnate something.
 We are sitting in the place of the people
 and the whole place is full of people
 who are dreaming the same dream.
 We decide everyone's game.

Box 7.1 *continued*

I am ready.
 Now it's your turn.
 Now you've got to decide.
 Now or never!
 You need me.
 You will need me.
 There's no greater story than ours!
 a man and a woman.
 It will be a story of giants
 invisible but transferable,
 a story of new ancestors.
 Look, my eyes.
 They are the picture of necessity,
 of everyone's future.
 Last night I dreamed of a stranger.
 It was my man.
 Only with him could I be alone.
 Open up to him,
 wholly, wholly, open for him.
 Welcome him wholly into me.
 Surround him with the labyrinth of shared happiness.
 I know
 it's you.

Extract transcribed from the film *Wings of Desire* directed by Wim Wenders. Screenplay in collaboration with Peter Handke.

transcribed one of the final speeches from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (written in collaboration with Peter Handke), borrowed a bit from Ann Oakley's autobiography *Taking it Like a Woman* (1984), and, finally, reproduced a sequence from a Barbara Cartland novel – *Moments of Love* (1982). These extracts are there to act as illustrative moments in my tour of broad premises, although they also deserve, of course, much more detailed analysis.

Transcendence, redemption and closure

David Harvey (1989) in his discussion of *Wings of Desire* argues that Wenders' film vividly encapsulates the postmodern dilemma. The first half of the story quite brilliantly plays with and illustrates images of fragmentation, contingency, the loss of the centre, and the failure of overarching systems of meaning to make sense of life. While, in

Box 7.2 *South of the Baltic Sea*

The morning spent waiting for him was perhaps the best time. (She would not like him to misunderstand this.) . . .

The minute he arrives she realises that their time together is again beginning to be over. He stands there and seems both a stranger and her intimate lover. . . .

The hours are crowded with experiences, not just of the two of them together (though that would, of course suffice) but of this place, its ambience, its difference from the cultures they know best. They get lost together in the rain, they stand together in a church and kiss. They sit, listening to mournful music in the minor key, in warm restaurants where everything is submerged in vodka. . . .

She can't remember what she said. . . . Why doesn't he say that she is beautiful? Why doesn't he say he loves her incredibly, more than he has ever loved anyone, and for ever; that he wants to spend his life with her; that she is everything to him? Why doesn't he buy her red roses and swim the sea with chocolates? She wouldn't believe it if he did. . . . She distrusts romantic chivalrous gestures in men. It means they are treating women as sex objects. So why does she want it? Why is she hurt by his pragmatism? The last thing she needs is to live with him, with his self-interest, his self-centred depressions, his magisterial exercise of male power. The last thing she wants is to be like his wife. She knows what she wants: she wants him to love her now wholeheartedly, to think of no one and nothing else when he makes love to her. . . . She wants him to feel about her as he does about no one else, to be so conscious of her individuality that whether or not he loves another woman does not matter. She definitely does not want him to claim more than his fair share of her.

Extract from Oakley, 1984: Scenes 3, 4, and 5, pp. 50–3.

radical contrast, the last part of the film, in the scene I have transcribed, seems to suggest some sort of solution: the coming together and mutual affirmation of the main characters, the trapeze artist, Marion, and the angel Damiel. Their love, their romance, is presented as an escape from coincidence and fragmentation, a movement away from the postmodern condition towards unity, wholeness, togetherness, community and humanism.

The second extract, taken from Ann Oakley's autobiography, is a more reflexive account, with feminist inflections, as Oakley ponders the contradictions of romance. It is the beginning of a story about a passionate and adulterous affair. But, like the film transcript, it also describes a desire for a specific Other, linked to the search for a

Box 7.3 Simonetta and Pierre

'I am . . . happy,' Simonetta managed to stammer. 'I am . . . happy, Pierre . . . but I thought it would be . . . impossible for me to . . . m.marry you.'

'You will be my wife,' he said, 'and I will never allow you to cry like this again.'

He turned her face up to his. Then he was kissing away the tears from her eyes, her cheeks and lastly her mouth.

At the touch of his lips Simonetta felt thrill after thrill flash through her and it was like coming back to life from the dead.

Once again he was carrying her up into the sky and there was the rapture and wonder of being close to him, of belonging to him.

'I . . . love . . . you . . . I love you . . . I love . . . you,' her heart was saying.

Extract from Cartland, 1982: 298.

moment of transcendence. Although it is presented as autobiography, as part of Oakley's own experience, Oakley carefully says elsewhere in her book that the 'she' in her story, the narrator, is a literary device and fictional. 'She' is presented as the paradigm of all the contradictions to which Oakley sees modern women as exposed.

So, by romance, then, what I mean, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is a text which presents an image of redemption, of salvation and rescue. Usually, but not necessarily, this is presented as a heterosexual passion. Perhaps, characteristically, Barbara Cartland's metaphors, in the third extract, present this transcendence of 'earthly' ties most unambiguously and most unashamedly.

Romantic texts seem to be distinguished by forms of closure on many levels. These texts represent, first, the closing off of emotional ambivalence. The desire is for a movement away from contingency towards unity and towards an emotional paradise of reciprocity and certainty. Romance is also, literally, the story which very frequently ends all stories. The story behind the story, the revealed meaning. So, after all, the couple loved each other; that, particularly in the Mills and Boon genre, is what it all seems to be about. In fiction, and in films, romantic discourse often appears as a form of relief from the search for meaning; we move from the image of the couple (usually, newly met) locked in a maelstrom of ambiguities, partial disclosures, interpretations and formulations of their relationship to the predictable ending of romance which stifles other interpretations and

imposes its authority over other accounts. In the end he loved her. That is the final story, and that is all we seem to need to say.

Because of this closure, romantic discourse sometimes presents a very static image. The couple are left forever locked in their embrace. They daren't move because movement would in some way spoil the effect. I can't help wondering, as other feminists have wondered, what happens when daily life has to be resumed and Marion and the angel Daniel or Simonetta and her man have to do a bit of shopping, negotiate cleaning the toilet, and so on. But that, of course, is not the point, and not the frame.

Romance, of course, is also usually gendered. It is a story that, typically, women are supposed to want and men to reject. Women are supposed to do the romance in relationships and men are supposed to do the sex. In popular culture, women and girls are assigned romantic fiction and men and boys pornography (Snitow, 1984; Walkerdine, 1984). Particularly within the genre of romantic fiction, the Harlequin and the Mills and Boon, women and men are also empowered differentially by romance and given contrasting positions and identities.

Romantic discourse is frequently contradictory on this issue of power, and perhaps this is part of its ambiguous appeal. On the one hand, romance seems to erase power in its image of mutuality. But, on the other hand, men are often represented as the initiators of romance and women as the receivers. Men are heroic in the throes of love, women are simply in the throes. Indeed, in many genres, for a relationship to count as romance, what is important is that the man, rather than the woman, recognizes it as such. I will come back to that contradictory message about power later, for as Tania Modleski (1984) has argued, it is all more complex than it might appear.

What, then, does discourse analysis, social constructionism and feminism have to say about all this? When we look at romance through the lens of discourse analysis, two distinctive features of this approach are clarified as well as three particular challenges or problematic issues. The two distinctive features concern the perspective on experience and the approach to subjectivity or identity. The three dilemmas concern: first, the explanation of what Wendy Hollway (1984) has called 'investment'; second, the relationship between discourse and the 'social'; and, third, the implications for feminist politics.

Discourse, experience and the formulation of identity

One emphasis of discourse analysis and social constructionism becomes clear if we develop a contrast with traditional, humanist,

psychological interpretations of romantic love (Johnson, 1984). These look at romance as primarily an emotional *experience*: an experience outside time, history and culture which has an authority in itself, an authority which originates in being. From this perspective, the question asked about representations such as those in the three extracts might be these: Are the descriptions authentic? Are some of these accounts more 'true to life' than others? Do these words accurately describe the emotion? The premise would be that the words, the discourse, and the experience can always be separated. The emotion exists outside the words and thus we can inquire into how well the words fit the experience.

For me, the most interesting thing about discourse analysis, and the aspect which gives it a radical potential for feminist psychology, is that it rejects this model of the process of representation and this model of language and emotion. Discourse analysis emphatically privileges the linguistic or the social/linguistic over what has conventionally been understood as the psychological; it argues that experience, and thus subjective psychological reality, is constituted through language and the process of representation. It is not the case that representation reflects, and is secondary to, the experience (Harré, 1986b; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Gergen, 1990; Shotter, 1993).

Discourse analysis proposes that, even in the case of the apparently 'overwhelming' emotions found in the three extracts, the experience, the psychology, the feeling, is always inevitably identified, labelled and constructed through narrative, language, and stories. It is the narrative which packages and thus, in some sense, creates and produces the identity and the desire, and, indeed, it is the narrative we adopt which defines the experience as one of those sorts of experiences and not some other kind of experience.

To put it another way, the discourse analyst says that it is not the case that every woman and man in love magically find themselves uttering, creating and discovering afresh, for the first time, these words as the mirror or reflection of their experience, although they may well feel they are doing just that. The words instead are second-hand, already in circulation, already familiar, already there, waiting for the moment of appropriation. The woman and the man, the heterosexual couple, recognize their experience and determine its quality through the words which are available.

The point I'm making is, as Roland Barthes says (1979), that to fall out of love, or more particularly, to fall out of romance, is not just to lose a relationship but, primarily, involves the loss of a language: a discursive method of figuring oneself and the other person and putting the two together. Discourse analysis focuses on that method of figuring while feminism questions the politics, the consequences

and the alternatives. Together discourse analysis and feminism produce a radical and liberating scepticism.

James Averill (1985), in his social constructionist analysis of romantic love, points out that romantic love provides a 'paradigm' of emotion, a model and a rationale for feeling and action. In taking on the paradigm the individual confirms the broader cultural networks of which the paradigm is an aspect. Romance is, supposedly, highly individual, yet it is also another of those moments through which the individual affirms their sociality and instantiates their culture.

The second strength of discourse analysis for me, or the second interesting argument from a feminist perspective, is the view of identity or subjectivity which emerges as a result of this model of representation. If we say that experience is constituted through narrative then we are also saying that our self-knowledge, our self-accounts, our self-descriptions are discursively organized (see Edwards and Potter, 1992). We are saying that a sense of identity is always an invention, a construction, a melding and meeting point of discourses.

I'd like to paraphrase some comments of Stuart Hall's to draw this point out. Hall argues that the 'who am I?', the 'real me' is always formed in relation to cultural narratives. Identity, he says, 'is formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture' (Hall, 1988a: 44).

There are a number of implications here. First, if we accept this position then, ultimately, we have to learn to live with ambivalence, with contradictions, with fragmentation because the discourses from which we construct a sense of self are inconsistent, contradictory, varying and embody the relics of many different social and ideological struggles (see Connell, 1987: 219–28). If there is no real me then there are multiple accounts of what I am like and if, like me, you have an authoritarian predilection for definite answers, for wanting to find out what is 'really' felt, the core meaning, then this is very frustrating. Because, although there are always attempts at unification and definition, 'real feelings' will be always contingent, always escaping, always changing, as the person comes to be positioned and repositioned within different narratives and versions.

But, secondly, it means, as Hall also argues, that because we eventually do stop talking, or stop positioning ourselves, because we do, from moment to moment, settle, in conversation and in our accounts, on one version of ourselves, and often maintain this version for a considerable length of time (or, indeed, find that others have settled for us), identity is also about closure and difference. It is about refusing all the possible versions of 'me', and going at a particular moment for one; it is about closing off some narratives and marking a point of difference.

Hall suggests this moment of closure should be seen as a kind of stake or a kind of wager. He points out (1988a: 45) that it is a moment which says – I need to say something, something . . . just now. Right now, this is what I mean, this is what I am. The self, subjectivity, identity are these points of unfinished closure where we place a full stop. As the feminist psychoanalyst Jane Gallop (1982) similarly argues, identity, as part of feminist strategy, must be continually assumed and immediately called into question. I will return to this point later.

That argument, I think, is fascinating and in relation to romance and the projects of feminism it is, again, potentially liberating. If we see romantic discourse as both enchanting and usually, also, deeply problematic for women, perhaps deeply oppressive, then it may be possible to close off identity and subjectivity in relationships differently. Or, at least, if romance proves impossible to shake off, there is the comforting knowledge of the constructed nature of this feeling. That move, I think, can be more reassuring and more empowering than grounding romance in the authority and authenticity of unquestionable experience.

These, then, are some ways in which discourse analysis clarifies romance, and makes a new contribution. But romance also raises some special challenges for discourse analysis. These points of debate, as I noted, are of three kinds. Crudely speaking, there is the psychologist's problem; the dilemma discourse analysis presents for the social theorist; and the political challenge of how to move forward from this base as a feminist. I'll take each of these in turn.

Questions about investment

The psychologist's issue is this (it is Wendy Hollway's (1984) point of interrogation in her analyses of heterosexual relationships). Why do we position ourselves within romantic discourse? What's in it for us, what explains the irrational charge of desire? And why are some people immune? Why do women do it, if they do, more than men? Why select one man or woman as the object of romantic desire and not another? Explain that if you will.

This question of investment or attachment is important and complex, and one solution is to place discourse analysis in some relation with psychoanalysis – most commonly in studies of romance, in relation to some version of object relations theory and/or Lacanian psychoanalysis. Analyses of romantic discourse and its gendered nature from a broad object relations perspective (see Edley and Wetherell, 1995: 38–65; Miles, 1991; Treacher, 1988) refer us back to the subjectivity of the child in the pre-Oedipal stage, to the patterning

of early relationships (most usually with the mother). These accounts see the child's trajectory as moving from a state of connection with the mother to one of disconnection, separation and autonomy as the mind is built up from the residues of significant relations with the 'objects' (people) in the environment.

Psychoanalysts who observe the interaction between mothers and babies in the first few months of life argue that this relationship tends to be quite unlike any other human relationship in its emphasis on 'merger' and 'symbiosis'. It is distinguished by the extreme dependency of the child upon mother, by the degree of sensitivity most mothers show to the child's needs, by the blurring of identity between mother and child, and by the potential for absorption of each in the other.

The British object relations theorist Donald Winnicott (cf. Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983: Chapter 7; Frosh, 1987: Chapter 4) argues that at birth the baby's sense of self is best described as 'undifferentiated'. The baby, whether male or female, experiences true symbiosis with the mother. She or he has, initially, no sense of where the mother ends and self begins, no sense of what is 'me' and what is 'not me', and only a limited or non-existent grasp of the properties of objects and its own powers in relation to these.

A sense of self emerges, however, through early interactions with the mother. Children learn through frustrations and delays in the gratification of needs, and as the mother begins to turn her attention to other matters, that there are boundaries to their experience which define where self ends and the world begins. Babies learn that they are not omnipotent but dependent. Indeed, at around six months, anxiety at separation when the mother is absent becomes possible, although it was not evident before, because children can now perceive their mothers and themselves as distinct individuals.

This process of separation and gradual individuation is one which all humans are thought to experience. It is a process which object relations theorists see as pivotal in the development of self-esteem, a self-concept, a sense of physical security, and a self-confident and optimistic attitude to life. But for boys it is suggested that individuation has a further dimension of a much stronger dis-identification from the mother, as a core gender identity begins to form. The boy, unlike the girl, is forced into a much stronger repudiation of the mother. Masculinity, in these terms, can be seen as a piece of additional 'neurosis' men acquire as they learn to dis-identify from the feminine and from their mothers. Robert Stoller (1985), for example, describes masculinity as a state of constant vigilance, the formation of a barrier against symbiosis since it is only through a

carefully maintained difference from the feminine that a man can be confident of being 'man enough'.

Romance, in this scenario, represents a form of nostalgia, the hankering for a return to some early sense of wholeness, subjective unity and self/other diffusion. Romance represents a desire for perfect mothering. Hollway argues that men, because of the precarious and particular character of their sexual/gender identity, resist diffusion and their desire for the Other, or for the scrutinizing Mother, because of the intense vulnerability summoned up by this degree of connection and intimacy. Men typically make romance, love and intimacy safe, Hollway argues, through the projection of the desire for mutual self-affirmation on to women.

Angela Miles (1991) and Amal Treacher (1988) argue from slightly different standpoints that the perfect male hero in romantic fiction is someone who is totally caring and absorbing. The woman reader's desire, in fact, is for a male mother – someone who offers symbiosis but safely contained within phallic difference. Treacher and Miles ruefully note the impossibility of the fantasy – where is the man who can be relied upon to 'mother' another? Ann Oakley in Box 7.2 similarly wonders whether such 'perfect encompassing love', ideal in fantasy, might prove stifling in reality.

Lacanian psychoanalysts also remark on the fantastic nature of the desires expressed in romance and their doomed nature. Lacan argues that the basic point about desire for an object (*objet petit à*), a desire for another, is that it is interminable, forever restless, and unsatisfied. There can be no permanent closure of the kind premised in romance. As Toril Moi puts it, 'there can be no final satisfaction of our desire since there is no final signifier or object that can be that which has been lost forever (the imaginary harmony with the mother and the world)' (Moi, 1985: 101). Lacan argues that before acquiring language and becoming a subject within the symbolic order, the child passes through an imaginary stage. In this stage the child's sense of self as unitary and bounded depends on the mother who supplies the child with this illusion of completeness. Hence is initiated the search to be again seen as whole and total in the eyes of others and, therefore, the eternal captivation of the imaginary.

The desire for the romantic object is, in part, a fantasy concerning the benevolent gaze of the original Mother/Other who can see the subject whole, unified, and 'self-identified'. Romance, remember, is the discourse distinguished by the image of unity and redemption/rescue, and characterized by the absence of contingency. It also contains highly narcissistic strivings for recognition. The desire is for the idealized other to confer perfection on self and recognize the special, endearing and unique nature of that self through their loving gaze.

However the psychoanalytic argument is developed, the appeal is the location of narratives of romance and other 'voices of the mind' in family histories, giving 'depth', explaining repetition and the 'driven' character of narrative construction. But there are important differences between the object relations account and those found in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and these differences are vital for the dialogue between discourse analysis and psychoanalysis. With object relations accounts there is a danger that romance is once more grounded in experience (this time, the mother of all experiences, so to speak). The constructive effects of discourses in immediate, moment to moment and longer-term formulations of self and Other, just celebrated in the previous section of this chapter, become overwhelmed by an experiential and relational process placed in the distance of the past and subsequently frozen.

From a Lacanian perspective, however, the relations of signification in which the child and mother move are central from the start. The subsequent search for an object of romance, for closure, recognition, the polish and completion of the image, along with the dialectics of desire, are understood as taking part within a symbolic order which is gendered (patriarchal) and which presents a cultural context of meaning. It becomes possible, in other words, to examine the intertwining of personal imaginaries with social imaginaries and to consider the nature of the symbolic resources articulating the images which become the objects of desire.

Discourse and the social

As Toril Moi (1985), Lynne Segal (1990) and many other feminists have pointed out, the greatest danger with an appeal to the psychoanalytic and the psychodrama of the family is the disappearance of the particularities of the material and social context in which family relations and child development are played out. And this signals the challenge to discourse analysis raised by the sociologist and the social theorist. Is there another kind of bedrock here, after all, beyond the words, a social bedrock which grounds romantic narratives? Do the determinants of romance lie in what is often called the extra-discursive – in material and social reality, in social institutions, social practices and in social processes such as the sexual division of labour?

With regard to romantic discourse, what might be these other determining 'conditions of existence'? First, perhaps the cultural institutions which produce romantic discourse, the formats and profit margins under which they operate and the general technology of representations. Second, there are the social practices governing

sexual relations and self-presentation. It is important to remember that love and romance have become the principle through which people have come to organize their economic and domestic relationships with each other. There is also the social history of romance – and the view, for example, that the emergence of romantic love depends on the appearance in the late Middle Ages of a strong concept of the individual which, in turn, is tied to the social and economic changes characterizing that period. We need to ask, too, about the take-up of romantic discourse, in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. Who becomes positioned romantically and just who finds this form of articulation a felicitous one? What is the status, for instance, of the older woman in the market-place of romance?

Talk of 'conditions of existence' suggests that here, at last, we might have causes beyond the words, or at least a mode of study which is more pressing and urgent than discourse analysis. My view is that a strong ontological distinction between the discursive and the extra-discursive is a mistake, both methodologically and epistemologically (see Wetherell and Potter, 1992: Chapter 3). To ignore the constitutive role of discourse is to ignore a central social force. How social objects (relationships, marriages, individuals, practices) 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. However, clearly also, it is sterile to study discourse as though it were a mere literary matter. Talk and texts need to be continually placed in their inter-textual social context.

As we move to this positioning of the texts of romance in the texts of the social, then it becomes more and more appropriate to talk of discourse as ideology, and investigate how it might operate as ideological practice sustaining and justifying relations of power. This is a move I would want to endorse for feminist discourse analyses. The enormous advantage of the concept of ideology is that it raises the question – just in whose interests is the romantic nexus of power/knowledge and subject positioning? Who benefits here?

The literary critic Terry Eagleton (1983) argues, and this is a classic point about ideology, that its presence can be most positively felt in the significant silences, in the gaps and absences in discourses. For me, the gap, the significant silence in romantic discourse is, as I said earlier, life after the moment of redemption/rescue, once the mutual eye gaze drops away. In other words, the silence concerns mundane life, the kitchen sink part of the kitchen sink drama and just who is left standing at that sink gazing out the window, maybe listening to Simon Bates on the radio (Gill, 1993).

Feminist politics

It has been frequently suggested that discourse analysis is antithetical to and even explodes the possibility of political action (for example, Soper, 1990, and see the discussion of postmodernism and feminism initiated by Linda Nicholson, 1990, and Judith Butler, 1990). How can feminism, for example, be based on a deconstruction of the category 'female'? Doesn't politics depend on organizing around common experience and taking a stand? And what relevance can struggles over representation have for these political efforts? That is the third dilemma – does discourse analysis inevitably lead to an ambivalent and inadequate feminist politics? Isn't it bound to be irrelevant, reactionary and elitist?

Of course that can be true, it depends on the discourse analysis. But a politics based on the notion of the common experience of women can also get it wrong and indeed may sometimes feel even more marginalizing to black and working-class women (bell hooks, 1989). For me, the political impact of discourse analysis lies in the point just made, that things which are discursive are no less real in their effects, and changes in the social and economic are always intertwined with changes at the level of discourse and subjectivity.

It is fashionable at the moment to argue for what Hall (1988a, 1988b) calls, building on the work of poststructuralist theorists, a politics of articulation. That is, a politics which tries to combine two contradictory movements – opening and closing. Closing in the sense that effective political action involves putting, at some point, a stop to talking: in feminist terms it involves defining a community of women, and an identity from which to act. But also opening – in that this community of women must not be taken for granted; the way it is constructed and imagined must be continually open to question (see also Gallop, 1982).

For me, feminist psychology is and could be a model of this new method of politics. What might a feminist politics of articulation look like in practice? It is, I think, about tracing out the power dynamics of different discourses of femininity, about investigating the ways the imagined community of women has been constructed in different contexts, openly questioning the formulation of dominant discourses about women, and pushing forward subordinated and barely formulated alternatives. In this guise it is vital to work with ambiguity, ambivalence and openness with the recognition that femininity is a negotiable category which takes its shape as a particular type of identity within contrasting discourses. Accepting that there is not one thing there to be discovered, femininity should be seen as a method of description, not a psychological attribute.

It involves also living with the uncomfortable knowledge that discourses have multiple uses and multiple meanings (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Romance, for example, can be read as disabling women, fixing us into potentially oppressive sexual relations. But romantic fiction may be also a source of resistance to men's power, and pleasurable precisely because it reveals the man squirming uncomfortably on the hook of his love for the heroine. His feet cut from under him, he grovels on bended knee. Romance, according to Tania Modleski (1982), can be read as a fantastical way of getting back at men, at rewriting their power plays, which become like the feeble efforts of the rabbit on the highway ducking and diving but still magnetized by the headlights of the approaching car. Unfortunately this feels like a solipsistic pleasure but the point is that discourse doesn't have just one political meaning.

We have to live with the fact, then, that nothing is simple, there is no inherent meaning, everything is ambiguous. But, of course, feminist psychology must also be about taking stands and fighting, probably and usually other psychologists and their control of women's lives. And for this we have to mobilize around some identities and some, rather than other, senses of community. Arbitrary closure is satisfying – this is the reality and it needs changing: we have to act on that basis, but perhaps keeping our fingers crossed behind our backs, the way that children do when telling a half-truth – not because we are insincere or uncommitted but because we are aware that sincerity, the feeling of rightness, and the aura of truth-telling is often the best, but sometimes also the most oppressive and dangerous, discursive effect.

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8

Pragmatism, Extravagance and Feminist Discourse Analysis

Corinne Squire

Discourse analysis is a much talked-about field in psychology, and it is increasingly something that feminist psychologists want to do. Many point to the convergences between feminist and discourse analytic concerns; a short list might include qualitative methods, experience, everyday language, reflexivity, and undecideability (Wetherell, 1986; Gavey, 1989; Hollway, 1989; Burman, 1991). There is, though, no necessary coincidence between feminist and discourse analytic interests in psychology, and a number of writers have emphasized the uncertain, even anti-feminist implications of discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989; Burman, 1991).

These divergences in view are complicated by doubts about how to define the two fields. Feminist psychology is a diverse category, encompassing a full range of psychological methods and theories (Squire, 1989; Morawski, 1992). It is described variously as a psychology by, about or for women, devoted to understanding gender relations or to improving women's condition. I shall characterize it broadly as the sector of psychology that analyses the effects of gender inequities on women's and men's subjectivities and tries to comprehend how these subjectivities might be changed; such a definition sacrifices precision for inclusiveness. Discourse analysis is similarly blurry. If a method, is it a form of conversation analysis or a Foucauldian archeology? If theory defines it, is its orientation towards a sophisticated, language-sensitive cognitivism, or towards linguisticism, or towards overarching accounts of power relations of for instance class, gender and race (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter et al., 1990; Billig, 1991; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Parker, 1992; Burman and Parker, 1993)? Again, I am going to operate with a general definition of discourse analytic psychology, as an examination of the relationships between units of talk, writing, or other representational forms, and of the significance of these relationships for our subjective experience.

Given the intensity and variety of opinions on the question 'Can

Discourse analysis has become an increasingly popular approach to research across the social sciences, and a particularly important tool for feminist psychologists.

Feminism and Discourse provides a showcase for a wide range of discourse analytical work in psychology from a feminist perspective. It constitutes a thorough critical evaluation of this approach for the feminist project of intellectual, social and political change.

Original contributions by leading researchers explore the benefits and contradictions of discourse analysis and consider its value for feminist psychology. The first part of the book illustrates the application of discourse analysis to four key topics of feminist concern: adolescent knowledge about menstruation, sexual harassment, gendered representations of childhood, and anorexia nervosa. The second part contains five assessments of the usefulness of discourse analysis – both as theory and as method – for feminists.

This book will be of great interest to critical theorists and discourse analysts across the social sciences, as well as to students and lecturers in social psychology, the psychology of women, psychology and language, women's studies, linguistics, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger are active members of the Loughborough Discourse and Rhetoric Group (DARG) and teach courses on Feminism and Psychology in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University.

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