Gender and Language G&L (PRINT) ISSN 1747-6321 G&L (ONLINE) ISSN 1747-633X

Review

## Communicating gender diversity: A critical approach. Victoria Pruin DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski (2007)

Los Angeles: Sage Publications, pp. 325.

Reviewed by Janet M. Fuller

Communicating Gender Diversity is a boon to the field of gender studies. Although intended as a textbook, this book is also an excellent resource for those teaching and researching gender in a variety of academic disciplines. In addition to providing succinct discussions of key terms and concepts, it also integrates information from a wide range of fields, providing perspectives from, for example, psychology and rhetorical analyses, in addition to fields more commonly associated with the study of language and gender (i.e., sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology). This breadth of approaches and subject matter makes this volume truly interdisciplinary.

The book is organized in two sections, the first titled 'Foundations', the second 'Institutions'. Part I, as promised in the title, provides the conceptual backdrop for the study of gender in communication, and is made up of five chapters: 'Developing a Critical Gender/Sex Lens', 'Alternative Approaches to Understanding Gender/Sex', 'Gendered/Sexed Voices', 'Gendered/Sexed Bodies', and 'Gendered/Sexed Language'. Part II includes an introduction to gender in social institutions and then individual chapters that summarize research and provide the framework for studying gender within five social institutions: family, education, work, religion, and media.

Chapter 1, 'Developing a Critical Gender/Sex Lens' is devoted to a delineation of the approach that will be taken in this book to the topic of language and gender/sex. One important insight in this chapter is that while sex and

## Affiliation

Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, MC 4502, Carbondale, IL 62901, USA email: <a href="mailto:jmfuller@siu.edu">jmfuller@siu.edu</a>





gender are primary categorizations in most cultures, this focus on difference is political, usually tied to concepts of heterosexual romance, and used to create a tension that is marketable in ways in which a focus on gender union would not be. Thus gender difference is not just culturally constructed but also politically exploited.

This chapter also lays out the critical vocabulary for the study of language and gender; as both the particular terms defined and the definitions themselves are indicative of the authors' perspective on the study of gender/sex and communication, I will review this section in some detail. Vocabulary that comes under the rubric of 'intersectionality' is introduced to focus on how gender/sex categories intersect with other aspects of identity. Paramount in this section is the discussion of the use of 'gender/sex' (as opposed to the more common differentiation of these two terms) throughout the book. This is a conscious decision on the part of the authors to recognize that differences, whether biological or social, are real and connected aspects of human experience which influence communication. 'Sexuality' is also a key term, which encompasses a gender/sex identity as well as a sexual orientation identity.

The terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' are further important aspects of identity which intersect with gender/sex. 'Race' is recognized as socially constructed system used to categorize people by particular physical traits; 'ethnicity' is used to mean a group of people who share a cultural history, but is often associated with shared race. Race and ethnicity also interact with 'national identity', another term discussed in this section. In many cases, there are widespread perceptions about the race of people of certain nationalities (e.g., French are White). Because of the lack of validity to such assumptions, these authors discourage the practice of using 'Northern European' as a synonym for 'White; I would add that the practice of using 'European American' to mean 'White American' (not uncommon in sociolinguistic studies in the U.S.) also creates the false correlation of nationality and race.

The authors note that the term 'socioeconomic class' is often used as a short-hand for income level; however, class categories also carry the connotations of certain cultural ideologies, values, and beliefs. Despite the difficulty in defining socioeconomic class, differences in experience associated with class membership contribute to different ways of conceiving gender/sex identities.

The second category of terms discussed in this chapter is 'communication', and the focus here is on the role of communication in the construction of gender/sex identities, as well as other aspects of identity. 'Contradiction' refers to the tensions and conflicts inherent in this process of group and individual social identity construction.

The third category of critical vocabulary is labeled 'systems of hierarchy', and includes the terms 'culture', 'hegemony', and 'power'. 'Culture', a system of



shared behaviors and attitudes, is the system within which gender identities are constructed. The term 'hegemony' refers to hierarchies in ideological systems which are prevalent not only in the dominant social group, but throughout a society. Other ideologies may conflict with hegemonic discourses, but inevitably must make reference to them. Hegemony is not an overt form of power, but a way of subtly controlling what seems 'natural' and 'right'. The term 'power' is usually used for more overt means of control, although there is a distinction made between the power to do something and power over others; the latter is seen as a coercive misuse of power.

Chapter 2 explores different approaches to the understanding of gender/sex and builds on the first chapter's outline of the issues to be explored by delving into the discussion of theoretical viewpoints. First, three worldviews are discussed: the empirical or positivist worldview, which is based on the belief that truth is objects and can be discovered by the researcher; the interpretive or humanistic worldview, within which truth is not objective but can only be known through people's perceptions; and finally critical studies or cultural criticism, which holds that knowledge is subjective and political.

Based on these three worldviews, there are three major areas of research on gender/sex in communication: biological (empirical worldview), psychological (empirical and/or critical worldview) and cultural (interpretive and/or critical worldviews). The discussions of the major areas are structured similarly, with a discussion of the main ideas within each area and then a treatment of the rhetorical implications historically and in contemporary society. Although the authors do not pretend to present all theoretical approaches as equally useful, they do promote a multiplicity in the application of theory, as different questions in the study of gender can be best addressed through different approaches. The conclusion to this section presents two general points to be drawn out of the discussion: '(1) that knowledge is culturally influenced, and (2) that a gender diversity, rather than a binary, perspective is best' (p. 59).

Chapter 3, 'Gendered/Sexed Voices', examines how communication is used to construct gender/sex identities. They outline some limitations of previous research with the intent of spurring on research which focuses on gender as socially constructed within specific cultural contexts, through complex use of language. The remainder of the chapter summarizes research on feminine and masculine styles as well as the cultural values of these styles and those who use them. This chapter seeks to move language and gender research away from the idea of universals of how men and women speak and toward discussions of how men and women 'do gender' through communication strategies.

This same principle is applied to the analysis of nonverbal communication of gender identity in Chapter 4. Components of nonverbal communication are presented along with a discussion of how these means, like language, are used



to both conform to social norms for gender behavior and resist them. Included in the section on 'gender as body performance' is a discussion of cultural ideals of beauty and how they too often serve to make people feel inadequate, and the consequence of eating disorders. This is one of the examples of how this book moves beyond the territory of language and gender and into other issues in gender studies.

Chapter 5 is the last chapter in the 'Foundations' section of the book and discusses language as a gendered/sexed entity. The positions taken are that communication is the study not just of how people communicate but also what they communicate, and language can represent ideologies, power differentials, and social order. With this in mind, examples are given of sexist (or non-gender-neutral) language such as generic 'he', asymmetries in male-female terms (e.g., bachelor v. spinster, female police officer) as well as meanings which indicate a male bias (e.g., referring to women as desserts; defining pornography as an assault on the church and state, not as sex discrimination; expressing rape in the passive voice). The last section of the chapter focuses on how alternative ways of communicating can bring about not just language change, but changes in the realities language represents.

The introduction to the second section, 'Institutions', presents gender as an institution in itself, because it serves to organize social life, as well as opens the discussion of institutions as places where gender is constructed. The rest of the section is organized around the latter idea, and each chapter focuses on research on gender in a particular institution, discussing how the social institution functions, how it constructs and constrains gender, and emancipatory practices within the institution.

Among them, the chapter on family shows how the predominant cultural ideology of the nuclear family serves to promote gendered identities which revolve around not just difference (in distribution of labor, roles, etc.) but also inequality, and in extreme cases contributes to gendered patterns of violence. In the next chapter, the perspective on the institution of education is that schools and classrooms can be microcosms of society. It is suggested that while gendered/sexed elements of educational settings may hamper learning, educational institutions may also be a site of social change.

In Chapter 9, multiple perspectives on the institution of work are presented. Work is in many cases a key aspect of identity and in that way intersects with gender/sex (as well as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc.) in the construction of social identity. In addition, workplaces are themselves gendered. Gender/sex is also a factor in how the relationship between work and other institutions discussed in this book is constructed.

Religious institutions, as discussed in Chapter 10, are key aspects to understandings of gender roles in many if not all societies, providing doctrine and



historical narratives to naturalize the cultural constructed concepts of gender/sex which they construct. As with other institutions, however, they also provides a social unit from which resistance to the constraints of traditional roles can emerge.

The chapter on the institution of the media points out the danger of uncritical consumption of all forms of media. This is presented as a double-edged sword; although representations of gendered/sexed identities in the media are important influences on how people conceive of gender roles, if used in creative or emancipatory ways they are still not the same as social change.

The final chapter of this book, titled 'One Last Look Through a Critical Gendered Lens', reiterates the problems with the difference approach to the study of gender/sex and frames the issues involved as being not merely a matter of personal choices but also political ones. The authors leave the reader with the charge to consider the constraints and possibilities for empowerment not just by local institutions, such as those discussed in the textbook, but also by globalization.

Communicating Gender Diversity is a welcome addition to the field of gender studies. Although the scope of the material covered is much broader than language and gender, it nonetheless is a good theoretical treatment of issues that are essential to current discussions of gender among scholars of language and linguistics.

