

## Developing feminist analyses

### Book review

Burman, E, Alldred, P, Bewley, C, Goldberg, B, Heenan, C, Marks, D, Marshall, J, Taylor, K, Ullah, R & Warner, S (1996) **Challenging women: Psychology's exclusions, feminist possibilities**. Buckingham: Open University Press. ISBN 0-335-19510-5. 210 pages.

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As is demanded by the genre within which **Challenging women** is written, I will position myself as a reviewer and in this regard it would seem that being a South African psychologist is more important than the usual markers of being white, middle class and female.

As a South African psychologist, like many of my colleagues, I embrace social constructionism and discourse analysis and therefore do not need to be convinced of its insights. Why it should be so that psychologists in particular contexts embrace or fail to embrace constructionism, is one of the themes of **Challenging women** which locates psychology in its macro-context. In this regard it is of note that in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s the turbulent political macro-context was such that psychology was forced to either question its relevance and its power relations or to take refuge in an ever deepening fundamentalism concerning its truth claims, based on theoretical notions of essentialism in regard to race and gender and on methodologies aspiring to remain faithful to the "scientific" method. Given this choice many South African psychologists at this time took the risk of questioning the discipline and found in discourse analysis a very helpful tool, although how successful we have been in generating alternatives to mainstream psychology is a moot point.

In this regard we share something in common with the book **Challenging women**, which succeeds in raising questions but not necessarily generating answers. Thus, for those PINS readers who have already embraced the basic principles underlying discourse analysis and social constructionism, this book is likely to offer little that is new, at the level of meta-analysis and the generation of alternatives. It will however offer a great deal at the level of illustrations and examples as it examines specific instances of power relations underpinning psychology's research, practice and institutions.

This examination takes place largely through the lens of gender and race but is mindful of other forms of power relations. By remaining mindful of how discourses of race, heterosexuality, class, normality, gender and professionalism interact to give voice to some and to silence others, the book shows a sensitivity to the unity versus diversity debate within feminism and also explores the relatively under researched area of power relations between women, which is a strength.

The issue of power relations between women is particularly pertinent in the South African context as is highlighted in Cock's (1980) ground-breaking book on **Maids and madams**. It is however an issue which has not been sufficiently researched since this time and perhaps this is one of the challenges of the book with which a South African audience may wish to run. Those who do, will find Bewley's article, to be discussed later in this review, extremely helpful.

At the level of presentation, the book shows an interesting mix between those authors, such as Ullah and Taylor, who speak explicitly in a personal voice and those who present material in a removed manner. Ullah speaks of her difficulty as a black researcher in gaining access to subjects even though the subjects were themselves black and she discusses how access between interviewer and interviewee is mediated through organisational structures and how these reflect more general race relations. She also discusses the notion of "sensitive" research topics and how these are constructed. Most interestingly, perhaps, she shows how her lack of data on black parent school governors constituted in and of itself very powerful data in regard to this topic.

Taylor, in speaking from her personal experience, points to difficulties women might have in interviewing men. She comments on how private and public contexts interact with differential power relations, based on gender, to enhance or diminish the unequal power relationship of the researcher and the researched. She highlights the potential dangers for female researchers interviewing males in the private domain and gives practical guidelines on to how to limit these dangers.

In regard to the issue of voice, a fascinating and insightful paper was that of Marshall who reflected upon her own shifting voice as a researcher into "heavy periods". She gave descriptions of her own changing voice in relation to women subjects, male doctors and female nurses and showed how different pressures and power relations led to her own collusion and compromise with these different audiences.

In regard to the issue of power relations between women, Bewley's article as already indicated was an important one. She analysed the mechanisms which maintain power relations in feminist organisations. The major thrust of her argument was that these organisations while showing similarities with others nevertheless, for example in regard to hierarchies and boundary maintenance, show differences in their particular emphasis on informal networks and personal characteristics such as "wisdom". However her central point is that the exercise of power is inescapable and that the safest way forward is to fully own this and to understand the intersection of power with the notion of difference. She points to the denial of difference as a major factor in the destructive destabilising of women's organisations.



A useful counterpoint to Bewley's article is that of Alldred as she provides pragmatic answers to some of the dilemmas which have plagued women's organisations. Arguing for a strategic rather than an ideological alliance between women Alldred's paper will alienate relatively fewer women than papers from more radical feminists, and nowhere is the strategy she advocates more successfully illustrated than in the South African National Women's Coalition which has recently united a large number of women's organisations in a strategic rather than an ideological alliance.

However Alldred's article, which for me was a highlight of the book, does not only focus on pragmatics. Her generic pragmatics derive from a sophisticated analysis of the specific discourses surrounding the issue of lone motherhood. She locates the issues of motherhood within the discourses of developmental psychology and with ironic humour she points to contradictions pertaining to the lone mother in regard to the image of maternal selflessness promoted by developmental psychology's focus on the needs of the child, tautologically defined by white middle class, male oriented, desired, normative outcomes without regard to difference and without regard to process. She shows for example how in regard to married heterosexual mothers the lack of desire to have a child is considered unnatural, immature and selfish, whereas in regard to single mothers, the presence of such a desire is considered equally unnatural, immature and selfish.

However, despite its interesting content, as already indicated the strength of Alldred's chapter lies not only in its content but in its contribution to praxis. Its contribution in this regard is all the more noteworthy because the strength of discourse analysis usually lies in its theory and critique while the translation of this into practice remains extremely problematic.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Heenan's article on Women, food and fat. Following a very informative and comprehensive review of feminist theory and critique in this area, Heenan struggles to deliver a therapy which transcends the limits to which she points. It is as if therapy, like the body she discusses, has no escape but is caught in the infinite regress of the practices which construct it. This however is a tension of which Heenan is not unaware.

The focus on practices which construct the natural is at its sharpest in Warner's article on child abuse, in which such abuse is argued to be a practice which constructs gender rather being predicated upon it. A similar focus on practices which construct, is evident in both Marks's article on gendered "care" which examines power relations in multidisciplinary teams and in Goldberg's analysis of how psychologists tell their tales.

All in all however, despite the fact that the book **Challenging women** contains a great deal of interesting content and in a different context may be an essential read, I suspect that for many PINS readers this will not be the case. This is because the book does not fully deliver on the issues outlined in Burman's introduction, which was nevertheless one of the strongest chapters in the book in that it reflects Burman's intensive knowledge of the key issues and debates in feminism and how these have been concretely expressed in conflicts over for example curriculum development and organisational structures within psychological societies. In the final analysis the book does not "develop feminist analyses" although it presents them in various forms and as promised focusses on psychology's "theoretical models, research methods and

institutional practices". It does not however "extend feminist theorising and opportunities for intervention" although it is located within such theorising and points to opportunities for intervention.

The book does however succeed in making writing a political strategy as is made clear in the authors' end note where they reflect on the process of publishing the book. Interestingly as a reviewer I can affirm this notion from a personal perspective because it was only in writing this review that it became obvious to me that in reading the book, I not only had privileged the academic lens above others but found it difficult to articulate the negatives about the book, being drawn toward the very "sanitisation of difference" which this book critiques.

Do these concluding comments then represent an apology for my critique which I hope has not been unduly harsh? I suspect it is the case, but the reader I am sure will decide this for herself or himself in the infinite regress of the discourse.