

The Poverty of Truth-Seeking

Postmodernism, Discourse Analysis and Critical Feminism

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ABSTRACT. In this article I examine one of the thorniest aspects of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, in order to see what a discursive analytic approach can contribute to this important debate. The problem I refer to concerns the threat that the postmodern turn—despite its benefits—is said to pose for a politically committed feminism. I begin with a brief recapping of the postmodernist challenge to the tenets of social science. I then advance a two-part argument promoting discourse analysis for feminist scholars who seek to benefit from postmodernism's respect for difference and inclusivity, yet refuse to give up a critical perspective. The first part of the argument deals with the charge that the postmodern turn disables critical *inquiry*; the second with the related debate over the need for 'generalizing' or 'totalizing' concepts (e.g. the concept 'women') in the service of a feminist *politics*. I argue that postmodernist scholars' widespread tendency to discuss language outside its context of use has hobbled their ability to respond to this serious challenge, and I suggest that a closer look at routine talk can help feminists reframe these debates about politicality in helpful ways.

KEY WORDS: critical feminism, discourse analysis, feminism and postmodernism, unity and difference

Postmodernism's Challenge to Social Science

Postmodernism has reverberated through all the social sciences for good reason. Though numerous 'postmodernisms' abound (including an innocuous variant which sees it as merely another historical period), postmodernists are generally agreed on a central principle which is anything but innocuous in its consequences for social scientists: the impossibility of an objective knowledge of social 'reality' independent of the ways we experience, interpret or *represent* it.

The implications of this position make it clear why combating and containing postmodernism has become a central project of many social scientists. First, by displacing reality with representation, the core social

science project is shifted from a concern with the substance of experiential reality to the images or representations that actors (scientists and ordinary 'members' alike) create to signify 'the real' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, pp. 75–76). This shift challenges our received beliefs about the goals of social science and also about its logic and methods (the latter appearing, on a postmodernist reading, as a set of technical manipulations in the service of an impossible objective). The result is that social science

... becomes a more subjective and humble enterprise as truth gives way to tentativeness. . . . Postmodernists . . . seek to 'locate' meaning rather than to 'discover' it. . . . They offer 'readings' not 'observations', 'interpretations' not 'findings'. . . . They never test because testing requires 'evidence', a meaningless concept within a postmodern frame of reference. (Rosenau, cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 8)

Second, our beliefs about science's role in history—the Enlightenment 'story' of science as our gradual emancipation from speculation, myth and illusion toward testable, objective knowledge of the world—is disrupted. And third, the status of the social scientist is undermined: if objective knowledge of social reality is impossible, then the stories social scientists tell—about mind, self and society—are 'only more sophisticated, but no more valid, than the stories told by any other types of narrators' (Dumont, 1998, p. 218).

No wonder then that postmodernism has caused consternation across the disciplines. It strikes at the heart of what we all learned—absorbed—in the course of our professional socialization regardless of our different fields: the conviction that the scientific method was the best way to achieve 'bias-free' knowledge of social life. It also appears to strike at another deeply held conviction, the one that brought many of us to psychology, sociology or political science in the first place; here I mean our desire to contribute to the kind of knowledge that can make a difference in the world. We shall see that for many social scientists these two basic commitments (to science, and to critical social inquiry) must stand or fall together, for in order to achieve the latter (this argument runs), one needs the sound knowledge provided by the former.

But in the matter of social critique, the implications of postmodernism are not so clear: at the same time as it undercuts the scientific project and the privilege of the scientific voice, it promises to raise the visibility and credibility of all of the voices at the margins:

... the forgotten, the irrational, the insignificant, the repressed, the borderline, the classical, the sacred, the traditional, the eccentric, the sublimated, the subjugated, the rejected, the non-essential, the marginal, the peripheral, the excluded, the tenuous, the silenced, the accidental, the dispersed, the disqualified, the deferred, the disjointed . . . (Rosenau, cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 75)

In what follows I argue that the two commitments can be uncoupled—that is, that one can reject the ‘story’ of science, as postmodernism counsels, without abandoning the possibility of critical social inquiry. This issue is particularly important for feminist scholars (who place politically engaged inquiry at the heart of their work) and for discourse analysts (many of whom share the insights of postmodernism on language)—hence my paper is directed particularly to these readers—but the larger project is inter- and multi-disciplinary. The issue at the heart of the paper, when framed most broadly, must be of concern to all social scientists: What is the possibility of critical social inquiry once the supports of science and the scientific method have been cut away?

Feminism and Postmodernism

In what follows I examine one of the most persistently problematic aspects of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, in order to see what a discursive analytic approach can contribute to this important debate. The problem I refer to concerns the threat that the postmodern turn—despite its benefits—is said to pose for a politically committed feminism. While feminists have welcomed postmodernism’s emphasis on difference and multiple perspectives, the relativism and fragmentation that allegedly accompanies it has caused some to reject postmodernism outright, and others to continue to treat it with misgivings.

My own view is that feminism is reinvigorated, not threatened, by postmodernist insights. At the same time, I am also persuaded that postmodernist scholars’ widespread tendency to discuss language *outside* its situations of use has hampered their ability to respond to a serious challenge such as the one above. Discourse analysis, by contrast, asks us to look at *language-in-use*, and by shifting the emphasis away from how we should talk, to how we do talk in routine settings, discourse analysis is better able to respond to the challenge of a politically engaged feminism within a postmodern framework.

Feminist scholars have paid far more attention to postmodernism and its potential benefits than they have to discourse analysis.¹ A contributing factor, perhaps, is the perceived overlap between the two: discourse analysis and postmodernism are both ‘about’ language, and many discourse analysts, myself included, accept the insights of the postmodern linguistic turn. Even so, the discursive perspective offers feminists—and postmodernists—something distinctive: its emphasis on the analysis of ordinary talk. The most general argument I advance in this paper, then, is that feminists who are interested in what postmodernism has to offer will benefit by broadening their view of language/discourse to include an examination of *language-in-use*.

My more specific objective is to advance a two-part argument promoting discourse analysis for feminist scholars who seek to benefit from postmodernism's respect for difference and inclusivity, yet refuse to give up a critical perspective. The first part of the argument deals with the charge that postmodernism threatens the possibility of a politically engaged feminist *analysis*; the second with the related debate over the need for essentializing or 'totalizing' concepts (e.g. the concept 'women') in the service of a feminist *politics*.² The fact that both debates are about politics is no coincidence: looking back from our contemporary vantage point, we can see that feminist concerns around postmodernism have consistently homed in on politicality—specifically, on the loss of the 'political real' (Curti, 1998) that is allegedly entailed by postmodernism's turn to language.

In what follows I shall be arguing against this view, specifically by highlighting the ways in which ordinary language as understood by discourse analysis is routinely, irremediably political. More generally, I shall be suggesting that the examination of language-in-use can help feminists reframe the debates about politicality in helpful ways. By treating 'politics' as an ongoing discursive accomplishment, I hope to counter the view that the postmodern turn entails a turn *away* from political engagement.

The Discursive Approach to Language

As Best and Kellner point out in their useful book *Postmodern Theory*, postmodernism follows poststructuralism in giving primacy to discourse; at this general level both of these approaches are part of the 'discursive perspective' which understands all phenomena as systems of signs. Social life is thus amenable to linguistic analysis (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 26). In addition, such systems of signification are understood to have regulatory power, and it is Foucault's great contribution to have shifted the discussion of power away from properties of classes and individuals to ways of saying and knowing (Foucault, 1975). In its narrower sense, however, the discursive approach emphasizes the study of the way talk works in everyday life. This tradition, which has been shaped in part by the ordinary-language theory of Austin, Wittgenstein and the ethnomethodological work of Garfinkel, puts the strategic character of talk—*what we do* with words—at the forefront, and in general focuses on language-in-use to a greater extent than does poststructuralism or postmodernism. Edwards (1995) reminds us that Harvey Sacks made this point some decades ago: talk is '*action, not communication*. It is a form of activity, not a medium for the transmission of thoughts, nor for the realization of some other underlying reality' (p. 585) This is important for social psychology and for sociology; it means, for example, that mental phenomena such as beliefs and attitudes, as well as, say, organizations and social structures, are treated not as objects in the world (or

the mind) to be described in talk, but rather as the ensemble of everyday social practices through which they are talked into being (G. Miller, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Shotter, 1993). On this view, to study social life (including the life of the mind) is to study the many ways we have to talk about it.

By 'discourse', we refer to talk, to text, and also to the large-scale cultural rhetorics³—for example, the rhetoric of modern masculinity or the rhetoric of medicine—which speakers employ as interpretive resources or repertoires in their concrete settings of use (for a discussion of this concept in the context of social psychology, see Potter & Wetherell, 1987, ch. 7; for a sociological discussion, see Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). The fundamental premise of discourse analysis as I use it in this paper is that language constitutes rather than reflects reality, and that speakers use talk strategically to accomplish their purposes in particular settings. In the parlance of social constructionists, language is a 'claims-making' enterprise; when we speak we are inevitably promoting one version of the world and disqualifying others (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977/1987). Here I use 'claim' in the specific sense of an account or story which is designed to further some practical goal. Accordingly, such claims are political and moral, not empirical.

This version of discourse analysis holds that we know the world through the ways we have to speak about it—and that we have no other way. It therefore rejects the possibility of any True or foundational knowledge of the world *outside* language, and it is this radical anti-foundationalism which the discursive perspective shares with postmodernism, and which is captured in the concept of the 'linguistic' or 'postmodern turn'. As we shall see, there are some discourse analysts who reject this 'turn', but those who accept it must also reject realist models of language which assess speech on its ability to accurately represent or mirror some independent reality outside it. Like postmodernism, the discursive approach holds that different communities of speakers generate many different accounts of the world, and that it is futile or misguided to attempt to assess their relative truth-value as reports on that world. Accordingly, attention is shifted to the ways such accounts organize and enact the world in talk.

The two issues I shall be considering in this paper emerge out of the emphasis on multiple perspectives and diversity which follows from the turn to language. The first issue concerns the possibility of a politically engaged form of social inquiry once the bedrock reality against which social change is said to be measured is swept away. The second issue concerns the possibility of feminist social organization and struggle once the postmodern emphasis on diversity has declared unities (such as women, or feminists) to be oppressive 'fictions'. I take up these issues separately below. In each case I introduce a brief discursive analysis of ordinary talk in order to forefront the insights to be had from examining language in its context of use.

The Turn to Language and the Possibility of Critical Inquiry

'Nothing but Accounts': Truth-Seeking as the Feminist Emancipatory Project

The debate I consider in this section concerns the effect on critical social inquiry of the postmodern challenge to objective or scientific knowledge of social reality. It centres on the question whether critical inquiry must be anchored in the kind of privileged, unassailable and context-free knowledge of the world which has been traditionally promised by science or philosophy. Critics of postmodernism argue that the turn to language has destroyed the possibility of social inquiry because it has destroyed any concept of the social beyond language (see the discussion of Smith's position, below). Postmodernists counter that the social (and the political) are not erased merely because they are seen to be constituted in discourse. They point out, moreover, that objective knowledge—'knowledge from nowhere'—was always an illusion anyway, and that the very distinction between scientific and other ways of knowing (typically discredited as prejudice, ignorance and myth) is itself a discursive strategy meant to legitimate the perspective of society's dominant groups at the expense of the marginalized.

The postmodern challenge to objective, scientific knowledge first set off a search among feminist theorists for new foundational knowledges on which to base the critical social project, then gave rise to a much-altered conception of social theory which was not dependent on foundational knowledges of any sort. This project spans several disciplines and there is no doubt that it has led to a radical rethinking of the whole nature of social theorizing. I review these developments in what follows, and then I turn to the contribution that a discursive perspective can make to this important issue.

The postmodernist questioning of the possibility of foundational or True knowledge is part of the larger challenge to modern Enlightenment ideals of progress, to the promise of objective and bias-free knowledge of reality held out by philosophy or science, and to the search for metanarratives of historical or psychological development (that of a Marx or a Kohlberg, for example) that have preoccupied so much of sociological and psychological theorizing (Best & Kellner, 1991; Nicholson, 1992; Seidman, 1994). Some of these commentators have traced the destabilizing of modern assumptions about knowledge and reality to the activism of society's subordinate groups in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is these same groups (women, gays and lesbians, people of colour)—those who have lived and subsequently theorized subordination—who have persistently interrogated the possibilities and limits of postmodernism since the 1980s.

The strength and radical potential of the postmodern or linguistic turn consists in the challenge it poses to any self-evidently True or privileged account of the world; knowledge, as Haraway (1988) put it, is always

'knowledge from somewhere'. The force of this insight is to place subordinated knowledges and voices on the same footing, in principle, as that of society's dominant groups. Feminists who had seen their own and other women's perspectives trivialized or ignored were quick to recognize the value of a theoretical approach which rejected the possibility of an unvarnished Truth outside language, and said instead that *every* account of the world was contestable. Postmodernism declared the legitimacy of multiple perspectives, and this openness spoke volumes to any woman who had ever confronted the patriarchal 'facts of life' and thought: 'Funny, it doesn't look that way from here.'

The Search for New Foundations

But while postmodernism's challenge to foundational Truth is liberating to some, to others it spells the end of critical social inquiry by putting reality 'itself' in doubt. The latter remain committed to the existence and knowability of a real world beyond language, and their resistance to postmodernism is usually motivated by a principled concern to preserve a model of inquiry which has emancipatory or political potential.⁴ They contend that we must know what the world is really like if we are going to change it. Accordingly, critical social inquiry must reject the anti-foundationalism of the linguistic turn and remain a Truth-seeking enterprise.

Dorothy E. Smith's recent 'Telling the Truth after Postmodernism' (1997) makes an important contribution to this discussion by explicitly setting out feminist concerns around the anti-foundationalist assumptions of postmodernism and the linguistic turn. The heart of her argument is that the 'turn to language' is a turn *away* from real life and political engagement onto the shifting sands of 'mere representation'; to repoliticize social inquiry, we need the firm ground of an extra-linguistic standpoint which only realist models of language can offer. This in turn means knowing the Truth about the social world; as Smith puts it, if we are to act politically, we have to know 'who is right in arguments about what is' (p. 177). Smith's view generates a very specific understanding of the way *language and power* are related, and of the *emancipatory or critical social project*. Both are worth taking up briefly here, since they are widely accepted by scholars outside, and sometimes within, the community of discourse analysts, yet their assumptions often remain implicit.

A realist approach to language, as I noted earlier, assesses speech on its ability to accurately represent some independent reality outside it. Such a model divides the world into true speakers who represent the word as it really is, and false speakers who oppress by misrepresenting reality for their own gain. Here power is equated with the ability to purvey and enforce distorted or 'ideological' (e.g. racist, sexist) views of the world.

On this view, the critical social project will require being able to differentiate distorted from true accounts of reality. Smith (1997), for example, argues that the critical feminist sociologist must begin by 'finding out "how things are put together"' and hence producing knowledge that represents the social as it really is' (p. 173). Here, politically engaged inquiry is the project of unmasking distorted representations of the world and replacing them with truer (hence fairer, more just) ones. I focus on Smith's position because she lays out its implications explicitly, and because of her importance as a feminist sociologist, but we should note that this version of the critical social project is held by feminists and non-feminists alike, and it requires them to reject the linguistic turn implicit in postmodernism for its refusal to differentiate social truths from social fictions (i.e. 'reality' from 'myths' or 'ideologies').⁵ In addition to Smith, this group includes some social problems theorists (for example), whose commitment to raising the visibility of 'real' (as opposed to 'spurious') social problems requires that they be able to adjudicate competing accounts of social conditions (for a discussion of this issue, see, e.g., Holstein & Miller, 1993, ch. 1); some prominent feminist theorists of the family (a field in which the 'rhetoric-and-reality' critique has become a staple, e.g. Barrett & McIntosh, 1982; Gittins, 1986; see also L.J. Miller, 1990); and some discourse analysts, notably Teun van Dijk, who understands the critical project as the effort to unmask 'domination', that is, talk which manipulates accounts of the world to the benefit of elites (Van Dijk, 1993, esp. pp. 249–250 and 258–296).⁶ This version of the critical project, then, is rooted in the view that justice will only be achieved when people come to see through the distortions of power and arrive at an accurate assessment of reality.

A model of critical inquiry such as this one, which gains its moral force from the contrast it constructs between ideological and true knowledge of reality, has a powerful appeal, and it has given rise to an array of innovative attempts by feminist theorists to replace the discredited modernist foundation—the objective, detached knowledge of science—with other, better foundational knowledges which are more sensitive to feminist concerns: the privilege of 'partial' or oppositional knowledge, for example (Haraway, 1988); the privileged knowledge of a 'successor science' (Harding, 1986); or Smith's candidate, the privileged knowledge which is grounded in 'lived experience' (Smith, 1987 and 1997, p. 172). But while these alternative knowledges are not presented as 'objective', they play a no less privileged/foundational role in the programmes of their authors.

The creativity of these programmes has stimulated much exciting discussion over the past decade and a half—but what is important for our present purpose is that they all depart from the modernist or Enlightenment view only insofar as they replace the privileged standpoint of science with other equally protected standpoints from which Truth can supposedly be glimpsed. In short, their interest in the marginalized or oppositional actor is primarily

as a better Truth-teller (thus Smith, for example, holds that the mother's standpoint provides not just a different understanding of the schoolchild than that of the school system, but a truer, more real one: Smith, 1987, chs. 4 and 5). Such alternative foundational knowledges are intended to function—like science—as the arbiter of true and false accounts of the world. These projects thus remain modernist Truth-seeking ones in an important respect, and they lead their proponents to conclude that there is no political critique possible 'within' language.

Critical Inquiry without Foundations: The Postmodern Alternative

The feminist theorists just mentioned remain in an ambivalent relation to modernism: they reject the modernist method (i.e. the promise of scientific objectivity), but cannot give up the modernist goal—a true account of social reality. In the past decade, however, we have seen efforts to develop an alternative emancipatory project *within* a postmodernist framework. In my view, these proposals move in the right direction—away from Truth-seeking—and begin to lay out how we can give social theory a moral and critical dimension without resorting to Truth-seeking or alternative foundational guarantees.

Sociologists encountered an early indication of the direction such a project might take in Foucault's groundbreaking recommendation that we 'amplify the voice of the Other' by 'entertaining the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges' (Foucault in Coles, 1991, p. 110), in order to recover some sense of the power struggles which have silenced them. Although feminists have often debated the advantages and disadvantages of Foucauldian insights, most concede that he alerted theorists to the political nature of the process whereby some accounts of the world (the professional discourse of medical science, for example) acquire the authority to trivialize or silence other accounts (notably the 'voice of experience', or common sense). Foucault's point—a genuinely emancipatory one—is that this process is not natural, but a socio-historical one that can be studied. Feminist scholars quickly grasped the usefulness of Foucault's programme as a way of understanding the process of marginalization; Joan Scott (1990, p. 135) argued, for example, that feminist research should emphasize two questions: (1) How have some ways of talking emerged as privileged or normative, as others have been eclipsed or silenced? And (2): What do these processes reveal about power and how it operates?

The sort of programme Scott describes focuses on restoring the legitimacy of discredited perspectives on social reality, and is very much alive in feminist scholarship in a broad range of fields—in the work of Judith Butler, for example, and that of Celia Kitzinger, whose critiques of psychoanalysis and psychology are directed in part to exposing the many different stories (here, of identity formation) which have been eclipsed by the dominant

narratives central to their disciplinary fields. At the heart of their projects is an uncovering of this history of silencing. Its starting point is that no account should be protected from challenge.

At the same time, these scholars recognize the need to go beyond postmodern scepticism to value-affirmative stances. Thus, they are concerned not simply to challenge the authority of hegemonic narratives of identity formation, but, beyond that, to argue for the good of alternate accounts which respect the multiplicity of the world (about which more later). More generally, feminist scholars have become increasingly concerned to connect their analysis to their own values and to a programme of social change. They are well aware of postmodernism's vulnerability to the charge of relativism and the value-neutrality it potentially entails—that is, the concern that postmodernism leaves us with a plethora of accounts or narratives of social life, and no principled way of deciding for one over another (e.g. Nicholson, 1992, p. 84). This is an ongoing theme behind feminists' mixed reactions to Foucault (e.g. Diamond & Quinby, 1988; Hartsock, 1990). It appears in other quarters as well; for example, it is the basis of Gill's complaint against the position of Edwards, Ashmore and Potter as it is developed in their well-known paper 'Death and Furniture' (1995): by 'relentlessly interrogat[ing] and dissolv[ing] each last claim, . . . each last shred of meaning', [says Gill,] these authors end up promoting a content-less morality which argues only for the social value of skepticism itself' (Gill, 1995, pp. 170–172). Gill's criticism is aimed at any model of inquiry that limits itself to contesting or deconstructing dominant narratives. It is also directed at the unsatisfying array of alternative models of reflexivity which showcase the play of narrative/dialogue but reveal little if anything about the theorists' own commitments—or if they do, they are attested to outside the analysis itself (p. 181).

Gill and other feminist scholars (Flax, 1992; Nicholson, 1992, 1998) urge a move toward a position that places values squarely in the centre of analysis: 'we need an orientation', says Gill (1995), 'which is unashamedly political, in which we, as feminists, can make social transformation an explicit concern of our work' (p. 182). For Gill (citing Henwood and Pidgeon), this means that theorists must explicitly acknowledge their own commitments by being accountable for their interpretations, and the social and political consequences of the latter (p. 182).⁷

The Turn to Pragmatics

The effort to establish a strong moral-critical dimension for postmodern inquiry by emphasizing the *consequences* of the inquirer's interpretation—rather than its Truth-value—has gained momentum in the last decade and is now widely shared by theorists in a variety of fields. One of the most persuasive proposals along these lines is that of the American social theorist

Steven Seidman. Seidman's position emerges out of his life as a sociologist and as a gay man. He argues (Seidman, 1991) that the sterility and insularity of recent sociological theory stems in part from its central project—'its quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory of society'—and his work since the late 1980s is a sustained attempt to refocus sociological theory away from methodological-foundational concerns (the search for foundational concepts and processes, e.g. the 'laws' of social life), to practical-moral ones. The moral-critical dimension of the sociological project can no longer be established through the modernist move which compares 'true' accounts with distorted or ideological ones, says Seidman, since this project rests upon 'the increasingly absurd claim to speak the Truth, and to be an epistemically privileged discourse'. Instead Seidman proposes to reframe social theory as 'a social narrative with a moral intent'. He says:

Insofar as postmodern social discourses are seen simply as narratives with all the rhetorical, aesthetic, moral, ideological and philosophical aspects characteristic of all story-telling, their social role would have to be acknowledged explicitly. *Postmodern social analysis amounts to stories about society that carry moral, social ideological and perhaps directly political significance.* (Seidman, 1991, p. 142, emphasis added)

Seidman shares with feminist theorists like Gill, Nicholson and Fraser an interest in joining postmodern insights with a 'socially rich notion of responsibility' (Seidman, 1992, p. 206). What emerges out of his discussion is a new critical project which identifies the moral/political dimension of analysis with an examination of the social consequences of different accounts of the world. Seidman suggests that we can argue for some accounts or stories over others not because they are truer, but because of the way they work in specific social contexts. For Seidman, the critical question becomes: What are the social consequences of telling this story rather than that one? For somewhat the same reason—their usefulness—Fraser and Nicholson contend that postmodern theorists should retain some hitherto suspect concepts (large-scale generalizing categories like gender, race or oppression, or particular values) so long as their historically specific applicability is explicitly recognized.⁸ Just because we reject the existence of context-independent criteria and principles, Nicholson (1992, 1998) points out, does not mean we must reject the language of commitment altogether.

These scholars set themselves the task of rescuing postmodernism from the charge that, as a form of relativism, it shrinks from political engagement. They all take the view that postmodernism—by rejecting all claims to privileged knowledge—widens, rather than narrows, the realm of 'the political', precisely by asking us to articulate the practical-moral agendas that authorize our claims about the world. Their proposals aim to shift the moral dimension of inquiry out of the abstract realm of philosophy and the quest for foundations and truths, and into the analysis of language (stories, accounts) in concrete situations and settings. Although Seidman and

Nicholson do not call themselves discourse analysts, this move brings them closer to the latter's recommendation to consider language-in-use.

In what follows, my purpose will be to show how a discourse analytic approach can further these goals. We note at the outset that the latter's emphasis on talk's performative aspect—that is, its 'usefulness' for members, its character as action rather than as, say, 'communication'—creates an affinity between the discursive perspective and the postmodern project just outlined. Both perspectives suggest that claims or narratives gain their sense from their contexts-of-use, not from some context-independent principles. Indeed, it is fair to say that social theory as Seidman envisages it begins to look very like the 'talk' of ordinary members—a moral story or claim about the world whose shape is pragmatically defined. If this is so, then everyday language as the discursive perspective understands it offers a useful model for postmodern social theorizing.⁹ Moreover, at the heart of the discursive approach is the idea that talk makes moral and political claims, and this resonates strongly with the postmodernist demand that the theorist be an advocate for a way of life (Seidman, 1991). In the brief analysis that follows, I hope to show that the discursive perspective offers feminist postmodernists a more profoundly politicized version of inquiry, and of the inquirer as well.

Enacting Power in Everyday Talk: Joanne and the Treehouse

In her study of the gendered play of children in several New Zealand daycares, Bronwyn Davies describes the following event which took place in the schoolyard. Joanne, a 5-year-old who has enviously watched the boys play in 'their' fort in the past, seizes the opportunity to stake her claim to a new treehouse. She climbs up into it, and moves to control who can and cannot come up. As the boys on the ground discover the invader, they swarm up from below but are taken aback by a rain of debris thrown down on them by Joanne, who is apparently determined to stand her ground. When a nearby teacher reproves her for her behaviour, Joanne calls out that she was 'just cleaning the floor' (Davies, 1989, p. 72).¹⁰

This is but a small event, but it can be analysed illustratively to demonstrate some of the strengths of a politically engaged, feminist discursive approach to everyday life. In line with the assumptions of the discursive approach, we begin by reading this episode as a strategic move on Joanne's part. Davies describes Joanne as attracted to boys' activities of many sorts around the school and, consequently, as the object of considerable boundary-maintenance work by others who want to return her to appropriately feminine forms of play.

But Joanne is something of a renegade, and in this light, the first thing to note about the episode at the treehouse is its character as a power play. Like other efforts by women to move into social sites culturally defined as

masculine, Joanne's attempt to take over the treehouse involves a challenge to the prevailing distribution of power. From a discursive perspective, power struggles over sites in the social landscape will involve struggles over meaning. For example, Joanne's reference to cleaning/sweeping the floor implicitly redefines the 'treehouse' (with its attendant masculine meaning as a fort) as a home—and thus as a natural and normal place for a girl to be. This is an important part of her takeover strategy, and the move reminds us that the structure's meaning as a treehouse/fort is not an inherent one, but merely a construction of its creators—the boys. By exploiting its subterranean meaning as a home, Joanne is able to open up its female possibilities as domestic ground, and begins to establish her right to be there. In a second move, she contests her teacher's masculinist reading of her 'aggressive' conduct—bombarding the boys with debris—by redefining it as housecleaning, that is, as 'women's work', something she has the culturally sanctioned right—even duty—to engage in.

Politicizing the Actor

By reading this encounter as a discursive strategy, we open out its 'political' character in a number of ways. First and most concretely, we treat actors as *doing* things with their talk; on this reading, Joanne's statement 'I'm just cleaning' is a claim which works to assert her right to the 'fort' and is an enactment of power, rather than a passive report on her own behaviour. By focusing on the interpretive work actors do, we mean to highlight discourse analysis' view of language as irremediably strategic or political. This assumption informs a discursive reading of *all* talk, not just talk which is overtly political. For this reason I have chosen a relatively innocuous example—a child's routine schoolyard banter—instead of, say, the conversation of women at a political meeting. By radically politicizing mundane everyday life, the discursive perspective extends in an important way the feminist commitment to the idea that 'the personal is political'.

A second point concerns the scope of the actor's politicality. On a discursive reading, Joanne's artfulness is displayed not just in the strategic way she feminizes the 'fort'/treehouse by redefining it as a home, but also in the way she invokes large-scale cultural discourse—in this case, the conventional rhetoric of femininity (including orientation to home and housework, to appearance and respectability, to nurturance and to deference) and uses it to drive a wedge into masculine territory. Any analysis of power which highlights the negotiation of meaning of necessity moves beyond the interactional or local setting into the realm of large-scale (macro-level) cultural discourses. Thus Joanne's encounter at the treehouse cannot be understood simply as an encounter between individuals, except concretely—for her claim to be 'just cleaning' only works as a strategy because it is grounded in a macro-level discourse about 'what everybody knows' girls do,

that is, domestic work. What we have here, then, is a three-way encounter between Joanne, the other actors on the scene (notably the boys, and the teacher) and large-scale cultural discourses at the macro level on which speakers draw in order to press their claims.

Other studies have examined the ways actors astutely invoke powerful discourses of medicine, for example, of science, or of legality and the courts, to legitimate their version of the world (e.g. Darrough, 1990; West, 1984), thereby enacting, but also remaking, these 'social facts'. Such discourses are socio-historical productions whose emergence and influence can be traced. Analytically distinct from the local setting, they are available to speakers as resources on which to draw (as Joanne draws on the discourse of feminine domesticity), and indeed have a considerable impact on the power dynamics of the interaction. Moreover, they are not invoked mechanically by the actor (nor are they seen to cause or 'drive' the talk) but are deployed only when it is strategically advantageous to do so. As Holstein and Gubrium (1994) note, echoing Garfinkel, 'the use of local interpretive resources is typically astute; resources are adapted to the demands of the occasion' (p. 266). Such theoretical assumptions substantially expand the power which the discursive perspective ascribes to the actor: while power is always *enacted* at the interactional level, the actor's 'politicality' reaches beyond interaction to encompass macro-level discourses as well.

Politics and Realist Models of Language

I now turn to the debate over the alleged need for realism in a politically engaged feminist analysis. As we saw earlier, the issue here is 'Whose version of the world is the right one?', and it goes to the heart of feminist misgivings over discursive and postmodern approaches. How can we make a better world (the argument goes) if we don't know the truth about the one we've got?

Against this line of thinking, I would argue that my brief analysis of the episode in the treehouse clearly shows the *poverty* of such a Truth-seeking project. The latter would concern itself with what Joanne was 'really' doing (in Smith's words, with 'whose claim is right'). By contrast, a discursive reading formulates Joanne's claim (to be 'just cleaning the house') as anything but an innocent or neutral description of what the world is 'really' like. Instead it treats it as a highly partisan construction which puts forward a preferred version of reality and is designed to further the 'poaching' project at hand—and in so doing, it politicizes the actor. This example is instructive precisely because it makes the weakness of the realist reading of her comment so very plain: we see at a glance how treating it as an empirical description, according to realist assumptions, and attempting to assess its validity as a true representation of what really happened—'Is she *really* sweeping the floor, or is she attacking the boys?', 'Is it *really* a [feminine]

house or is it a [masculine] fort?', or the example often thought to clinch the realist argument, 'Was it really a rape or was it consensual sex?'—would be to erase entirely the actor's interpretive work which is so crucial to grasping the episode as a power struggle (here, Joanne's work to construct her act as 'just cleaning').

There are important implications here for feminists who argue that a politically informed feminist stance requires sorting out true from distorted versions of social reality. The first problem with this project is the way the realist question—in Smith's (1997) words, 'who is right in arguments about what is' (p. 177)—works to depoliticize the encounter by *depoliticizing the actor*. As I have suggested above, the realist interpretation reduces speakers to passively reporting on the world, rather than actively struggling to shape it in the course of their talk. This move in turn depoliticizes *the theorist*—a second problem—who is reduced to adjudicating between these reports in order to sort out untrue or ideological accounts from true ones, so as to advocate for the latter. I shall return to this point shortly.

The third problem concerns the relationship between Truth and power which is assumed by all Truth-seeking projects. As we saw in our earlier discussion of feminist attempts to explore new and better foundational knowledges of the real world, such proposals are motivated by the conviction that a better, truer picture of the world is the only key to changing it. The proponents of realism (including feminist scholars who argue for such foundational knowledges in the interest of political change) are certainly right to recognize that discourse is far from a level ground where all accounts count the same; but they are surely wrong to assume that the most powerful or persuasive account is the accurate or true one (assuming we could know it). Indeed, we can find plenty of evidence that 'false' or 'distorted' accounts—the use of the term 'work' to describe only paid labour-force work, for example, or the kinds of racist talk documented by Van Dijk—persist through the generations, despite repeated attempts to dislodge them by pointing out their falsity; and in such cases it is painfully clear that both social policy and common sense are remarkably impervious to such 'truths'.

Thus Truth does not accomplish the task its supporters set out for it. *Whose account counts* is not a question of deciding 'who is right in arguments about what is', as Smith puts it—it is rather about power and the ability to have my (feminist, more just) account carry the day over yours (Flax, 1992). By mistakenly assuming that the Truth unproblematically persuades, the anti-discursive (and anti-postmodernist) argument covers over the very discursive strategies which make some accounts more compelling than others. A serious consideration of this issue—How do claims persuade?—might lead us toward an examination of the ways speakers deploy culturally dominant rhetorics to press their accounts of the world (e.g. Egger & Stam, 1999; Holstein, 1987; L.J. Miller, 1993), or of the particular

vernacular styles and strategies used by successful claims-makers (see Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993; or the discussion of 'undeniability devices' in Edwards et al., 1995, pp. 27–28). In any case, these approaches all recognize that only by abandoning the Truth-seeking project can we open up the thoroughly political process of negotiation in which various claims or accounts of the world vie to attain what Schutz called 'the accent of reality'.

Accordingly, if all accounts are political or strategic, including the theorist's, then what differentiates better from worse accounts, from a feminist perspective, is not their accuracy but how they are socially organized as a strategy. While the superiority of a 'Truth' must be natural—its authority (God, science) is supposedly self-evident and thus ironically protected from debate—the superiority of a better or more just account (think again of the term 'work') can be discussed and argued about (Edwards et al., 1995, pp. 39–40). How just and fair accounts of the world come to be silenced and discredited in favour of unjust (e.g. patriarchal) ones—a topic of considerable concern to feminist scholars—is a process which can now be opened to inspection, but only once the quest for an innocent Truth is foregone.

Politicizing the Theorist

As I briefly noted above, a serious weakness of social inquiry as a Truth-seeking project is that it depoliticizes not only the ordinary member but the theorist as well. Here we turn to the question of the relationship between the theorist's values and her analysis. Where critical inquiry is understood as Truth-seeking, the theorist's commitments are expressed in her ability to tell social truths from 'ideologies' (e.g. sexist from non-sexist definitions of work, or racist from non-racist portrayals of immigrants). But by invoking Truth as the grounds for that decision, the theorist inevitably masks her moral-political agenda. Seidman's comments are helpful here for understanding what is elided in the Truth-seeking, modernist project.

When one appeals solely to the truth of a discourse to authorize it intellectually and socially, one represses reflection on its practical-moral meaning and its social consequences. A discourse that justifies itself solely by epistemic appeals will not be compelled to defend its decisions on moral and political grounds. . . . Experts step forward as the authorities. (Seidman, 1994, p. 135)

Only by explicitly identifying her analysis as a *reading* (a claim, a story) will the theorist be able to draw attention back toward the commitments which inform it. Accordingly, a discursive approach treats both member and theorist as strategic speakers who make moral claims about the world. The idea that a social analysis is a reading or interpretation of the world rather than a true description of it is scarcely news to critics of positivist social science. My concern here, however, is to lay out clearly the ways in which

the values and commitments of the feminist theorist and the analysis are connected—rather than simply asserting this to be the case. My own values as a feminist sociologist inform my (mini-)analysis of Joanne and the treehouse on two levels. The first recognizes my complicity in my ‘description’ of the actor’s (Joanne’s) practices. The second has to do with the status of my own practices, that is, the categories and themes through which I theorize the former.

Any approach must insist on reflexivity at both of these levels if it is to fulfil its radical political potential (Bologh, 1992). My reading of the episode at the treehouse recognizes the first level as the interpretive work or artfulness of the actor—for example, as Joanne deploys the conventional rhetoric of femininity in order to further her claim on the fort. It recognizes the second level by laying open for discussion and debate my own theoretic elections—to begin with, my very specific formulation of the actor as one who enacts power through interpretive reality-struggles. By identifying this formulation *as* an election, I point up my own commitment to this ‘model’ of action rather than some other.

My formulation of this episode as a feminist one, which consciously reads it against the background of issues such as the subordination of women and the strategies of subaltern groups, comprises another aspect of the second level of reflexivity. Reading it this way constructs a linkage between Joanne’s encounter at the treehouse and larger emancipatory themes in the feminist literature. Thus, I might note that Joanne’s strategy shares something (tactically) with other girls’/women’s efforts to establish their presence in masculine domains—with women bodybuilders’ claim that bodybuilding is ‘really a sport of appearance’ rather than of strength (Miller & Penz, 1991); with the claims of funeral directors’ widows who attempted to enter the male-dominated profession of undertaking in the early 20th century by arguing that (feminine) qualities of sympathy and nurturance were at the heart of the work (Rundblad, 1993); and with women in the Marine Corps, who argued that life in the marines, with its emphasis on deference and discipline, was ‘just like’ life in the Catholic girls’ school they had known as teenagers (Williams, cited in Schultz, 1992, p. 313). My reading thus makes Joanne’s strategy part of a larger one in which women colonize a masculine activity by discursively reconstructing it as feminine terrain.

In a similar vein, I might also connect the treehouse episode with another current discussion in the theoretical literature which concerns the power of marginalized groups; in particular, the styles of resistance members of (structurally) subordinate or ‘subaltern’ groups engage in (Brantlinger, 1990, ch. 4). A common thread in this discussion is that members of structurally subordinate groups (notably women and children) must exercise power in indirect and politically careful ways, while members of dominant groups (notably adult white males, but also bosses and parents) can afford to assert their demands directly (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). Underdogs, therefore, will

be especially attentive to the political appearance of their practices because they have to. We might note in this connection how 'cagey' Joanne's response to the teacher is; in the way it backs away from an open challenge to the boys' ownership of the treehouse, and in the feigned innocence which adults recognize as one of the arts of childhood resistance, it is a vivid display of the carefully calculated ambiguity which, for this line of theorizing, is characteristic of power from the underside (L.J. Miller, 1993). Like other underdog strategies, Joanne's claim to be 'just cleaning' manages to contest the dominant order of things without overtly seeming to do so.

By reading Joanne's practices and strategies as linked to specific broader feminist issues and concerns, I bring my own concerns and interests as a feminist theorist to the fore. In this case, I formulate the episode at the treehouse as 'about' gender segregation and limited strategies of resistance, and in so doing I endow Joanne's practices with *this* kind of significance rather than *that*. The strength of this kind of theoretical reflexivity is that it displays the connection between the values and commitments of the theorist and the analysis itself, a point Gill (1995) rightly regards as crucial if the analysis is going to count as a response to the charge of value-neutrality and relativism. By explicitly acknowledging my analysis as one reading among others, I make the actor (here, Joanne) a *representative* of feminist concerns and issues, rather than a thing in the world whose 'real meaning' lies ready to be discovered (Bologh, 1992).

I also open the door to alternative readings or accounts—to Bronwyn Davies' own, for example, which stresses Joanne's 'hesitation' in asserting power, and references Gilligan's work on the ethic of care, in which girls learn to experience power as something immoral (Davies, 1989, p. 72). My own reading, by contrast, transforms this hesitation into a specifically differentiated style of power, more akin perhaps to Lipman-Blumen's (1984) concept of 'micro-manipulation'. Such readings point in different directions and have different implications, but the larger point is that they enact different feminist commitments and interests.

My intention here is to highlight a broader sense of reflexivity than is encompassed by pointing only to the politicality of the actor (or common-sense member)—here, Joanne. In her critical discussions of ethnomethodology, the feminist theorist Roslyn Bologh (1992) argues that approaches which politicize members by treating them as constructing their worlds, but then go on to treat these members' practices as given, objective things in the world to be described according to the tenets of positivist social science, fail to fulfil their radical potential.¹¹ In our terms, such approaches politicize the member but depoliticize the analyst (and the analysis); a True account of the (members') world is produced by disavowing the theorist's complicity in its construction.

Radical reflexivity, argues Bologh (1992), starts instead from 'a principled refusal to accept as a given, objective thing out there, any or all "realities",

including the categories with which we . . . name, describe and constitute those realities' (p. 203). Thus my analysis of Joanne's encounter in the schoolyard treats her as actively accomplishing ownership of the treehouse, but goes beyond this to formulate that struggle as part of a larger drama of gender segregation (for example) and the limited resistance strategies open to members of subordinate groups. In so doing, the analysis begins to open up the thoroughly political questions of how such inequitable worlds persist and the sorts of resistance they engender. By explicitly acknowledging the analysis as a reading—that is, by refusing to engage in a Truth-seeking project, with its associated rhetoric of bias, objectivity and 'evidence'—we invite alternative ways of theorizing this episode. More generally, we take ownership of the political dimension of the inquiry.

It is important here to underscore the connection between this expanded concept of reflexivity and the assumptions of discourse analysis. The great strength of the discursive perspective, as I see it, is its insistence on talk's routine politicality *wherever it occurs*; hence the theorist's account is an enactment of power and a moral claim in the same way as the member's. By returning us to that politicality wherever we find it (i.e. in the theorist's 'talk' as well as the member's), the discursive approach persistently reminds us of our ongoing complicity in the constitution of reality. For this reason it offers feminist scholars the strongest—because the most radically politicized—version of action and of the theoretical project.

Excursus: Politicality as the Consequences of Accounts

In the foregoing I have outlined (and attempted to illustrate) a version of radical reflexivity which locates the political dimension of theorizing in the interests (concerns, values, commitments) which inform the theorist's analysis. I offer it as a response, we recall, to the charge that the postmodern or discursive turn *depoliticizes* social inquiry. Before moving on I want to compare the above proposal with recent efforts to politicize theory by looking to its social consequences—a position which, as we saw earlier, has gained wide currency with politically concerned postmodern theorists in several fields.

We have seen that Seidman and others' proposal to counter the charge of relativism and value-neutrality directed at postmodernism turns on an examination of the social and political consequences of competing accounts. As an illustration of Seidman's argument, we might consider Vicki Schultz's (1992) analysis of law and gender segregation in the labour force.¹²

In this interesting paper Schultz examines the lawsuit charging job bias that was brought against Sears, Roebuck. She contrasts three accounts or 'stories' of why women continue to be under-represented in high-status, 'men's' work. Two of these accounts (the 'liberal judicial story' and the 'conservative story') assume that women have fixed characteristics before

they ever enter the workforce,¹³ and they are regularly invoked by the law to support its unwillingness to intervene in the discriminatory workplace. Schultz argues for a third and better account which challenges the first two by constructing women as continually developing their work aspirations and identities on the job, and we note that its superiority rests on Schultz's view that it will make the law 'assume a more transformative role in dismantling sex segregation'. 'By elaborating the new account', says Schultz, 'feminists can remind judges that they too are architects of women's work aspirations and identities' (p. 324).

Schultz's analysis exemplifies Seidman's programme, because it is primarily interested in the social consequences, not the truth-value, of the three stories; the third account is better (for Schultz) because of the way it works to (potentially) influence judicial rulings and thereby to further women's equality. Schultz's analysis is meant to demonstrate that the ways we represent women—the stories we tell about them—have different 'value' because they have different effects in the world. The power of the stories—their politicality—lies in their usefulness/outcome.

As I see it, the strength of this approach lies in the way it vividly demonstrates—rather than simply asserts—the poverty of a Truth-seeking model of analysis. It shows that how we construct the world in language counts; and insofar as it rejects foundational arguments, it is an important, positive step in support of the postmodernist position. Its weakness, on the other hand, lies in the way it locates power *outside* the talk—in its 'consequences' or 'effects'. On this view, language is political in the sense that the stories we speak have results, a formulation which shifts power beyond language to its impact on the (extra-linguistic) 'real' world. By contrast, the discursive perspective treats talk as *itself a consequential act*. From this perspective, the model of inquiry suggested by Seidman and others does not take full advantage of language's performative or strategic character, a feature which works precisely to move 'politics' into the heart of routine, everyday talk. Undergirded by this insight, discourse analysis highlights the ways actors contest and negotiate meaning in local settings; it is here, in the realm of meaning-struggles—not in some extra-linguistic realm—that we see the workings of contemporary power.

Accordingly, the speaker's 'politicality' is found in the interpretive work they do when they talk, and this, not the talk's outcome, is what makes the discourse analytic concept of language and the speaker 'political'. Joanne's achievement, on this reading, is not to have simply learned and uttered a story about girls and housekeeping with a frozen meaning that holds from one situation to another, whose effect is to help her secure ownership of the fort. It lies instead in the way the account is crafted to respond to the demands of the setting, especially in the way she strategically picks out specific features of the common-sense discourse of femininity and uses them not as a limit (as is routinely assumed in much feminist literature) but to

contest the settled order of things. This artfulness will not surprise scholars who study language-in-use. As they recognize, the meanings of such taken-for-granted rhetorics ('what everybody knows about women') are not fixed and stable from one context to the next, but multiple and inconsistent—a loose and flexible cluster of understandings which are inflected in different ways in order to accomplish highly specific projects.¹⁴ The point here is not that the theorist need remain silent about the consequences of an account: Joanne is able (or not) through her artfulness to stake a persuasive claim to the new treehouse. But the analytic focus must remain on *the way she has produced this effect through her talk*, and not on the outcome alone, as if this were achievable without (interpretive) struggle.

This point applies, of course, to the theorists' 'talk' as well as members'. Any version of social inquiry which segregates language and the (extra-linguistic) world and locates power in the latter undermines the power of the linguistic turn, whose force lies precisely in the challenge it poses to such a split. Thus the problem with Schultz's analysis is that the different stories appear to gain their significance (as strategies to combat workplace discrimination) from somewhere in the world, rather than as an outcome of Schultz's own concerns. If this is the case, then the theorist denies responsibility for her own 'local achievement'. In sum, we find that the 'consequences' approach retains a version of the relationship between language and the world that is still more modernist than we would wish. Ironically, it attempts to politicize inquiry—but only by *depoliticizing* language and the inquirer.

In the preceding section of this paper I have attempted to trace the anxiety many feminists feel about postmodernism to their principled commitment to telling the Truth about women, a programme they view as the necessary foundation for politically engaged social inquiry. I have tried to turn this argument back on itself by suggesting that it is the Truth-seeking project—not the turn to language—that depoliticizes social inquiry. In addition I have taken an example of ordinary talk as an occasion to show the possibility of a politically engaged discursive analysis which refuses a realist model of language. The 'politics' enters at two levels: (1) at the level of the actor or member, whose talk is formulated as a strategic claim which works toward local projects involving struggles over meaning; and (2) at the level of the inquirer or theorist, who, by explicitly identifying her analysis as a reading, signals that the inquiry is value-laden and also contestable.

'Totalizing' Terms and the Grounds of Political Action

In the previous sections I took up the problem of the relativism attributed to postmodernism and the depoliticizing effect that the latter is alleged to have on social inquiry, and I attempted to address this concern by demonstrating the radically engaged version of inquiry associated with the discursive

perspective. I now move on to consider the second major problematic aspect of postmodernism identified by many feminist scholars. Like the first concern, this charge also sees postmodernism's preoccupation with difference as a potential threat to feminist political interests—in this case by arguing that postmodernism fragments the unified collective identity which women need as the grounds of political advocacy. This debate is about the implications of conceptualizing women as a collective, and about the advisability of using generalizing terms (like 'women' or '“the” feminist movement') in feminist writings of all sorts—in political documents like the mission statements of feminist community agencies, for example, as well as in feminist theorizing. At its heart is the alleged incompatibility between two compelling feminist principles: the need to respect the diversity of women's experiences, on the one hand, and the need to posit women as a single, solidary unity for political purposes, on the other.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the overriding concern to emphasize diversity and inclusivity led feminists inside and beyond the academy to be increasingly suspicious of all generalizing or 'totalizing' categories, which, it was argued, homogenized the variety of women's lives by representing them as a seamless, monolithic entity. Such terms were heavily criticized for imposing a 'fictional unity' upon a multiple and diverse reality, and insofar as feminists relied on them in their theoretical formulations and elsewhere, they were said to be engaging in the same kind of exclusionary misrepresentation that had silenced *them* in the past. Hartsock (1990) spoke for many concerned feminists when she stated in connection with 'the current questioning of universalist claims':

I believe [that] we need to sort out who we really are. Put differently, we need to dissolve the false 'we' we have been using into its real multiplicity and variety and out of this concrete multiplicity build an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top . . . (p. 171; and see also Riley, 1988)

As Linda Nicholson noted in her introduction to *Feminism/Postmodernism*, a collection which, together with *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Butler & Scott, 1992), brought the unity vs difference issue to the fore: postmodernism's most important lesson for feminists was its 'wariness toward generalities which transcended the boundaries of culture and region' (Nicholson, 1990, p. 5).

The celebration of difference, then, a stance undergirded by postmodernism's principled emphasis on multiple perspectives, was an early and strong point of attraction between feminism and postmodernism, as I noted earlier in this paper. At the same time, however, scholars began to voice concern over the threat to the possibility of unified political action posed by the fragmentation which the postmodern emphasis on difference appeared to entail. Butler (1990) asked, for example, 'Without a unified concept of

women . . . who is left to emancipate?’ (p. 327). DiStefano was even more pointed: ‘[To invoke] the ideal of endless difference is for feminism . . . to self-destruct’ (DiStefano, paraphrased in Nicholson, 1990, pp. 7–8; and see also Bordo, 1990; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). Here it was argued that if feminism is to exist as a political movement, women *had* to represent themselves as a unified entity, if only for ‘strategic purposes’. Iris Young, writing in 1994, put the dilemma simply:

On the one hand, without some sense in which ‘women’ is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include. (Young, 1996, p. 159)

The debate over the advisability of using such generalizing concepts has continued apace over the last decade—among postmodernists like Nicholson and Fraser, Butler, and also among discourse analysts who are concerned to weigh the benefits of the postmodern turn (Wetherell, 1995; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995, esp. pp. 4–7). The solution many of these scholars propose is to use such terms, reluctantly, for ‘strategic’ or ‘political’ purposes only, recognizing their totalizing or exclusionary implications but employing them, nevertheless, in the spirit of a ‘half-truth’ (Wetherell, 1995, p. 142). Thus pragmatic stances like ‘strategic’ or ‘tactical essentialism’ (Squire, 1995, p. 160, attributed to Gavey), ‘contingent foundationalism’ (Butler, 1992) or ‘arbitrary closure’ have proliferated, and all imply positing a (fictional) ontological essence or foundation where necessary. The qualifiers (‘strategic’, ‘contingent’) are meant to limit the damage that is assumed to accompany their use; yes, they seem to say, terms like ‘women’ construct false unities, but it is for a good cause. Moreover, we are aware of their totalizing implications, and we intend to use them noting explicitly that they apply only in specific, limited historical contexts (Nicholson, 1992, 1998).

Although a variety of ingenious solutions have been proposed in an effort to reconcile the need for political unity with the need to respect diversity (e.g. Alcoff, 1988; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Nicholson, 1992; Squire, 1995), commentators continue to treat these two demands as deeply incompatible; thus Bordo (1990, p. 153), for example, argues that feminists must reluctantly accept such totalizing categories if they are to struggle effectively for political change, but are thereby forgoing ‘theoretical purity’. Such ‘solutions’, then, are expeditious rather than principled, and an air of compromise is palpable.

I shall return to this issue shortly. For now, I want to draw attention to the assumptions about the nature of language that ground this dilemma. All of the theorists who agree to the limited use of generalizing terms ‘for strategic purposes only’ assume that (1) ‘strategic’ or ‘political’ language distorts or misrepresents reality, specifically by occluding difference (hence the

reluctance to employ it). This in turn implies the view that (2) language as it is ordinarily used is *not* 'strategic' or 'political'. On this assumption, 'normal' language portrays the world as it really is, while strategic talk purveys fictions or falsehoods, permissible only under certain carefully circumscribed conditions. The compromise involved in the use of strategic talk (here, generalizing terms or categories) is precisely that by speaking strategically we risk obscuring diversity, thereby joining the ranks of the oppressors who use 'rhetoric' or 'ideology' to misrepresent the real world for their own gain.

In what follows I suggest that the dilemma as it is here presented—to misrepresent reality or not by employing 'totalizing' or 'essentializing' terms—is a false one, resting as it does on an outmoded realist version of language as the mirror of reality. The reliance of almost all of these scholars on this version of language is readily apparent when we recall that the argument against terms like 'women's experience' or 'the feminist movement' is precisely that they fail to describe accurately all of the different experiences and feminisms that are presumed to exist in the 'real' world. (Thus Young's concern for the women who are 'left out'.) The solutions that are proposed similarly assume a linguistic realism: they are designed as correctives to the 'problem' of terminological distortion and inaccuracy that allegedly accompanies the use of generalizing terms. (Thus Nicholson's caution that we use terms like 'gender' or 'women' only if we specify their historical and cultural context, thereby ensuring that they describe a limited slice of reality more carefully and more accurately: Nicholson, 1992.) Or (to take another example) the use of terms like 'tactical essentialism', which trades off an implied distinction between an *exceptional*, political ('tactical') use of language, and a 'normal', apolitical use which is oriented to descriptive accuracy or correspondence between terms and the world.¹⁵

In sum, this is a debate which only makes sense within the confines of a realist (or correspondence) model of language. It essentializes difference, treating it not as a political/discursive construction but as a naturally occurring reality which exists outside of language, and to which good feminist talk should remain faithful. Insofar as the 'dilemma' stems from the argument that we may, for politics' sake, have to speak untruthfully about that reality by presenting it as a unity, then it, too, is rooted in a Truth-seeking project.

The realist view of the way language works limits the 'unity vs difference' discussion in fatal ways. By assuming that difference is real and unity 'fictional', these theorists are unable to turn their attention to the ways unity-claims and claims of difference work in ordinary talk. Further, by assuming beforehand that political agency is enacted only through the use of *generalizing* terms and categories (unity-claims), they unnecessarily restrict their understanding of the way speakers 'do' politics/power. The tendency, in this instance, for these scholars—postmodern philosophers and discourse ana-

lysts alike—to concretize language, that is, to scrutinize the empirical accuracy of generalizing terms by subjecting them to a reality-test where unity and difference are the issue—sits uncomfortably alongside their more general commitment to the anti-essentialism of the linguistic turn. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that this debate at least has remained largely untouched by the insights of a discourse analytic approach which focuses on language-in-use.

As I have noted in earlier sections of this paper, the discursive approach contends that language is *irremediably* strategic or political. This means that we cannot, as feminists, ‘choose’ to speak strategically (or ‘tactically’) on certain pragmatic or political occasions—for as ordinary speakers, we *always, already are*. Moreover, the discursive approach requires that we put representations of difference on the same footing as representations of unity; neither is ‘truer’ than the other. Whether we are constructed in talk as different or as the same is a matter not of what we are ‘really’ like, but of quite local and context-specific claims speakers are trying to make, as I hope to show.

Accordingly, I intend in what follows to shift the debate from the question of how we ought to talk, to how we *are* talking—routinely, in everyday practice. Feminist theorists for and against postmodernism have argued the pros and cons of ‘totalizing’ terms, but the discussion has been noticeably abstract and sometimes prescriptive.¹⁶ (Can/should such terms be eliminated/circumscribed? What are the theoretical and political implications of using/not using them now? And so forth.) While I applaud the spirit of self-criticism that animates this debate, I feel, as a discourse analyst and a feminist, that it demonstrates a real neglect of the ways such exclusionary terms work in ordinary talk. In line with the insights of the discursive perspective, I examine below several examples of talk in which unity/sameness and difference is constructed in the talk of ordinary speakers. By focusing on these concepts as ongoing, discursive accomplishments, I hope to shed new light on this currently unpromising debate.

Doing Sameness and Difference

The debate over generalizing terms as I have outlined it above argues that political agency can only be exercised through the use of generalizing terms like ‘women’ or ‘feminists’. And indeed, when we look to see how such terms (or unity-claims) are used in mundane talk, we can find plenty of support for this argument. Consider the excerpt below, for example, in which an activist for feminist agencies in a Canadian city describes how she and a ‘backup’ person regularly collaborate in Parliamentary Question Period to challenge the (conservative) government minister responsible for women’s issues:

I asked M. [the Minister] a question about the immigrant situation. She would make a comment . . . that she never said such a thing. And then my backup—preplanned, all preplanned—[would say] ‘you were quoted’ and name the three [news]papers she had been directly quoted in

The situation is very stressful, and *we are in a situation of being the challengers* . . . so having a backup person ensures you feel supported in what you are saying And the great part too is that many women take turns at different events, different things, with the same plan So it gives you a chance to participate. *Women* may not under other circumstances feel confident enough to get their words out and to speak and ask questions. It is very empowering for them. . . . *It is a sisterhood, it is a cohesive force.* (Metcalf, 1995, interview 5, emphasis added)

In this stretch of talk the speaker clearly formulates herself, the women activists in the legislature, and, by extension, the whole women’s movement as a ‘we’ (‘a sisterhood’, a ‘cohesive force’) in which sameness is emphasized and diversity ignored. This is presumably just the sort of ‘fictional unity’ or essence which Bordo and others point to as the necessary grounds of feminist politics, and the situation described by the speaker, which clearly positions ‘us’ against ‘them’, is political in an obvious sense.

Other examples of ‘fictional unities’ crop up when women jockey with men for ownership of cultural sites. The women bodybuilders studied by Miller and Penz (1991) constituted themselves as part of a seamless entity when justifying their (contentious) inroads into this masculine sport: they routinely asserted that ‘women’ were committed to working systematically at bodybuilding (‘women start with the proper weight and form and work up’), ‘women’ were willing to learn from others, ‘women’ were health-conscious, and so on, while men were depicted as self-obsessed, vain (‘they sit and stare at themselves flexing in the mirror’), impatient (‘when guys come into the gym . . . they will lift the absolute most weight they can, regardless of technique’) and uncommitted to health (‘after, they run out to McDonald’s for burgers and chips’) (interview data, Miller & Penz, 1991). Here, too, it seems clear that such unity-claims (‘Men are from Mars; women are from Venus’) are the discursive ground of overtly political activity.

These last examples show, in addition, that while women constructed themselves as unities in order to promote their own local projects, they constructed *others* as unities as well, usually in order to exclude them (this is the traditional use of totalizing terms). As I pointed out above, the women frequently represented ‘men’ in classic totalizing fashion in their effort to undermine male ownership of bodybuilding; and the women activists referred to earlier annually reminded themselves that ‘men’ inevitably changed the way meetings were run, and so should continue to be excluded from the boards of feminist agencies. A final example, and perhaps the best, comes from Davies’ study *Frogs and Snails* (where we earlier encountered Joanne), as Davies herself recalls how her sister used to eject intruding boys

from the girls' play corner with the pointed reminder that 'men go out to work' in the morning (Davies, 1989, p. 83).¹⁷ Here speakers apply 'totalizing' categories to others to control and exclude them.

It would surely be easy to find similar examples. I conclude from them that feminist scholars are right to treat discursive unities (fictional, totalizing) as the basis of political action: unity-claims are used to assert women's own power and rights (against anti-feminist government ministers, against the resistant male bodybuilders), and women also use them to exclude/control others (boys who want to take over play areas and agency boards).

But having noted this, we must also recognize that at other times, the speaker's politicality is enacted by *refusing* such shared identity or group membership. Consider the following excerpt taken from transcripts of client–therapist sessions, in which we see how a young woman client tries to make her problem clear by resisting the therapist's attempts to assign her to the conventional gender-category (women who are oriented to 'relationships', not masculine 'independence' and 'self-confidence'):

Cl.: [I want to] let go, *be independent*, be me, and, but he [her father] didn't understand this? . . . he didn't understand that I wanted to go [to another university] . . .

Th.: hmhm

Cl.: I'm changing my decision to go later on . . . So I go to him, I'm going, I'm going to finish that degree and then I'll think about going . . .

Th.: . . . O.K., so one thing that you want to *work on is your relationship* with your dad. (quoted in Egger & Stam, 1999, pp. 16–17, emphasis added)

Egger and Stam show how the therapist again tries to assign the young woman to the conventional feminine gender-category and resists her effort to differentiate herself:

Th.: So there's a couple of things we will focus in on. We'll focus on your *relationship* with your father and how to, ah,

Cl.: pull my *self-confidence* up

Th.: how to deal with him in a manner you're happy with and *improve that relationship* and also dealing with the university, ah,

Cl.: yeah

Th.: aspects

Cl.: yeah and my *self-confidence*

Th.: and *self-confidence*. OK . . . well, it's good to meet you. (Session ends) (quoted in Egger & Stam, 1999, pp. 17–18, emphasis added)

Although in these excerpts the 'essentializing' or 'fictional' unity (what 'women' are like, what 'men' are like) is assumed and invoked by the therapist rather than being explicitly present in the talk, nevertheless the politicality of the client consists precisely in resisting such imputed group identity. Here (and in sharp contrast to the activist woman in the legislature) the speaker struggles, albeit unsuccessfully, to negotiate a standpoint *outside*

the expected 'unity': she claims, in effect, 'I am different; I'm not the same as other women.'

Egger and Stam's paper also shows how a young male client similarly attempts to state his 'problem' to the therapist ('I'm not sure, I just, it just so strongly feels like I'm missing something . . . I have a strong need for *affection* [from a girlfriend] . . . I'm looking for a kind of *commitment* . . .') by positioning himself outside the conventional 'masculine' identity, and he draws explicit attention to the differentiating work he is doing ('It's probably *a strange thing* to hear a twenty-year old male say this . . .') (Egger & Stam, 1999, p. 19).

These last examples are intended to show that unity-claims are not the sole grounds of political action. Speakers appear to negotiate the relation between political activity and unity in different ways (see Widdicombe, 1995, in this connection), and whether they construct themselves in talk as the same (part of a unity) or different is not a matter of what they are 'really' like, but rather varies in response to the demands of the local setting. In the cases just mentioned, the interaction involves a struggle between the participants to define the clients' problem, and the clients' refusal of the relevant essentializing categories (what 'women' are like, what 'men' are like) plays a strategic part in that struggle.¹⁸

There are several important implications to be drawn from these examples. First, we learn that speakers (women but also men) represent themselves and others as the same or different when it is strategic to do so. Moreover, we would not be surprised to find that these accounts (of 'who I am', or 'who we are') will shift and vary, as the speakers make different conversational moves (Holstein, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, esp. pp. 155–157). This means that we are not 'the same' or 'different' *except as we construct ourselves as such in the course of our talk*. At the heart of the discursive perspective is the principle that social realities only exist through the talk/interaction which enacts them (Antaki, 1994, p. 137; Holstein, 1987). Accordingly, neither difference or unity exists a priori; if women (or men) exist as the same or as diverse, then it is because they have been produced as such in the routine talk and local practices of actors. In short, difference is as real as—but no more real than—unity.

Taking the discourse perspective seriously means we must resist judging some constructions ('we are one') as inherently *more political* than others; unity-claims are only one way of taking a political stand. It also means that we must resist judging some constructions ('we are diverse') as *fairer* than others ('we are one/the same') because they are thought to represent the 'real world' more accurately. Such constructions have no ontological implications for how we 'really' are; they must be treated, instead, as moral/political stories meant to advance a preferred version of the world. And as strategic claims rather than empirical descriptions, *they are neither true nor false*. It

follows that the charge levelled against ‘totalizing’ terms—that they falsely unify the diversity of the world—misses its mark.

Remnants of Realism

But as we have seen, the ‘dilemma’ over generalizing terms portrays difference or diversity as the foundational, true reality in danger of being occluded by ‘totalizing fictions’. The foundationalist commitment to difference as real and sameness/unity as illusory is a mainstay of feminist theorizing and, as such, is a remnant of the modernist Truth-seeking project even in the work of scholars whose overall corpus and orientation is decidedly postmodern. I have already noted how the ontological privileging of difference over unity is the tacit assumption that grounds the debate over generalizing terms. But it surfaces in its most striking form in the critical work of prominent feminist scholars across several fields, whose arguments against their respective disciplinary foundational narratives (psychoanalysis, sociology, psychology) turn on the charge that the latter *misrepresent* the ‘real’ diversity of the world.

Thus Butler (for example) argues in ‘Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse’ that the foundational story of identity development purveyed by psychoanalytic theory falsely unifies ‘the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual and gay and lesbian contexts’, in the name of a regulatory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, p. 376). Versions of this critique appear in the work of the sociologist Bronwyn Davies in sociology and Celia Kitzinger in psychology, who assert that the assumptions of liberal humanism and the Enlightenment intertwine with patriarchal interests to reduce diverse and inconsistent assemblies of identity constructions to one, according to the myth of a ‘unified and rational coherent identity’ (Davies, 1989, pp. 138–141; Kitzinger, 1987¹⁹). In her study *Frogs and Snails*, for example, Davies states that the ‘fixed and unitary’ image of oneself as masculine or feminine is nothing but a ‘controlling fiction’ imposed by the tradition of liberal humanism upon the child’s diverse experiences of who s/he is. This view says (and it is shared by the feminists cited earlier on the debate over generalizing terms) that ‘my self is a coherent unity’ is false, because I am ‘really’ multiple and diverse.

Butler’s contribution to this discussion is worth examining in greater detail because the particular generalizing concepts which concern her—gender identity and the self—are important ones for sociologists and psychologists. Moreover, many feminists share Butler’s ‘critique of the unified self’ and some share her concern for the alleged incompatibility between postmodern versions of the self/identity and feminist politics. In ‘Gender Trouble’ Butler (1990) sifts a wide range of psychoanalytic perspectives on gender, including Lacanian feminism and object-relations theory, for

their essentialist assumptions. She argues that even theories which reject a 'normal model' of the unified self (e.g. Lacanian theory), and are not therefore explicitly essentialist, undercut that openness by employing a narrative of infant development which has 'gender coherence' as its endpoint (pp. 228–229). For Butler, such theories are stories about gender acquisition 'which effect a narrative closure on gender experience and a false stabilization of the category of women' (p. 329). The 'coherence' Butler speaks about is between biological sex, gender identity and desire (i.e. gender performance), and she invokes anthropological studies of female impersonators (whose performances dramatize the discontinuity and distinctness of these three elements) to argue that this coherence is a 'regulatory fiction' perpetuated by psychoanalytic theory, and maintained in the interests of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (p. 339). For Butler, the loss of a unified 'us' which could serve as the grounds of a feminist politics is the price that must be paid, for that 'us' is built, she asserts, on 'the denial of a decidedly more complex cultural identity—or non-identity, as the case may be' (p. 339).

It is interesting to note that these arguments appear in the work of post-modernist feminist philosophers who often discuss language in the abstract, but also, and perhaps more surprisingly, in the work of those who do study language-in-use, like Davies.²⁰ The widespread tendency in this literature to posit unities as fictional and difference as real, even where we would not expect it, leads us to speculate that this is a blind spot in feminist scholarship. It appears that for many feminist scholars, even postmodernist ones, difference functions as a foundational assumption that remains largely unproblematized—an unchallengeable, undeniable reality which takes its place alongside Death and Furniture as bottomline, irrefutable Truths (Edwards et al., 1995).²¹

Constructing Unity and Difference: Some Lessons from Discourse Analysis

If we accept the basic discursive insight which treats language as an inevitably strategic (or claims-making) enterprise rather than as a descriptive one, then a new theoretical and research agenda emerges. Instead of asking, as many feminist postmodern theorists do, 'How severely do generalizing terms and concepts distort differences in the real world, and how can we limit their use?', we ask: 'How are generalizing concepts invoked in ordinary talk, and what concrete local purposes do they serve?'

Freed of the need to apply a reality-test to such terms, we are opened to a range of new insights. Even our brief investigation above shows the direction some of these insights might take. We note, for instance, that strategic unity-claims seem to crop up in contested or oppositional situations—that is, when talk positions 'us' (constructed now as an unproblematic unity) against

'them'. Secondly, we see that political stands can be enacted through constructions of difference as well as sameness (and under what circumstances is presumably a matter that invites additional research). Once emancipatory social inquiry is seen to be possible without Truth-seeking, the anxiety over such terms is defused. They lose their special status as the great lie, and the theorist's interest is focused on how they work, instead of their descriptive accuracy. By casting such terms as just one discursive power-strategy among others, we remove their uniqueness and highlight the more general, and more important, question of the ways power and language are related.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have argued that feminist postmodernists who are concerned to preserve a critical stance at the level of social inquiry as well as political activism would benefit from a closer look at the discursive perspective on everyday language and the way talk works in the world, especially around claims of unity and difference. Insofar as the discursive perspective treats language as making moral/political claims about reality rather than neutrally reporting on it, then theorists are steered away from a whole set of realist concerns about how well or poorly that reporting is done. I have also argued that the two major dilemmas which trouble feminist theorists (both of which focus on the potential loss of the 'political real') are to a considerable extent entangled in these realist concerns, and can be seen to be relatively unproblematic once the realist approach to language is jettisoned.

The failure of many feminist philosophers to take ordinary language seriously is well illustrated in an otherwise insightful paper by Iris Young entitled 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective' (1996). Young begins her paper by recounting a comment made to her by several white women as she distributed political flyers one morning for an African American woman who was running for the local school council in the northeastern USA. On seeing the flyers, the women commented, 'I'm so glad to see a woman running for school committee!', and Young notes how unproblematically in ordinary conversation the white women were able to collect their interests as women with those of the Black candidate, despite their obvious differences (p. 158).

Although Young recognizes the unity-claim advanced in the comments of the passersby, she signally fails to go on to look more systematically at how ordinary talk works, specifically around the matter of the discursive construction of unity and difference. Instead, she moves to 'doubt' the women's comment, that is, to define it as flawed or incomplete when measured against the presumably superior knowledge of feminist theory. Speaking about their comment, Young says:

This [the group 'women' constructed by the comment of the passersby] seemed to me an unremarkable, easily understandable affinity. *Recent discussions among feminists about the difficulties and dangers of talking about women as a single group, however, make such incidents appear at least puzzling. These discussions have cast doubt on the project of conceptualizing women as a group*, arguing that the search for the common characteristics of women or of women's oppression leads to normalization and exclusions. (Young, 1996, p. 158, emphasis added)

Young has in fact just heard such a group ('women') conceptualized unproblematically—and by evidently political women, no less—but appears unable to believe her ears, for she immediately invokes the by-now-familiar realist reading of their talk (and language more generally) as describing the world, against which the women appear as 'poor describers' of diversity/difference. Instead of asking: 'How do such women unproblematically use group-talk from occasion?'—a question which would preserve the integrity or 'logic' of everyday life and language—Young (at least in this instance) asks the realist/ontological question: 'How can we improve the descriptive fit (or correspondence) between language and the world?'²² Like many of the feminist theorists discussed here, Young assumes that language describes the world that exists outside it, that the world (of women) is essentially diverse, and that misrepresentation is the root of the dilemma of generalizing terms like 'women'. Nor is her brief encounter with such terms in use enough to provoke a challenge to this view.

For feminist philosophers like Young, ordinary language still exists in what Featherstone has called the 'seen but unnoticed' realm of everyday life. Yet even those feminists who affiliate themselves with discourse analysis, and who generally advocate a constitutive model of language, tend to revert to realist assumptions—by worrying over language's descriptive inadequacies—when the issues they (and we) see as the most important are up for discussion. Difference/diversity is one such issue, and we have seen the pervasive tendency to essentialize it by treating it as the extra-linguistic reality that language either mirrors or obscures.

A second rockbottom reality may be the body.²³ Reporting on a recent workshop called 'Theorising Bodies in Medical Practices', Van Loon warns against the tendency to treat talk about the body ontologically instead of politically (or strategically):

The fact that we—in everyday discourse—prefer to talk about 'our' bodies as 'whole entities' is a particular realisation of 'body politics' that should not be confused with body-ontology. As a consequence, the opposition between 'subjective embodiment' (prevalent within some sectors of contemporary feminism) and 'objectified bodies' (the Foucauldian legacy) which frames much of the current debates around embodiment, makes little sense. The question of embodiment is first and foremost an empirical one,

that is, a question of under what conditions particular bodies are being constituted as, for example, resistant or docile. (Van Loon, 1998, p. 11, emphasis added)

Van Loon's point here (in this case about current debates on embodiment) is roughly the same one I have argued in this paper: how our bodies (or women) 'are' is a matter of *how we constitute them* in specific situations and practices; it is not a matter of ontology (how bodies or groups are in the world), and debates which frame the issue as such are misguided. Van Loon's comment points to a tendency among theorists of the body to peer around language in order to assert what 'really' lies behind it when the stakes are high,²⁴ and the sites (the body, diversity) are the ones that seem to feminists to matter most. But as he points out, this shift to ontology naturalizes and *depoliticizes* accounts—and I would add, it does so at the very sites where there is the greatest need to challenge naturalized conceptions and to strenuously reassert the politicality of every 'description'. In just these sites the discursive perspective has the most to offer. By relentlessly insisting that language constitutes the world, discourse analysis reminds us that even—especially—those sites which are so easy to naturalize are political constructions.

Discourse analysis is concerned not with the Truth—about women, difference, or any other social reality—but rather with the politics of representation. It inquires into the ways ordinary actors enact power by representing the world in this way rather than that, how some accounts of the world work to influence other accounts, and why certain accounts, like those of the clients in therapy, fight an uphill battle to be heard at all. Like any other approach to social inquiry, this one has no natural superiority over any other—it is a theoretic election whose strengths (and weaknesses) can be debated. By virtue of its basic assumption—that truths are negotiated, not discovered—discourse analysis is social and political from the outset. If a politically engaged perspective is what we feminists want, then this approach will serve us well.

Notes

1. This situation has been substantially improved with the appearance of *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives* (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995), although much of the theoretical discussion centres on the pros and cons of discourse analysis as a postmodern approach, and does not systematically discuss what the discursive perspective has to offer feminists beyond its postmodernist assumptions. (See also Burman's [1991] discussion of this issue, which emphasizes the implications of postmodernism but goes somewhat beyond the latter.) For their part, the editors of *Feminism and Discourse* note how little attention discourse analysis has paid to feminist issues, especially to psychological perspectives. Outside psychology we have seen a good deal of work done on

gendered communication styles (e.g. Lakoff, 1990; Tannen, 1994) and ethno-methodology has produced a large body of work on how gender 'gets done' (e.g. West & Zimmerman, 1987). But my comment here refers more narrowly to the lack of systematic attention which has been paid by feminists to discourse analysis as a distinctive perspective. Within my own field (sociology), the writings of Dorothy E. Smith and Bronwyn Davies are exceptions which stand out.

2. To some extent this distinction is a false one: feminist scholars would be the first to assert that feminist analysis is itself a political act. I have distinguished the two issues here, however, because they are distinguished in the debates around feminism and postmodernism.
3. Actors encounter these rhetorics as 'givens'—like Durkheim's social facts—but for the theorist they are socio-historical constructions whose origins and development can be traced. Their inclusion (as the actor's 'interpretive resources') allows analysis to recognize the impact that such large-scale discourses have on interaction, but in a way that does not reduce speakers to puppets of these macro-level forces. For a discussion that differentiates approaches to discourse theory on the basis of the question of agency, see Fraser (1990/1997).
4. There are of course other reasons for resisting postmodernism and the linguistic turn, notably from those who argue the merits of renewed efforts to construct general theory—I think here of the work of sociologists Anthony Giddens and Randall Collins—but I am concerned in this paper only with the principled rejection of postmodernism for the threat it allegedly poses to critical or politically engaged social inquiry. Among feminist theorists the concern is overwhelmingly tied to the latter; see in this connection Wilkinson and Kitzinger's introductory discussion of the 'status of the extra-discursive' (1995, pp. 4–5).
5. Smith (1997) is quite clear here: because feminist sociology as she formulates it is committed to 'producing knowledge that represents the social as it is . . . it must find some alternative to poststructuralism/postmodernism's rejection of the possibility of referring to what exists beyond discourse' (p. 173).
6. But see the dissenting rejoinder by Stenner and Marshall (1995). Van Dijk's position on critical discourse analysis is related to his commitment to the retention of extra-discursive categories (notably cognition), and insofar as it is limited by a realist approach to language, it represents a 'weak programme' for discourse analysis, one which cannot realize the full benefits of the stronger, constitutive position.
7. Gill's point is directed to discourse analysis, but is relevant to any approach that accepts the anti-foundationalism of the postmodern turn.
8. Nicholson (1992) says:

From a postmodern perspective, theories gain their legitimacy through their usefulness, a value itself acknowledged as immanent to a specific historic tradition. It is because of this pragmatic bent of postmodernism that science loses its privileged position as 'the mirror of nature' and takes its place with other modes of discourse, such as history and poetry, as legitimate in proportion to its usefulness. (p. 90)

9. My point here is that in Seidman's hands, the gap between (postmodern) social theorizing and the narratives of ordinary members is greatly reduced. Sociologists

may notice the resemblance between Seidman's pragmatic and modest concept of postmodern social theory and the ethnomethodological concept of the member as the 'common-sense theorist'.

10. I have simplified this account slightly; as Davies tells it, Joanne and her sometime friend Tony both attempt to control the new fort, and Davies' emphasis is on the differently gendered ways they do it. Overall, however, she represents the activity at the fort as a gendered struggle for the ownership of space, and our accounts agree that by entering the fort Joanne is engaged in a takeover of what the children see as primarily 'boys' territory.
11. Bolgh notes that Pollner makes a similar distinction between 'endogenous' and 'radical or representational reflexivity'. She also notes that the criticism of theorizing which is reflexive at the first level only was made early on by Peter McHugh, who specifically addressed ethnomethodology's 'failure of analytic nerve' (McHugh, Raffel, Foss, & Blum, 1974). (See also Burman, 1991, p. 334.)
12. Readers might also look at Seidman's own application of his proposal in his book *Embattled Eros* (1992).
13. The conservative story employs the rhetoric of choice; it argues that women come to the workplace with 'feminine' preferences, and hence are 'not attracted' to men's work. The liberal story is designed to counter the former, by arguing that women are no different from men as they come to the workplace; if they are underrepresented in non-traditional jobs then the employer must have discriminated. Schultz argues that both stories about women and work function to limit the law's capacity to dismantle segregation.
14. See, for example, Holstein's (1987) analysis of the diverse ways the discourses of masculinity and femininity are used in court hearings, or Miller and Metcalfe (1998) on the discourses of feminist identity.
15. Or Spivak's suggestion, as paraphrased in Butler (1990), that 'feminists need to rely on an operational essentialism, a *false ontology* of women as a universal in order to advance a feminist program' (p. 325, emphasis added), a stance which clearly treats language as describing, whether truly or not, what exists in the world (ontology).
16. One exception is of course Smith; and see also Widdicombe (1995) for another call to examine language-in-use, and for a discursive analysis of identity which, like the one in this section of the paper, tests some of the received feminist wisdom against an examination of everyday talk.
17. I have changed this episode into direct speech; in *Frogs and Snails*, Davies (1989) recalls 'the occasions when my older sister would get rid of my older brother when we were playing in our cubby by telling him that he was the man and that he had to go to work' (p. 83).
18. Here is another opportunity to make the point that the theorist's business, as I see it, is not to discover the truth but to examine the factors which allow the therapist's version of the talk to emerge as 'the client's real problem', as well as the strategies which permit the client to resist, perhaps unsuccessfully, this definition. In connection with the first, we note the institutional advantage which works to privilege the therapist's account, and in addition, the fact that he has on his side the moral authority of common sense—in this case, 'what everybody knows' about women (i.e. that they are naturally oriented to relationships).

19. In this volume Kitzinger argues strenuously against realism on the methodological front, stating that her unit of analysis is the account, not some underlying 'real' lesbian identity. In so doing she makes some trenchant criticisms against positivist readings of interview data in sociology as well as in psychology which I have always found helpful to students trying to grasp the discursive perspective on language. At the same time, the study does appear to argue that liberal humanist assumptions about the individual produce a conventional psychological version of lesbian identity as the-difference-that-is-really-no-different from 'normal' sexuality (i.e. as 'just another sexual orientation'), and that this harmless notion of difference-as-sameness functions to suppress what Kitzinger takes to be real, that is, strong or political difference.
20. Wetherell's discussion of unity and difference in feminist politics is instructive in this regard. In her paper 'Romantic Discourse and Feminist Analysis' (1995), she argues strongly for the constitutive role of discourse and the rejection of the extra-linguistic (p. 140), making the crucial point that 'things which are discursive are no less real in their effects' (p. 141). This general point is followed up with the example of feminism, which, she states, should be treated not as an 'attribute' but rather as 'a negotiable category which takes its shape as a particular type of identity within contrasting discourses' (p. 141). Here Wetherell clearly implies that there is no sense arguing over which version of identity is 'correct'. But she seems unable to extend the same insight to the categories of unity and difference: in her discussion of the need for feminists to employ the category 'unity' when we have to 'take a stand and fight', she reverts to the (Realist) language of truth and falsity, by portraying such representations as 'half-truths' (p. 142). This move reintroduces the extra-discursive and thereby undercuts her previous argument.
21. As Edwards et al. (1995) note, such realism is a rhetoric that 'refuses to acknowledge its own existence' (p. 42).
22. Young's answer to the problem of fit is not to change the way we talk (at least not in the first instance) but rather to look harder at the ways women-as-groups exist in the world; see her discussion of the concept of 'seriality', a kind of quasi-group.
23. Wetherell also notes the widespread tendency in psychology to privilege feeling and emotion as naturally given (and thus immediately apprehended) realities.
24. Van Loon presumably refers to the tendency in some feminist writing to privilege women's subjective experience of their bodies as natural and authentic (especially when contrasted with professional medical accounts), and accordingly to resist seeing this experience as discursively constructed.

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