Captives of Gender Determinism? Poststructural Discourse Analysis and Deconstruction as an Analytical and Transformative Practice

Katerina Zabrodska

Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

zabrodskat@yahoo.com

Discourse analysis is a highly diverse field of qualitative research which studies how social reality is represented, reproduced and/or transformed in and by language and other semiotic systems. Discursive approaches mostly assume that binary categories such as sex/gender, man/woman are constructed in discourse and see power relations as central to their research focus. It is therefore not surprising that there is already a long tradition of discourse analysis in feminist research (see e.g. Speer, 2005; Sunderland, 2004; Wodak, 1997). Indeed, discourse analysis and feminist research can be viewed as almost synonymous terms (Wilkinson, Kitzinger, 1995). In my presentation, I intend to discuss the question of "legitimate" and, for feminist aims, beneficial use of *poststructural discourse analysis* (PDA), which is an approach to discourse analysis influenced by poststructural philosophy, specifically in the work of Butler and Foucault. I shall argue for the usefulness of this method for feminist research, understood here as an endeavour to challenge discursive structures supporting gender inequalities and to initiate social change (Brooks, Hesse-Biber, 2007). I particularly aim to bring attention to the transformative potential of combining PDA methodology with a *deconstructive reading*, as derived from Derrida's concept of deconstruction. To support my arguments, I will refer to my PhD research on gender identity among young heterosexual Czech women and men.

In the discipline of social psychology (the discipline in which I have been educated), PDA is commonly employed by feminist researchers interested in how women's subjectivity is constituted by competing gendered discourses. PDA applies a Foucauldian concept of discourse as a regulated system of knowledge and practices which construct the object of which they speak (Foucault, 2002). The significant departure of PDA from Foucault's work is that, in PDA, the analysis is more often based on utterances of individual subjects, whereas the Foucauldian notion of discourse generally implies an interest in the rules and regulations of discourse on an institutional and societal level. PDA is mostly interested in the various implications of discourses for a subject who takes up the positions which discourses provide, in how discourses close down or open up new subjectivities, desires and actions. Researchers

often analyze verbal interaction in order to identify, for example, discourses of heterosexuality (Hollway, 1998), discourses of heterosexual relationship (Willig, 2003), discourses of masculinity (Edley, 2001), and the like.

In spite of its increasing popularity, PDA occupies an uneasy position. It is subjected to critique from mainstream psychology, as well as from other discursive approaches. Mainstream psychology excludes PDA, deeming it a threat to its foundational values of an experimental and objective science. PDA is greatly influenced by feminist theory, which renders it even more problematic to mainstream psychology that still has not fully accepted feminism as a legitimate source of knowledge. Discourse analysts working in sociology or cultural studies, on the other hand, may find it problematic that PDA in psychology has not quite abandoned interest in an individual subject. Mills (2004) presents an interesting critique of discourse analysis in social psychology in general, suggesting that it is often not more than content analysis. Conversation analysts point to insufficient engagement of poststructural researchers with details of verbal interaction and to a consequent danger that the researcher might only reproduce her or his previous theoretical commitments (see e.g. Hammersley, 2003).

Nevertheless, I want to maintain that application of PDA to the study of individual subjects' utterances is productive, especially when combined with deconstructive reading (see Hepburn, 1997). I would agree that some applications of PDA are perhaps too similar to "common" content analysis and do not make sufficient use of the subversive potential of the concept of discourse. It is uncertain, for example, whether analysis which ends up with a mere description of several discourses identified in a text benefits enough from discourse theory. I would also agree that PDA is at risk of reiterating what the researcher knows in advance. In my research on gender identity, I also "discovered" discourses, of which I already had knowledge. The answer to these problems, which I have found enormously useful in my research, is to combine PDA with feminist poststructural theory and associated methods of deconstructive reading (Gannon, Davies, 2007; St. Pierre, Richardson, 2000). In contrast to PDA, feminist poststructuralism puts less emphasis on identification and naming of discourses inhabiting analyzed text, and instead privileges its deconstruction, opening text to *différance* (Derrida, 1993).

Feminist poststructuralism is part of the postmodern turn in social sciences and defines its aims accordingly. It does not seek truer or better knowledge of social reality. Instead, it deconstructs discourses which produce reality, assuming that by making visible the constitutive power of discourses, this power will be diminished and reality opened to change

(Davies, 2003). The ambition of feminist poststructuralism is to enable radical transformation of how we experience and act in the world, to provide "lines of flight" (Deleuze, 1995), without exactly knowing where the flight will take us. One of the strategies employed to achieve this is deconstruction. Deconstruction is a practice of reading which provokes text to "reveal its own contradictions and (im)possibilities" (Gannon, Davies, 2007: 86). It challenges binary system of thought and continually demystifies the reality produced by a text (Lather, 1991). Deconstructive reading does not only describe discourses and binaries which produce gendered reality. It also prevents a subject who engages in deconstruction (both as a reader and a writer) from experiencing knowledge produced by these discourses as true, given, unchangeable. Deconstruction means describing what we already know but at the same time destroying our knowledge. Combining PDA with deconstructive reading provides us both with a technique of textual analysis, *and* with a practice of affective and bodily transformation of a reader's and writer's subjectivity.

To support my claims and to provide concrete examples of practices and beneficial effects of deconstruction, I shall briefly discuss my research on gender identity. The research was part of my PhD project, in which I analyzed discourses employed by Czech women and men to constitute themselves as gendered subjects (or to refuse such identifications). In accordance with feminist poststructural philosophy, I did not intend to establish what the gender identity of the participants was, but rather to make visible discourses which produce their gender identity as stable and authentic and to deconstruct these discourses in order to open habitual performances of gender identity to change. The data for analysis consisted of transcribed focus groups and interviews with 22 adults in their mid-twenties, both women and men, who at the time of the research (2005-2007) were studying various social sciences at two main Czech universities. The objective of the research was to engage in detailed analysis of transcribed texts in order to identify the discourses which the participants employed to make sense of gender, as well as the subject positions these discourses provided for them. I was particularly interested in consequences of discourses employed for the reproduction or subversion of hierarchical gender binaries.

The analysis revealed, among the study's participants, the dominance of deterministic discourses and an individual-society dualism which in various ways constituted change of gender identity as not viable. The technique of analysis was based on principles of PDA (Willig, 2003) and resulted in identification of six discourses, which I named as follows: discourse of individualism, discourse of socialization, discourse of biological difference, discourse of heterosexuality, discourse of gender essentialism and discourse of otherness. I

will restrict myself here to a brief discussion of two dominant discourses widely shared by all research participants: *discourse of socialization* and *discourse of individualism*. These discourses were employed by the participants to position themselves as progressive individuals resisting gender norms and practices, and at the same time to account for the impact of these norms and practices on other people.

A discourse of individualism constructs gender as an illegitimate limit to freedom and the right to self-determination of an individual whose nature is defined as independent of gender and other social constructs. This discourse formulates a moral imperative to live according to one's desires and not to surrender to social expectations. A discourse of socialization, on the other hand, speaks about the immense force of social processes, against which an individual has no chance of winning. It invites us to view gender as a result of socialization enforced on an individual by parents, peers, school and the media. In this discourse, gender "roles" are "learned", "imposed" and "required by others".[1] Interestingly, subjects who appropriate the discourse of socialization in their talk always employ it to position others – their sexual partners, family, friends and general others. These others are defined as fully determined by social processes, whereas participants themselves take up positions in the discourse of individualism which summons them to abject connection between one's self and gender as belonging not to "I", but to others (who are older, less educated and/or live in the wrong places).

The analysis makes visible numerous ways in which these two discourses reproduce unequal gender relations and define change as unrealizable, particularly due to the individual-society dualism they reiterate. This dualism, of course, has been long subjected to poststructural critique, beginning in social psychology with the seminal work of Henriques et al. (1984/1998). It is nonetheless valuable to see how, despite this critique, the dichotomy still operates unchallenged in participants' self-positioning.

The individual-society dualism identifies others with "society" and defines them as determined by social forces, which in effect deprives them of knowledge and the possibility of change. This is especially true in case of the binary knowing woman-unknowing man, which was repeatedly employed by women participants to critique traditional gender arrangements. This binary, though, functions both as a critique and a reproduction of some very traditional

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[1] These discourses may strike readers as somewhat common and, from the perspective of current feminist theory, long outdated. Yet, accessibility of feminist theory and research is generally very low in the Czech Republic, partly due to the still-present legacy of former communist isolation of the country. In this context, to define gender as a product of socialization can easily be viewed as a progressive and even radical position. Another point to be made is that the knowledge of recent feminist theories does not necessarily lead to their inclusion in people's self-positioning and everyday discourse.

forms of feminine identity. Moreover, the fiction of the free individual and an association of gender with "roles" leave many supposedly "gender-free" acts and desires unchallenged. Yet, it is important to draw attention to the fact that discourses of individualism and socialization may be the most subversive discourses available to Czech students at this time in history. They are therefore important resources for resistance to traditional gender identities and arrangements.

The analysis documents how, in the Czech context, these widespread discourses seemingly enable, and at the same time close down the viability of, change. It demonstrates the significance of transgressing the limits of a world constituted by discourses of socialization and individualism, where the only conceivable resistance limits itself to the fight of a lone individual against a monolithic social structure. The analysis also makes visible what is not present in the data. Playfulness, experimentation, a community of others were absent from the utterances of my participants. To experiment with identity, to attempt its radical transformation, or to join others in their struggle against habitual gender practices seems impossible in a world constituted by these discourses. The analysis thus shows the crucial importance of disseminating diverse feminist and postmodernist discourses to the wider Czech society.

For the reasons just stated, I find an analysis guided by the principles of PDA illuminating and relevant. Yet, an identification of discourses does not necessarily provide us with the prospect of their change. A reader of the analysis may feel helpless and depressed by seeing how the two discourses (together with more explicitly deterministic discourses representing sex/gender as a biological fact, as metaphysical essences, as a natural consequence of heterosexuality) are so habitual, so taken-for-granted, that it seems impossible to contest them. Thus, even though this analysis may bring interesting insights to the constitution of gender identity among Czech university students, we may have doubts about its transformative potential. This transformative potential comes, I believe, with a deconstructive reading.

In my research, I used several strategies of deconstructive reading: reading the transcribed text "against its grain", offering contradictory readings, making visible inherent contradictions of the text and deconstructing binary oppositions. To read text "against its grain" means to interpret it contrary to its explicit meaning. In my data, for example, I attempted to show how utterances about biologically given differences between women and men can be at the same time read as utterances about cultural production of this difference. The certainty of the first reading, which would by itself only reproduce its essentialist truth, is

thus undermined and the meaning of the utterance made ambiguous. Another deconstructive strategy engages with oppositional binaries (knowing woman-unknowing man, determined others-free me, powerful man-powerless women). It shows how identification with one part of the binary presupposes the other part and points to possible negative consequences of binary thinking. The third strategy makes explicit contradiction inherent to all statements and renders habitual meanings of gender incoherent and unbelievable. Another strategy, I found helpful, is to offer several contradictory readings of the same passage or of the same interview. One of the research participants, for example, constructed her identity through an abjection of femininity and identification with masculinity, particularly with the power and freedom that masculinity signifies. A first reading described her identity as an identification with the masculine. A second reading, however, showed that the abjection of femininity was necessarily only illusory because the abjection was performed by a subject who in language and discourse still occupied the position of a "woman". A third reading, contrary to the first two readings, documented that the association between masculinity and power presupposed a definition of men as ignorant of the conditions of their existence. In this reading, the participant constructed women as more powerful, knowledgeable and free than men. The visibility of all three readings contests the stability and certainty of the first and most obvious reading, which reiterated women's powerlessness without offering any transformative potential.

Based on my research, I can conclude that PDA reveals problematic implications of discourses employed by the research participants and potentially presents them as captives of gender determinism. A deconstructive reading enables us to break through this static analysis. By providing different readings, engaging with contradictions and deconstructing binaries, a reader's habitual understanding is challenged, and new possibilities of thinking and acting in the world are opened up. The effect of deconstructive reading, I trust, is that both its reader and its "author" can no longer experience the text and the discourses which inhabit it as the simple truth. A detailed and intensive deconstructive work seems to differ significantly from abstract intellectual critique. Such a critique can be read and quickly forgotten, whereas intensive deconstructive reading, based on a detailed analysis of everyday discourse, demands from a subject full immersion in the deconstructive process. Another strength of deconstruction is that it avoids moralism; it does not oppose right to wrong, true to untrue, which might alienate a reader from the analysis. Instead, it gives an impetus to move to something different, something unknown, which is the starting point of transformation. As Foucault (2000) says: "[a]s soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they

have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible".

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