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**(Mis)Communication in Couples: Positioning as a Site of Conflict**

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## **Abstract**

(Mis)communication between people in couple relationships often results in arguments. Psychological research on this phenomenon has often relied on essentialist accounts of gender, offering little room for social or personal change. This study has used feminist poststructuralist theory to investigate the discourses that constitute couple relationships and enable (mis)communications in the form of arguments. From my reading of this theory and my experience of couple relationships I formulated three research questions: What discourses may be identified in young adults' talk about their couple relationships? How do these discourses specify the various obligations and entitlements of Boyfriends and Girlfriends? How are young adults' positions within these discourses implicated in their accounts of arguments?

The transcripts of semi-structured interviews with young adults talking about their couple relationships provided the texts for analysis. I conducted interviews with six men and six women aged between 22 and 30. Four themes emerged from participants' talk: division of labour, relationship work, spending time, and arguments. I used analytic resources from Parker's (1992) and Baxter's (2003) interpretations of poststructuralist discourse analysis to identify five discourses that constitute these thematics. I have named these discourses egalitarian, traditional, togetherness, reciprocity, and men-need-space. Analyses address the ways in which these discourses position boyfriends and girlfriends. The implications of contradictory positioning for enabling arguments are discussed.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

I am interested in the way people in couple relationships sometimes (mis)communicate. It seems that boyfriends or girlfriends sometimes (mis)interpret what their partner says because of their assumptions about what it means to be a boyfriend or girlfriend. When the first speaker attempts to correct what they think their partner heard, arguments can result, as each partner appears to talk at cross-purposes. I became interested in (mis)communication through my own experiences of being in couple relationships, and being part of this kind of argument.

Sometimes it seems that my boyfriend hears me say what he expects to hear, given that I am his girlfriend, rather than what I mean, and I'm sure I do the same to him. Sometimes we realise quickly that we've misunderstood, but other times these misunderstandings become quite big arguments. I remember a time when he told me he was going out and I asked what time he would be back. He replied, very abruptly, that he would be back when he was finished. I was annoyed that he wouldn't give me a straight answer, and he was annoyed because he didn't want to have to answer to me. I was offended by his tone, and couldn't understand why he was angry when I knew he was coming back to my house and I wanted to know when he would arrive. I felt that he didn't want to spend time with me at all. However, he thought I was trying to control how long he would be. Once he explained, it offended me that he would think I would act that way towards him. By this stage neither of us wanted to spend time with the other one anyway, and he was late for wherever he was going.

It bothered me that my boyfriend would assume I was checking up on him, when what I had been doing was checking on plans we had already made. Why would he think that of me? Is that what he expected of me? How many times had I done that to him?

These were questions I wanted answers to! I wanted to look into what boyfriends and girlfriends had to say about their (mis)communications. This began with a search of past research into couple relationships.

*Reading the literature on communication and couple relationships*

I found that sex/gender<sup>1</sup> differences in the way that men and women act within relationships has often been a focus of past research into the way couples communicate. The interpersonal relationship literature on (mis)communication between couples usually focuses on sex/gender differences in language use, and includes assumptions that sex/gender differences are the reason for the miscommunication (for example, particular incompatible patterns of conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990)). This research often includes investigations of the different things that men and women speak about, how often they bring up particular topics, as well as how they speak.

Past research on (mis)communication between couples includes common sense notions of what makes people who they are, which usually rely on the concept of essential characteristics, that is, characteristics that come from within a person that are stable, consistent and enduring. Essentialism assumes that people have a definable, discoverable nature (Bohan, 1993). These assumptions are common among psychologists hence their research aims to discover various traits, attributes, and attitudes, which people possess in various levels and amounts.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a trend to use the word 'gender' to refer to those aspects of our behaviour that aren't related to our biology, such as those produced socially or culturally, while reserving the word 'sex' for matters relating to anatomy or biology. However, it isn't this easy to separate sex from gender. Gender is usually initially decided by sex, and once that categorisation is made we don't depend on genitalia for deciding sex – we presume it by gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). People who are transgendered or born with ambiguous genitalia show us that the sex/gender relationship is not simple. However, 'gender' has simply replaced 'sex' in common usage, and in the literature. When reporting others' studies I have used the terms interchangeably, using whichever term was used by the researchers. In other places I have used 'sex/gender' (or sex-typed/gendered) to acknowledge their complex relationship.



Research that aims to examine the differences between men and women can usually be considered essentialist. Marecek (2001) calls this project 'gender science', and suggests such research assumes a definition of gender as "a collection of personal attributes of men and women...which impels people to act in sex-differentiated ways" (pp. 255-256). Essentialist research is usually also empirical research, which aims to discover facts about the nature of human beings. Through its careful attention to scientific method it is assumed that results found in empirical research can be generalised to all people. In sex/gender difference research, differences in results are assumed to be differences that can be found between all men and all women (Riger, 1992).

Both sides of the nature/nurture debate have essentialist assumptions in common. Although researchers using either of these approaches use different theories to explain the origin of the qualities they are interested in, they locate these qualities similarly, that is within the individual. Both accounts "locate gender within the person" (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994, p. 532) and portray it "in terms of fundamental attributes that are conceived as internal, persistent, and generally separate from ongoing experience" (Bohan, 1993, p. 7). They differ in that one side of the debate argues that what makes people who they are comes about through nature or biology, whereas the other side suggests people are produced by their environment or by the way they are socialised (Burr, 1995). Nature/nurture arguments provide two different accounts of essentialism evident in psychological sex/gender difference research, examples of which are discussed below.

Sex/gender difference research provides a clear distinction between qualities attributed to women, and those attributed to men, and assumes that differences between men and women are linked to sex/gender, and are located within individual men and women. Sex/gender difference research talks about sex/gender-differentiated qualities, that is, qualities that are present or not depending on sex/gender, and in doing so produces particular constructions of men and women. This conception of sex/gender presents several problems, as outlined here.

Firstly, our classification as male or female is not generally changeable. If certain qualities or ways of being are attached to a classification which is immobile, then the ways in which men and women can behave, and the ways in which it is acceptable for

men and women to behave are limited. It allows members of each sex/gender no access to alternative ways of being. This is especially problematic if women are attributed with ways of being that are deemed inferior to men's ways of being (Bohan, 1993).

Secondly, if the things that men and women do are sex-typed/gendered, and hence inescapable, then essentialist notions of sex-typed/gendered experiences and behaviours locate responsibility for experiences and behaviours within the individual (Weatherall, 2002). This creates further problems, as experiences become a result of internal qualities rather than an effect of social systems (Bohan, 1993). If responsibility for experiences is located individually, it follows then that responsibility for change is also located within the individual. Using essentialism, women's marginalisation and oppression (for example) is their own fault, and women can only change the situation by changing themselves. This results in attempts to change individuals, not the social system (Weatherall, 2002). Women are encouraged to take part in assertiveness training or self-defence classes, and men in anger management or stopping violence groups "rather than working to change the beliefs that render women vulnerable and that condone violence against women" (Bohan, 1993, p. 10). Such training does not prevent violence from occurring.

Essentialism and sex/gender difference research are often used to explain differences in the way men and women behave in couple relationships. Such research contributes to a construction of what it is to be part of couple relationships. This construction is dependent on and varies for each sex/gender. Such research also locates observed sex-typed/gendered qualities within the person, and so reproduces these same problems of essentialism in couple relationship research.

My approach to redressing the problems of essentialism is informed by feminist interpretations of Foucault's work (Baxter, 2003; Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1987), and lies not within research that attempts to uncover every aspect of what makes people who they are and what it is to be a person. Instead we can resist the constructions produced by research with such aims by challenging the definitions, categorisations, and classifications that we are tied to, and that tie us to them (Sawicki, 1991). To do this, we first need to locate the ways in which we are constructed as particular types of people. I will discuss examples of research that assume differences observed between

men and women are essential, and consider what this does for being a man or a woman. I will then discuss poststructuralism, and consider what this perspective can offer.

*Sex/gender difference research and social role theory*

Goldenberg et al (2003) conducted a study investigating 'gender-typical responses to sexual and emotional infidelity'. They claimed that men are more distressed if their female partner has sex with someone else than if she claims to be in love with another man, and that women are the opposite; women are more upset by emotional infidelity than sexual infidelity. They used an evolutionary explanation to account for this difference. It seems a man is expected to be more distressed by his female partner's sexual infidelity than her emotional infidelity, due to his desire to see his genes represented in his offspring. If his partner has been unfaithful he can't be sure her offspring are also his. Conversely, a woman is expected to be more distressed by her male partner's emotional infidelity than his sexual infidelity, as she needs someone to support her as she spends her time making sure their children survive. If he loves someone else the possibility of him leaving her without this support is high. Similar results were found by Harris (2002), although as well as generating results that suggest that more men than women chose sexual infidelity as more distressing, she found that *most* men rated emotional infidelity as the most distressing, indicating inconsistencies in the research.

Goldenberg et al (2003) also offer an alternative explanation of the gendered responses to infidelity that their study found, suggesting that infidelity is distressing as it impacts on self-esteem (an internal quality), and as women and men have different bases of self-esteem, sexual or emotional infidelity has different impacts. In this same study men and women gave different answers when asked which was more important to them, 'having a good sex life' or 'being in a committed romantic relationship'. According to the study, it is more important to men to have a good sex life; whereas being in a committed romantic relationship is more important to women. Goldenberg et al (1993) conclude that "men's stronger reaction to sexual infidelity is a consequence of the importance of sex to their self-esteem" (p.1592). Such conclusions have implications for explanations of domestic violence (of which jealousy is often a factor) and for sexual negotiations,

where women often comply with men's sexual requests in order to prevent men from feeling hurt or rejected (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998).

Christensen and Heavey (1990) used several strategies to account for a difference in men's and women's communication that they call "the demand/withdraw pattern of conflict" (p. 73). The authors focussed on a process "when one partner pressures the other through emotional demands, criticism, and complaints, while the other retreats through withdrawal, defensiveness and passive inaction" (p. 73). According to the research, women are more likely to be the demanding partner, whereas men are more likely to be the withdrawer. One of their accounts of this process is a biological explanation of a gender difference in reactivity to stress. Apparently women are less reactive to stress, which means they can "function more effectively in a climate of negative affect and are more likely to escalate conflict" (p. 74), whereas men, who are more physiologically reactive to stress, will avoid, withdraw from, or attempt to reconcile conflict. This statement minimises the man's part in such conflict, and places the blame for it squarely with women. His avoidance or withdrawal *is* a form of communication, which also may contribute to an escalation of conflict. Attempting to reconcile conflict before it is resolved does not provide a solution to whatever started the conflict in the first place. In explaining sex differences in reactivity to stress in this way, they cast the woman's behaviour in the demand-withdraw process as the problem. This constitutes an example of what Weatherall (2002) calls the "androcentric rule" (p. 72), where men's behaviour is regarded as the norm, and "differences in women are interpreted as deficits" (Weatherall, 2002, p. 72).

Harris and Christenfeld (1996) note that people occasionally suggest that men are more likely to have sex without love than women are, but the possibilities that would make this statement 'true' don't make sense. Each constructs a particular type of man or woman, none of which are fair on the gender they are supposed to represent. A statement suggesting that men have sex without love more often than women separates the behaviour of people into two groups. To behave outside of that generalisation is to be considered deviant. For a woman, this behaviour might be having sex without love, or for a man, to not have sex without love. Even remaining within the generalisation is

not without cost, as a man behaving in this way may be called a user, and a woman used, or a moral prude.

Ellis (1991) discusses the evidence for 'men's stronger sex drive'. Although he notes that most of the observations he cites as evidence could be explained in terms of culture, he concludes that together "the evidence provides support for the argument that men have evolved a stronger sex drive than women" (p. 633). Such a conclusion can be dangerous for women. Hollway (1989) presents a discursive account for such a belief, which she calls the male sex-drive discourse. The central proposition of this discourse is that "men are driven by biological necessity to seek out (heterosexual) sex" (Hollway, 1989, p. 54). It includes woman as an object that is capable of igniting unstoppable desire in men. Such a conclusion encourages the justice system to be sympathetic towards rapists and to require evidence that the victim wasn't complicit or provocative before convicting an offender.

Social role theory is often used to account for differences in the way men and women behave socially (eg. Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Rudman & Heppen, 2003<sup>2</sup>). Social role theory provides another example of essentialist research to the extent that it locates qualities that differentiate men from women within the individual.

This theory suggests differences in men's and women's behaviour come about through the way labour is divided between the sexes (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000). Such a division sees women at home doing the cooking and cleaning and minding the children, and men out in the workforce earning money. This is said to result in people holding certain types of beliefs, and possessing certain skills, based on their sex; what Eagly (1987) calls "sex-typed skills and beliefs" (p. 32). If more women are homemakers, more women will possess skills in this area, whereas, by the same token, men are more likely to acquire skills particular to achieving, maintaining, and advancing their place in the workforce. This division of labour also brings about expectations of each gender's role around the place that men and women should occupy in society, and what their occupation will be. People are then expected to assume a

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<sup>2</sup> Also Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer & Yellin, 2003; Donaghue & Fallon, 2003; Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Pickard & Strough, 2003; Rubin, Hill, Peplau & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980; Swann, Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Wagner-Raphael, Seal & Ehrhardt, 2001.

particular role based on their sex/gender, and also expect such a role of themselves. This creates a pattern of norm, expectation, and conformity, which has perpetuated the existence of sex-typed roles (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000).

When applied to heterosexual couples' relationships, social role theory suggests that each member of a couple will act and react in particular ways, consistent with the sex role as internalised by the individual and that differences in behaviour are due to the differences between these roles. Researchers have shown sex-typed behaviour is evident in many aspects of couple behaviours, including communication and sexual interactions.

Christensen and Heavey (1990) use social role theory as well as a biological theory about reactivity to stress to explain the demand/withdraw pattern of communication apparently often seen in heterosexual couples. It is suggested that the communication style characteristic of each gender is due to sex-role conditioning, where "women are trained to be affiliative and expressive and thus more likely to fear rejection and abandonment in relationships, whereas men are trained to be strong and independent and thus more likely to fear intrusion and engulfment in relationships" (Christensen & Heavey, 1990, p. 74). Not all conflict situations can be distinguished in such a way, but for the couples whose discussions can be characterised by the demand-withdraw pattern, alternatives are hard to find. Social role theory proposes that men and women are trained in a particular way, which encourages them to communicate or seek information in a particular way, and doesn't allow for reformulating or relearning in order to alter this type of communication. Modelling the problem in this way doesn't allow for an easy solution – there isn't an easy way out of such a cycle.

Rose and Frieze (1993) studied dating scripts for young singles. Gender roles are a fundamental aspect of sexual scripts. They found that young singles' first dates are highly scripted, with men in a proactive role (including asking for and planning the date, and initiating sexual interaction) and women reactive (by participating and responding). The authors note that "such gender differences serve to give men more power in the initial stage of a relationship" (p. 506). Such differences are explained by gender roles – "stereotyped gender role postures designate the male role as taking possession of the object of desire and the female role to be serving as the object of

desire” (Rose & Frieze, 1993, p. 499). This means that in a sexual relationship, men’s proactive role is in initiating sex and women’s reactive role becomes one of a “‘gatekeeper’ by resisting or refusing sexual advances” (Rose & Frieze, 1993, p. 499). Social roles make it difficult for women to initiate sex as, as Rose and Frieze (1993) say, “gender role violations have negative consequences” (p. 499). Gilbert, Walker, McKinney and Snell (1999) found in an analogue study that some men would like for women to take the lead in sexual interactions, but were not sure that they would like what that would mean about the woman, or what it would mean about them.

Rudman and Heppen (2003) used social role theory to account for “women’s self-selection bias” (p. 1357) in the types of jobs they apply for and accept. They claim this has led to the higher status, higher income-earning jobs being dominated by men. They note that “gender prejudice undoubtedly plays a role in the persistence of the status quo” (p. 1357), but made no connection between such prejudice and social role theory. Social role theory postulates that women and men differ in the jobs they are most capable of and that these capabilities are gradually acquired from a very young age. The theory also suggests that men and women expect others, and will conform themselves, to occupy a particular place in society. Possibly, such a theory may play a role in engendering intolerance of women or men who occupy places other than those expected.

Unfortunately, the expected gender roles for men and women aren’t equal in power or social status. This can be observed in the above research examples – the implications of each have a more negative impact on women. As Eagly (1987) puts it “the specific roles occupied by men tend to be higher in hierarchies of status and authority than the roles occupied by women” (p.23). This appears to be the case even when women’s roles include a place in the workforce (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000). The power differential brought about through men’s and women’s differential occupations in society also applies once the man comes home from work. Eagly suggests that “in the family, husbands generally have an overall power advantage for both routine decision making and conflict resolution” (p. 23).

Not only are women awarded lower power, social status, and authority than men, but “women are viewed as suited for the specific social roles that women typically occupy,

and men are viewed as suited for the specific social roles that men typically occupy” (Eagly, 1987, pp. 21-22). This cyclical pattern of sex-typed skill acquisition, gender roles, expectations, and conformity makes it very difficult for women to occupy positions equal to men, and therefore, to hold similar power or social status as men, in occupations or in couple relationships (Donaghue & Fallon, 2003).

Social role theory gives an account of why such sex-typed/gendered roles exist, and explicates these roles. However, such an account may perpetuate these gender roles, and doesn't allow for alternatives – there is no role available for women where they can possess similar levels of power as men possess. This constrains men and women to their particular role, and ties them to that stereotype. Sex roles are considered to be internalised, and are therefore an essential part of a person. This means there is no room to move for anyone dissatisfied with their designated role.

Research with essentialist assumptions about sex/gender operates with another assumption that eventually, with enough research, we will know all there is to know about people and how they come to be the way they are. It is assumed that we can accumulate the conclusions of all scientific studies so that each study conducted is another step on the road to this knowledge (Marecek, 2001). However there is much literature that suggests that this research is plagued by empirical weaknesses, such as “methodological problems, theoretical inconsistencies, and failures to replicate” (Bohan, 1993, p. 12). Bohan (1993) wonders then how such research has become so popular, to the point where it is granted common sense status, and why it seems to ring so true with our observations and experiences.

Rampage (2003) suggests that if we have always been surrounded by sexist bias then none of us are free from it. Sometimes these biases are expressed explicitly “in the form of statements that characterise one's partner as a typical member of his or her gender” (p. 207). However, gender biases are more often used as assumptions that aren't expressed explicitly. These assumptions often come in the form of expectations of each sex/gender's rights and responsibilities, ways of being, and place in the world. These are all fixed, as is sex/gender. These expectations structure access to alternative rights and responsibilities, ways of being, and place in the world. There is a “common-sense assumption that there is a natural way for girls, women, boys and men to be”



(Weedon, 1987, p. 98). Common-sense assumptions often become accepted as truth rather than intuition, and thus perpetuate gender biases (Bohan, 1993; Greeno & Maccoby, 1986). The common-sense assumptions about gendered ways of being and the gender stereotypes they result in form the basis of social role theory. Behind these assumptions is an understanding of men and women's differences as common sense or 'natural'. Many feminists have observed that this kind of understanding can limit people's access to anything which isn't deemed 'natural' for their sex/gender. This often means that women are considered to be suited for particular social tasks because of their biological differences from men (Weedon, 1987). Appeals to common sense are very powerful, however they leave little room for possible change.

Hyde (1994) contends that researchers, the media, and the public will always be interested in sex/gender differences. She suggests introducing guidelines that allow this research to "be carried out in a manner that meets the highest standards of science and at the same time is not detrimental to women" (p. 507). Gavey (1989) argues that even writing that aims to foreground women's experience can work to preserve, not subvert, the status quo, because such challenges move parallel to hegemonic discourse (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). These challenges reverse dominant values, in that women's experience is privileged rather than men's, but this continues to posit the idea of fixed, essential, sex-typed/gendered qualities. Before a challenge such as positively redefining women's experience can be successful the practices of the system of meanings that defined women's experience negatively must be overturned (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987).

For all of these reasons, research using essentialist assumptions is unsatisfactory to me, so looking into sex/gender differences is not the direction I wanted to go. Also, arguing that there are no significant differences between men and women does not always serve feminist interests, as Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1994) note. Arguing for an absence of sex/gender differences promotes equal treatment however equal treatment is not necessarily equitable (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994). For example, workplace practices often strive for equality, however women most often have primary responsibility for childcare, resulting in treatment that is equal, but not equitable.

After noting the limitations of essentialism I decided to explore the possibilities of poststructuralism and feminist interpretations of poststructuralist and Foucauldian theory.

### *Poststructuralism and Foucault*

Feminist poststructuralism is an approach to subjectivity, knowledge and language that offers a potentially valuable way for “disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” (Gavey, 1989, p. 463). Feminist poststructuralism moves beyond essentialism, challenging current hegemonic discourses, and therefore has implications for subjectivities (Gavey, 1989). Poststructuralism suggests that subjectivity (or personhood) is constituted in discourse, so that who we are and who it is possible to be is constrained and enabled by the subject positions available in discourse. If hegemonic discourses can be challenged then so too can the subject positions available within them. The opportunity to subvert the practices and forms of subjectivity allows us to look beyond essential qualities as the source of subjectivities, and allows the room to move between subject positions that were formerly constrained by essentialism. In Riger’s (1992) words, “poststructuralism rejects traditional notions of truth and reality and claims instead that power enables some to define what is or is not considered knowledge” (p. 734).

Burman and Parker (1993) suggest that we understand ourselves through language. Language (in the form of discourses) has power to create the conditions by which we experience and behave in the world. Thus, the way we use language to talk about the world, how we account for aspects of it, and how we justify our own and others’ actions has huge importance. As language is constructive, the way we do all of these things affects how we experience, talk about, and act, within the world.

Many feminist poststructuralist writers and researchers make use of Foucault’s theories of power. Unlike social role theory, for Foucault power is a force that is exercised not possessed, and is not something that can be acquired as a commodity (Sarup, 1993). Power is exercised within discourse in the ways that subjects are enlisted and constituted, and in the ways subjects relate within or across discourses (Weedon, 1987). Power cannot be exercised without knowledge. Discourses are forms

of knowledge, and knowledge is constituted in discourse (Baxter, 2003; Sarup, 1993; Weedon, 1987).

Although Foucault's writing may have been unsympathetic to feminism, Weedon (1987) suggests that his theories are still useful for feminism. Feminists can use Foucault's theories in ways that challenge patriarchal power relations and enable women to resist constraining subject positions in favour of new ways of being. Weedon (1987) advocates making a distinction between a theory and its author, arguing that it is then irrelevant whether or not Foucault's own analyses accomplished this.

Poststructuralism has changed the way many psychologists view the world, and the way they approach research. Poststructuralism rejects essentialism – the idea that what makes people who they are, is something they carry around inside them (Burr, 1995). This means that qualities such as personality, personality traits, attitudes, and even gender, are things that people *do*, rather than things people *are*.

Discourse analysis is compatible and consistent with feminist poststructuralism. Discursive researchers generally subscribe to the idea that “language produces and constrains meaning, where meaning does not, or does not only, reside within individual's heads, and where social conditions give rise to the forms of talk available” (Burman & Parker, 1993, p. 3). This puts forward the idea that subjects aren't static and stable, but fluid, inconstant, and changeable, particularly according to context. Discourse analysis allows us to examine the assumptions that are normally taken for granted in our talk. Discourse analysis doesn't allow us to see what is ‘really’ happening, or what a person ‘really’ means, but instead makes obvious what people do with their words and how they do it. Davies and Harré (1990) suggest that what we know and what we call knowledge is understood through the terms of one or more discourses; knowledge is constituted in discourse. When people speak of what they know (for example their own couple relationship) they use one or more discourses. Discourse analysis allows us to see what discourses are employed in such talk, and where a speaker positions him or herself within these discourses.

Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) makes obvious what utterances in a conversation do in terms of how they affect another's stance, and what replies this person can make. “Positioning is a discursive practice...within a conversation each of

the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself” (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p.22).

A discursive approach allows for multiple positions, and for individuals to move within and between positions. This approach to human phenomena makes a variety of ‘roles’ possible. It avoids the constraints that some theories, such as social role theory, establish on the places people can occupy in the world.

### *Research using discursive theory*

The recent ‘turn to language’ has encouraged a focus on the way that social and personal phenomena are constructed through discourse and power, and has changed the way many psychologists conduct research. Attention is paid to the way participants construct their talk and their explanations, and what discourses they use, rather than looking at only what answers they give. Discussion of examples of such studies follows.

A way of accounting for misunderstandings between couples is miscommunication theory. This has been applied to acquaintance rape, by suggesting that women don’t articulate ‘no’ clearly enough and that men misinterpret their attempts to say ‘no’. Frith and Kitzinger (1997) suggest that women use miscommunication theory to account for their experiences of sexual coercion not as an explanation, but as a discursive resource, “as it avoids blaming men, it gives women a sense of control, and it obscures institutionalised gender power relations” (p. 517). This constructs an incident that could be labelled as rape as a ‘simple misunderstanding’, which makes it more acceptable, thus allowing a woman to avoid ‘victim status’ (Kitzinger & Thomas, 1995). This is important for women who wish to maintain heterosexual relationships, as it allows women to continue a relationship in which this kind of incident has occurred. If men were blamed for these incidents, if women had no sense of control, it would be very difficult for most women to maintain couple relationships with men. Therefore, an account of rape as the result of miscommunication ignores that not only do gender power relations exist, but that they are institutionalised.

Frith and Kitzinger (2001) suggest a similar strategy is used by women to account for difficulties they experienced in saying no to unwanted sex. Sex is often depicted as

scripted by researchers who ask subjects to list actions or events they would expect to occur in a typical sexual interaction. Frith and Kitzinger (2001) note that researchers using script theory seem to have in common the understanding of “scripts as things that reside inside people’s heads (as cognitions), which are merely emptied out in self-report data” (p.212). This means that social role theory isn’t really very social at all. Instead, it is “fundamentally individualistic and asocial” (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001, p. 213). They suggest ‘script formulation’ as a discursive alternative to script theory. Scripts suggest ‘rules’ about the way things should be done. These rules can be very hard to break, as doing so is to be considered deviant. Frith and Kitzinger (2001) suggest that young women’s talk does not simply reflect, but actively constructs, the scripted nature of sexual interaction. This presents saying no to unwanted sex as something that is generally difficult, rather than specific to particular situations or to particular women.

Baxter (2003) conducted a feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis on high school students’ classroom talk whose speaking and listening skills were being formally assessed. Baxter was interested in establishing what constituted effective speech in the classroom, and whether all students had equal access to such ways of speaking. Baxter found that three discourses were active in this setting; these were the discourse of gender differentiation, the discourse of approval (both of teacher and peers), and the discourse of collaborative talk. These three discourses were all competing and each added to the others. Baxter found that subjects’ positioning in each of these discourses determined whether or not they would be regarded as effective speakers. For example, girls were better able to exemplify the practices of collaborative talk, by virtue of their positioning as the more supportive sex. However, this positioning could disadvantage them from gaining speaking turns, and give them little opportunity to demonstrate themselves as effective speakers. Boys were also constructed as the ‘wittier’ sex according to the discourse of gender differentiation, and benefited from this in terms of peer and teacher approval. However this ‘clowning around’ sometimes prevented them from speaking effectively in terms of collaboration. Also, some boys in Baxter’s study lacked the confidence to ‘perform’ in front of their classmates, were subject to ‘heckling’ from other boys, and hence weren’t considered effective speakers. Such boys could be rendered relatively powerless across all three discourses. Baxter showed

how something like classroom assessment couldn't be theorised only on the basis of sex/gender.

I will use positioning theory as a discursive alternative to essentialist theories to look at how members of couples are positioned as 'Boyfriend' or 'Girlfriend', and how utterances are interpreted through positioning as Boyfriend or Girlfriend. I will use feminist poststructuralism to gain an understanding of the discourses employed by young adults in negotiating positions with their boyfriends or girlfriends<sup>3</sup>.

Brown (2001) posits that relationships are defined by rules that organise how the relationship will operate. The people within the relationship construct these rules (either intentionally or unintentionally). I suspect also, that social groups are also a source of rules for how their members conduct their couple relationships. I am interested in what these rules are, and what it means to break them. I am interested in how these rules come about and how they are applied. I am interested in what 'Boyfriend' and 'Girlfriend' mean. This leads me to several research questions.

#### *Research questions*

What discourses may be identified in young adults' talk about their couple relationships?

How do these discourses specify the various obligations and entitlements of Boyfriends and Girlfriends?

How are young adults' positions within the discourses that constitute couple relationships implicated in their accounts of arguments?

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<sup>3</sup> The term boyfriend or girlfriend serves as an explanation of one person's relationship to another. A boyfriend or girlfriend is someone who is involved in a couple relationship. The *position* of Boyfriend or Girlfriend not only signifies the presence of a couple relationship, it also carries obligations and entitlements. This distinction is indicated by the use of capitals.