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# Blogging About Feminist Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender

Cynthia Berryman-Fink


Janet Bing  
*Old Dominion University*, [jbing@odu.edu](mailto:jbing@odu.edu)

Deborah Cameron

Amy Sheldon

Anita Taylor

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## **Blogging About Feminist Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender**

Cynthia Berryman-Fink, Janet Bing, Deborah Cameron, Amy Sheldon, Anita Taylor  
Introduction and Conclusion by special issue Co-editor Patricia Sotirin

What is "interdisciplinarity"? What assumptions do we make about such scholarship and how it is done? Specifically, why is interdisciplinarity critical to the study of communication, language, and gender? What are the constraints on interdisciplinary scholarship and how can we facilitate such work? As special issue co-editors, we wondered how these questions are being discussed among gender, communication, and language scholars. We decided that an online blog would offer an interactive venue for engaging their experiences and views. Accordingly, we invited several scholars whose work has contributed significantly to the study of communication, language, and gender to participate in a blog discussion conducted on the public blog site *WordPress* between February 8 and March 17, 2008. Those who accepted our invitation included: Cynthia Berryman-Fink (University of Cincinnati), Janet Bing (Old Dominion University), Deborah Cameron (Oxford University), Amy Sheldon (University of Minnesota), and Anita Taylor (George Mason University).

The discussion was initiated in response to Anita Taylor's editorial, "Whither Interdisciplinarity?" in the Spring 2007 issue of *Women and Language* (Volume 30, No. 1). In that essay, Taylor reviewed the history and goals of *Women and Language* and its organizational affiliate, the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG) as well as the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA) and its new journal, *Gender and Language*. Both of these groups and their affiliated journals hold one of their primary goals to be facilitating interdisciplinary research. Yet, as Taylor noted in her editorial: "Although we now have two international journals (*Women and Language*, *Gender and Language*), both with goals of sharing scholarship across fields and nations, the originally sought interdisciplinarity remains elusive, a goal not yet reached" (p. 1). Later in the essay, she wondered, "Can a publication be interdisciplinary when our scholarly fields are not and our institutional structures do not encourage such work?" (p. 2). Reflectively, she observed,

It is as accurate in 2007 as when the founding editors [of *Women and Language*] said it, more than 30 years ago: To fully understand issues of communication, language and gender, we need to be interdisciplinary. Not just multi-disciplinary, although that is infinitely better than single discipline focused. Inter-disciplinary. In spite of the difficulties and barriers. The remaining questions: Can we? If yes, how? (p. 2).

Her questions were taken up in our blog. The following transcriptions are drawn from that discussion. Given the serendipitous flow of blog discussions, we abbreviated some posts to maintain topic coherence and changed the order in some cases. Each post is preceded by the topic line of the post and the name of the participant. We maintained the blog convention of prefacing each entry with the oral marker, "Says."

### **How to Develop Our Blog Conversation**

Amy Sheldon Says:

To develop the conversation, we could begin with this question: "Has the problem been accurately identified and framed?" The term is not defined in Taylor's editorial or in the call for papers to the W&L special issue. 'Interdisciplinary,' when it is used in these documents, is either vague or has multiple allusions. So, our first step could be to clarify what we are talking about. As a terminological preliminary, participants on this list could define what "interdisciplinary" means, and contrast it to "multidisciplinary," or "cross-disciplinary," and "disciplinary." Second, it would be helpful to tie some of this discussion to concrete examples of published work that exemplifies "interdisciplinary" work and describe what makes it successful as an exemplar. Third, it would help to know of concrete examples of roadblocks to interdisciplinary collaboration – what prevents people from doing interdisciplinary work. Finally, let's distinguish between "interdisciplinary" as a collaborative social process between researchers and "interdisciplinary" as a feature of the scholarly work and intellectual contribution to one or more fields.

I am always "suspicious" of single words about general phenomena because they usually compress a lot of complexity. Barrie Thorne (1975) made that point about "gender," I believe, a few decades ago. Obviously, the lingering concern over the issue of "interdisciplinarity" suggests a complexity to unpack, as does the definition of the word itself.

### **Definitions**

Janet Bing Says:

In response to Amy Sheldon's suggestion about identifying and defining our terms (always a good idea), I would like to introduce a new term, "integrative." When I became interested in interdisciplinary research, partly as a result of work in gender and partly as a result of work in intercultural communication, I joined the Association for Integrative Studies ([www.units.muohio.edu/aisorg/](http://www.units.muohio.edu/aisorg/)), an

organization devoted to what we have been calling interdisciplinary studies. I think the term "integrative" is more specific than "interdisciplinary," since the latter term has also been used to refer to works, especially collections, which are better characterized as "multi-disciplinary," as Anita Taylor pointed out.

In 1997, I co-authored an article about sexual harassment with a colleague whose discipline is criminal justice (Bing & Lombardo, 1997). I think that one reason we had little difficulty in getting this interdisciplinary article published in *Discourse and Society* was because we realized that most articles are published within a disciplinary framework, in this case, linguistics. Although the content of the article came from both of us, I wrote the final draft, not because I was the better writer, but because I knew the conventions of the field and the journal. However, when writing for an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary journal, authors can never be sure of the assumptions of their reviewers, which is, of course, the underlying issue.

### Reply

Amy Sheldon Says:

Janet Bing mentions the importance of disciplinary conventions, and the importance of being mindful of them in order to steer a manuscript into print. Thanks for the integrative studies website, too. It's interesting to see the variety of ways that integrative scholarship is being addressed. I would add that there is an integrative pressure within disciplines too. Developing a discipline depends on producing integrative work – work that stays within the discipline, integrating prior work, developing a topic in a disciplinarily coherent way. We are all familiar with the politics of defining disciplinary borders, and the continual effort to differentiate what "counts" from what's "outside," which is how a discipline patrols what it perceives to be its borders, and sanctions or limits "unapproved" border crossings. Janet gives us something to learn from a successful collaboration across disciplines, one that got all the way into print. Let's also discuss what needs to be working in order to get a language and gender project off the ground, no less to the finish line, when people work across boundaries. What are barriers that have actually made interdisciplinary work in language and gender such a struggle that it was not even attempted, or didn't get off the ground? And of course, what has worked well?

### What Are the Problems?

Anita Taylor Says:

I would re-phrase the question to "What are the problems?" Among them are the problems of trying to enter a new field – getting acquainted with a new literature; new writing conventions; new approaches to doing scholarship. So not only do we have to get past the

disciplinary "border patrol" (to expand on the metaphor of disciplinary territory) but we have to devote extraordinary amounts of time which for most of us is a scarce commodity. Connecting these problems is an overriding issue: no institutional rewards for the effort. In my university considerable institutional rhetoric extols integrative studies. We have (had) a college with that name (George Mason University New Century College, <http://www.ncc.gmu.edu>). It is now a "college within a college" with all the related problems of funding. Faculty who work in that college come under suspicion from their colleagues in disciplinary departments; are often subject to exceptional scrutiny from a politicized governing board and militant local "thought police"; and although supported better to work across disciplinary lines than those of us in traditional departments, rarely receive compensation equivalent to the many hours it takes to do integrative teaching and scholarship.

### What Works and What Doesn't?

Anita Taylor Says:

What works is folks representing different disciplinary traditions who see great benefits to be gained from collaborating with people from other traditions working on similar issues. Major commitment is required of them because of the huge amounts of time and effort required. If the work that M. J. Hardman and I currently have underway – creation of teaching materials to support integrating women and language matters fully into communication, English, linguistics, sociology and women's studies courses – gets finished before we are, it might be an example both of what it takes and what works. We find we can accomplish just so much until we have the need to work face to face to create usable documents. So it has required MUCH time and a considerable amount of money from both of us because no publisher nor university that I know will front the amount of money it takes to support the amount of time that truly working across disciplines takes – even if we were at the same institution, which sadly we are not.

Women's Studies programs provide instructive models; they demonstrate both the problems and the successes of inter-, multi-, cross-, disciplinary work. Probably each of us has on our campuses examples of a Women's Studies course that is nothing more than English faculty teaching women's literature, or literature about women; or communication faculty doing women and media courses; or art faculty doing a course on feminist art or women in art by men or history of women artists. Each of these individually may be a great course. On my campus, students put them together to amass 18, 21 or 30 hours and receive a Women's Studies Certificate or Degree. But as I noted in editorializing the need for the special issue, typically that is multi-disciplinary.

On many campuses, Women's Studies Programs also typically involve some courses that draw from several disciplines and come closer to integration. We all usually

have an "Intro to Women's Studies" or something like it that combines a bit of feminist theory, some women's history, some sociology of sex roles and some bits of other disciplines. At George Mason University, we have an intro level graduate course developed by a team that included a sociologist, two philosophers, a communicologist (me), and two English professors, one with a specialty in writing, one in literature. We call it "Feminist Theory Across the Disciplines." Another team developed a graduate course in women in global development.

So, we have some good examples, both of what works and what doesn't when it comes to "being" interdisciplinary. To me, bottom line of what they show is that it is a labor-intensive process requiring great quantities of love and energy. We have had administrative encouragement for our program, and support to the extent of permitting them to be taught with relatively low enrollment. At least instructors got compensation for working out how to teach across these boundaries. Course developers got nothing for their time except seeing something they wanted come into being. Although that is better than nothing.

#### **What Works and What Doesn't?**

Janet Bing Says:

I agree with Anita that doing integrative work of any kind tends not to be rewarded. When my department chair first asked me to teach a course on language and gender, I was ill-prepared. I was a feminist and a linguist, but my training was in phonology, not sociolinguistics. I was not satisfied with most of the textbooks at the time (partly because I was not a sociolinguist), so I created my own collection of articles from a variety of disciplines, and over the years I have updated and improved this on-line textbook. I did the same thing for the four cross-cultural courses I designed. The downside has been that I put a great deal of time and effort into writing what are really unpublished textbooks, whereas others might have put this same time and energy into research. I did make several unsuccessful attempts to publish the language and gender textbook; I do not know if I failed because it is interdisciplinary or because the book is simply not good enough.

However, my university has recently begun to reward interdisciplinary work. Our Office of Research now offers \$70-\$80,000 grants for "Multidisciplinary Seed Money." My college encourages team teaching across departments by giving the FTE's for team-taught classes to both departments. Perhaps things are changing.

#### **How Do Universities Approach Interdisciplinarity? Two Ways to Go About It.**

Amy Sheldon Says:

Here is the website at the University of Minnesota's Graduate School which has information about initiatives to promote interdisciplinarity: [www.grad.umn.edu/oii/](http://www.grad.umn.edu/oii/) (Dubrow, n.d.). I found it instructive that our Graduate School has presented 2 models of interdisciplinarity: 1) teams with various expertise, and 2) a "super scholar" who has done all the homework herself or himself.

Finding effective solutions to the most pressing problems that confront us in the twenty-first century increasingly requires collaborative approaches that employ the tools, methods, and perspectives of individuals with varied expertise working together in interdisciplinary teams. So too, some of the most exciting frontiers of knowledge-creation are being explored by individual scholars who have intentionally mastered theories and methods outside of their original field of expertise, allowing for insights not accessible from the perspective of a single discipline.

Our individual experiences of interdisciplinarity are happening in different institutional CONTEXTS, as well as disciplinary ones. We are talking across disciplines and institutions. So it would seem that it would productively extend the discussion to know more about these contexts.

#### **Institutional Arrangements**

Cynthia Berryman-Fink Says:

Amy asked about institutional arrangements that work against cross-disciplinary and integrative scholarship. This is a key point, because no matter how much we as scholars/teachers and institutions of high education claim to value cross-disciplinary and integrative work, most all of us were trained within disciplinary boundaries and we occupy faculty positions within disciplines. This affects our identities, how we think, what we study, how we do research, where we present and disseminate our work and what support and rewards are given for our work.

My College of Arts & Sciences (A & S) is beginning to use a cluster hiring approach. It remains to be seen whether this will truly incentivize cross-disciplinary research because the institutional structures are still tied to disciplines. For example, four A & S departments (Communication, Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology) are collaborating to define a cluster of four

faculty hires in the area of minority health issues or health disparities. We will design positions such that the four faculty hired will work as a team of scholars and possibly team teach courses, or at least cross list each other's courses to get a disciplinary mix of students in each class. It's very exciting and think about how much intellectual support these four new faculty will have as part of a cross-disciplinary cluster.

Yet each person will be hired into a department, will have departmental expectations placed on them and will need to meet departmental/disciplinary expectations for reappointment, promotion and tenure. I suspect that their cross-disciplinary work will become an add-on or an extra-burden to them – something they will be expected to do on top of all of the disciplinary research, teaching and service. They will be expected to do double duty in serving both the discipline of their faculty appointment and college expectations of the cross-disciplinary cluster. Do others have any experience with the concept of cluster faculty?

### Reply

Amy Sheldon Says:

The idea of hiring people from different disciplines, who may not know each other, have never worked together, serve different "masters," and expect them to work productively together as a team on research seems like a very high expectation indeed. I'm more familiar with "Centers" that grow out of similar interests and somewhat related research of faculty who are already in the university, but who are spread out in different disciplines. New hires may be attracted by the presence of the Center, and be invited to join it.

### Striving to Be a Feminist Interdisciplinary Journal

Anita Taylor Says:

*Women and Language* has a particularly high bar because the goal is to be a feminist interdisciplinary publication. That means answering questions about what serves the feminist mission. It means being dedicated to seeking out and nurturing work that pushes boundaries. From my perspective that has meant being multi-disciplinary when we cannot be truly inter-disciplinary (integrative). Finding and publishing scholarship from many different fields is better than not mixing such viewpoints. *W&L* has a fair record of doing that, especially when we have done special issues. We have collected work on a "topic" such as spirituality; gender, race & ethnicity; redefining gender; paradox; global feminism; war, language and gender into such issues. Most of those have been reasonably multi-disciplinary and several of the articles have been integrative. A particularly good example and one that illustrates what works is the women and linguistic innovation issue M. Lynne Murphy edited in Spring 1992 (Vol 15:1). I will

also name one other from a long time back: Fiona Place's "History Taking," in Fall 1989 (Vol 12:2). I still think it might be one of the best pieces we ever published.

But we have a lot of work still to do to be truly integrative. Our board, our authors, our various editors and I are mostly from Communication and we do not always (perhaps not even often) manage to promote truly interdisciplinary work. To be better than most other publications (with the exception of those in women's studies on which I will comment in a different posting) is not good enough. [To be truly integrative] requires an editorial board with the time and willingness to stretch in reading papers coming from different perspectives. Finding and nurturing the editorial board is a never-ending task. As our forum in the spring of 1999 (Vol. 22:1) demonstrated, reviewers often differ dramatically. A publication that works requires editors with commitment and a backbone of steel, not to mention a pretty deep reservoir of energy or sponsors with deep pockets to bankroll good staff support.

### Why This Blog?

Janet Bing Says:

I would guess that some of the motivation for this blog was a result of the frustrations Anita Taylor has faced as editor of *Women and Language*. I was one of the two reviewers who blind-reviewed the article that was the issue in the forum published in the spring of 1999. It was an article about how males talk in a brokerage house, and in my opinion it was a standard sociolinguistic article, well-written with good data. I read the article, thought it was great, gave it the highest ranking and made minimal comments. After all, the article was clearly superior and I, as usual, was overworked so I did not spell out the obvious strong points of the article (from my perspective).

I was astounded when Anita contacted me and said that the other reviewer had given the article a very low score and had voted to reject it. She then asked for permission to publish the remarks of both reviewers, sent the article out to other reviewers, and published the whole forum. I am surprised that the forum did not attract more attention, partly because it gave me one of those "ahah!" moments and made me realize how effectively I had been socialized into my discipline. I was not aware of that for several reasons. I earned my first two degrees in English literature, I had received training in anthropology during my Peace Corps training, I had work experience as a teacher of English as a second language, and I had taught a number of integrated courses. I assumed I was relatively unbiased towards other disciplines but I was wrong.

### Reply

Amy Sheldon Says:

Are there any inherent, disciplinary obstacles that make collaboration between communication studies

scholars and linguists difficult? If two fields define “language” differently, then that will not favor intellectual collaboration. If “communication” means a study of the effects of “messages” and not the structures and processes involved in discourse itself, then scholars will focus on different domains. If, in addition, disciplines have different training in methods and argumentation, different knowledge bases, and different requirements for language research, that’s an additional obstacle.

Could another obstacle be a need for theory development – that we have not yet developed a coherent theory of gender ideology as a social process, and how it connects to actual language behavior?

### **Disciplinary Boundaries Is One Issue, Collaboration Another**

Amy Sheldon Says:

Let’s make a distinction between collaborative work across disciplinary boundaries and the patrolling and enforcing of disciplinary boundaries. Patrolling and enforcing the disciplinary boundaries is the usual way that academic departments in American universities work (maybe others too). It’s the way a discipline creates its intellectual niche, differentiates itself from others, socializes graduate students, and competes for resources in a university and from grant agencies. This is turf building across universities, and whether you feel it’s intellectually justified or not, or done too narrowly or not, our blogging won’t change it.

On the other hand, collaboration is something under our control to a greater extent. When bloggers on this list have been discussing “multidisciplinary,” “interdisciplinary,” “cross-disciplinary,” or “integrative” projects, I think some of that relates to the intractability of disciplinary boundaries, but some of it relates to how collaborations work. Some collaborations are successful. Some are not. Collaboration across academic disciplines is effective if people share enough disciplinary grounding to be able to work together. The quality of the work should be central. The above distinction connects to the field of language and sex/gender. Both content and historical time are relevant too. Robin Lakoff’s *Language & Women’s Place* (1975) was circulating (some say “underground”) as a ditto in the early 1970’s. At the time it had a transgressive quality, and it was outside the taken-for-granted linguistic model of what constitutes the study of language and society, in the way that radical new work is. The following 30+ years have allowed “the field” to develop, deepen and change. A critical mass of people, published research, textbooks, professional societies, etc., have made their way on the scene. Various disciplines are incorporating these researchers and this work into their faculty and course offerings. So, the politics and conservatism of boundary-setting in a field is not easy to change. Yet we do our research in this kind of intellectual climate and there has been slow progress but “the field” is having an intellectual impact. What counts as “good

research” is often a matter of interpretation and of who’s judging. But “good work” does have an impact. So, where to take this discussion?

### **Critical Interdisciplinarity**

Deborah Cameron Says:

I’ve been following this discussion, but have held back from posting so far because I’m aware that my current preoccupations on the subject of interdisciplinarity are rather different from the ones we have been concentrating on. The emphasis has been on collaborative work across disciplines, what kind of collaborations are productive, how institutions can facilitate and reward these, and how disciplinary boundary-policing can get in the way. These are all important issues, and it’s interesting to hear about the various initiatives Amy and Janet have mentioned. But at the risk of going off at a tangent, I’d like to introduce the idea that feminist interdisciplinarity doesn’t just mean collaborating with others who are like-minded but differently trained in order to, as the Minnesota website puts it, “find better solutions to pressing contemporary problems”; it can also be about critiquing what is happening in other disciplines where scholars are talking about your subject, but do not share your assumptions, your commitments, your definition of what’s a problem or your idea of what would constitute an effective or just solution. In language and gender studies at the moment there is arguably a pressing need for that kind of ‘critical’ interdisciplinarity.

The specific example which I have in mind is the resurgence of biologicistic approaches to the study of what we call gender and they (the new biologists) insist is really sex. I’m talking about accounts of male and female behaviour (prominently including linguistic and communicative behaviour) which invoke neuroscience and evolutionary theory – but also, in a supporting role, the work of sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists and communication scholars – to bolster the argument that sex/gender-related variation in the use of language reflects profound, innate cognitive and psychological differences between men and women. And increasingly I’m talking about the practical application of these ideas in real-world domains such as education. In the US, for instance, there’s now a movement for sex-segregated classrooms in public schools based on the argument that boys and girls naturally learn differently, are naturally good or bad at different things – you guessed it, girls are naturally good at language and communication – and therefore benefit from different curricula and teaching methods (for a quick summary, Google Caryl Rivers and Rosalind Barnett’s piece ‘The Difference Myth’, which appeared in the *Boston Globe* on October 27 2007; see also Barnett and Rivers, 2005).

If you only read the scholarly literature of the disciplines which are the main homes of language and gender studies (e.g. anthropology, communication, linguistics, sociology), you won’t necessarily notice that

elsewhere in the academy there is a sustained assault (and as it happens, an interdisciplinary one) being made on the social constructionist approach which we take for granted among ourselves. But given how influential it's become, I think feminist language scholars need to engage with the new biologism more directly, at the level of its science as well as its ideology. That means doing the work of reading its literature, understanding its assumptions and assessing the evidence it marshals to support its claims. Recently I have been working on a long article which tries to do these things, and I see the research I have done for it as an exercise in interdisciplinarity, even though it has not involved collaboration (few insiders to the relevant areas of research would want to collaborate on a feminist critique, though a couple have corresponded with me). I have no idea who if anyone will publish it, though, because this is an argument in which (putting it crudely), neither side takes the other seriously. I do want to take the new biologism seriously: I think that's as important for critical as for collaborative interdisciplinary projects. But doing so raises another problem: the lack of confidence many of us feel when confronted with 'hard' (in both senses) science. The new biologists have no inhibitions about (mis)reading sociolinguistics, but we seem to be much more doubtful about our ability to tackle brain research, endocrinology or genetics. Are we right to be daunted? Do some research areas, because of their highly technical and specialized nature, set limits to the feminist ambition to take issue with sexism wherever we find it? I hope not, because to me that is the most important purpose of feminist scholarship, and the reason for our resistance to traditional (disciplinary) ways of organizing – and fragmenting – knowledge. What do others think?

### Reply

Janet Bing Says:

I think Deborah Cameron has come up with a useful direction. Along the lines of what she has suggested, I think that Emily Martin was a good role model for me. She is a sinologist and anthropologist, a professor of Socio-cultural Anthropology at NYU. I love her article, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-female Roles" in *Signs* (1991). It does exactly what Deborah suggests, showing the bias in medical texts.

As for approaches to what Deborah calls "Critical Interdisciplinarity," I like the methodology of the anthropologist Naomi Quinn in her 2005 article, "How to Reconstruct Schemas People Share." Briefly, she had people talk about their marriages, and having collected many hours of discourse, she identified patterns of metaphors, analyzed key words, and described patterns of reasoning. What I like about her approach is that it developed organically out of her data after she had concluded that the traditional approaches were not working for her. I've had my students analyze various types of texts using Quinn, Lakoff & Johnson (1980), and

Reddy ("The Conduit Metaphor," 1979), and these readings have inspired some nice work on their part.

I think you are absolutely right, Deborah, and articles such as "The Romance of the Egg and the Sperm" and much of Anne Fausto-Sterling's work does address this issue (Fausto-Sterling, 1992; 2000). However, I think it is equally or even more important to get the message through to the media. Whenever some scientist finds a difference between males and females, the media is all over it as Victoria Bergvall and I discussed in "The Question of Questions" (1996) and in our later individual articles on the brain (Bergvall, 2006, 2005; Bing, 1999). However, when feminist scholars challenge biased science those challenges probably do not get the same media attention.

### Reply

Amy Sheldon Says:

Thanks for this new and welcome thread, Deborah. I agree with this characterization of feminist scholarship. I also think some of the difficulty of making the critique from **within** "highly technical and specialized" research areas is due to how scholars have been trained and continue to train acolytes. Most of science continues to be a tacit, consensual, shared, male culture and collaborative work is highly valued. It is not politically advantageous to ask questions that set oneself off as a "feminist."

Aside from the sociological barriers – and taking neuroscience as an example science – one intellectual barrier is that basic neuroscience research is using MRI's to locate reflexes of behavior in the brain. Does neuroscience (i.e., cognitive science, of which psychology is a contributing field) incorporate or acknowledge a model of culture in its descriptions of behavior? Psychological constructs are not necessarily sensitive to analysis of the social sphere. Surely the relevant critique has been made before and is still current. Someone on the list can probably suggest a key feminist critique of science (perhaps Evelyn Fox Keller, 2000, 1987, 1985, 1982; Anne Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2000).

If we pursue this thread, a key question would be to understand how, e.g., neuroscience research, and neuroscientists represent "females," "males"? What seems to happen is that "women" conflates with "females" (and "men" to "males"), and the class is interpreted as homogeneous, essentialist, and unproblematic. I'm interested in the question: What does it take to build the notion of "social construct" or "culture" into the design of a neuroscience study about females or/and males?

As far as journalistic interpretations of research go, as far as I can see, most of journalism and electronic media is in the business of reproducing pop culture, stereotypes, and ideologies of females and males as different. This is an industry-wide approach and it's not going to change. We have seen journalistic interpretations of research vary a lot in reliability, even when written by someone with scientific *bona fides*! The media make their profits from

reinforcing consensual stereotypes in pop culture, not from having a sensible airing of the issues, and keeping an open mind. That's supposed to be what science does. There have been numerous critiques of the media's misrepresentations of females and males that fall on deaf ears. Barnett & Rivers (2005) wrote a book a few years ago debunking claims about so-called 'sex differences', for example. There probably have been other thoughtful pop treatments. There certainly has been substantial scholarly critique as well. We know this. What do we not know, and where do we go from here?

Finally, you asked a sobering question:

...But doing so raises another problem: the lack of confidence many of us feel when confronted with 'hard' (in both senses) science. The new biologists have no inhibitions about (mis)reading sociolinguistics, but we seem to be much more doubtful about our ability to tackle brain research, endocrinology or genetics. Are we right to be daunted? Do some research areas, because of their highly technical and specialized nature, set limits to the feminist ambition to take issue with sexism wherever we find it? I hope not, because to me that is the most important purpose of feminist scholarship, and the reason for our resistance to traditional (disciplinary) ways of organizing – and fragmenting – knowledge. What do others think?

I think we are as "right to be daunted" – and cautious – as we would be to, hypothetically, e.g., write our own good will without legal training, or prescribe a good treatment for our cancer without medical training. But that doesn't mean we can't overcome the limits of our own lack of training, or that we don't get a will written or get cancer treatment. In all these cases, we are the critical consumer, and it seems that we take the least risk to getting it "wrong" if we team up with a specialist who will work with us and shares the same goal....which is to arrive at the best outcome. But what is "the best outcome" here? As we've said, the feminist goals and the scientist's goals may not be aligned. Although you would think they would be aligned, considering the requirement that scientific studies meet conditions of "descriptive adequacy," "reliability," "validity."

So when you ask, "Do some research areas, because of their highly technical and specialized nature, set limits to the feminist ambition to take issue with sexism wherever we find it?," I don't think there are limits that can't be overcome. But it requires finding a willing researcher or two to get a productive dialogue started.

## Reply

Anita Taylor Says:

One way to cope with being daunted by the "expertise" (and obscurity) of science and science writing

is to pair with feminists or allies from within the field. I think, for example, of Evelyn Fox Keller (2000, 1987, 1985, 1982), Ruth Bleier (1986, 1984), and Anne Fausto-Sterling (1992, 2000). Not many of us know them, but we surely know comparable folks within our respective academic homes. Such pairing, however, is of course limited by time and availability (not to mention interest) on the part of both parties.

## What Can We Say About Interdisciplinarity?

Patricia Sotirin, Co-Editor:

As free-form conversations tend to do, this discussion ended abruptly when we came to the end of the specified time for participation. And, like any good discussion, more questions were raised than answered and we have benefited from our shared reflections on the issues and opportunities of interdisciplinarity for the study of gender, communication, and language. So what can we say about interdisciplinarity based on this blog exchange?

Clearly, interdisciplinarity is an elusive concept and a challenging practice. The labels "interdisciplinarity" or "interdisciplinary" may refer to an intellectual perspective, an attribute of scholarship, a way of doing research, or a goal of academic work. Despite calls for definitions, the participants proceeded with implicit understandings of the object of discussion. This taken-for-grantedness deserves further reflection; as Amy Sheldon pointed out, such one word labels "compress complexities." Among these complexities are the ambiguity of interdisciplinarity as a goal and process; the entrenched force of disciplinary power/knowledge claims; the institutional barriers against doing interdisciplinary work; and our implicit assumptions about and commitments to doing interdisciplinary work.

In considering their own interdisciplinary experiences, blog participants identified two trajectories for interdisciplinary work in communication, language, and gender: **collaborative interdisciplinarity** involves collaboration among scholars who share intellectual ground despite different academic affiliations: **integrative studies** was offered as an alternative and perhaps more specific conception. Collaboration is difficult because as scholars, we are indoctrinated into disciplinary identities, protocols, and knowledges. A multidisciplinary approach – bringing different disciplinary representatives into conversation about a common topic – is a feat in itself; yet there was agreement that multidisciplinary falls short of interdisciplinarity. A second trajectory for interdisciplinary work identified by Deborah Cameron is **critical interdisciplinarity** involving feminist critique and challenge to the work in fields that not only do not share social research traditions or commitments but are often antithetical and even antagonistic to feminist perspectives and goals. Different models of the interdisciplinary scholar emerged as well: **collaborating academic partners** personally and professionally dedicated to an interdisciplinary project – realizing



interdisciplinarity as, in Anita Taylor's terms, "a labor-intensive process requiring great quantities of love and energy"; an **interdisciplinary team** comprised of scholars from different disciplines focused on a common topic; the "**super scholar**" who develops expertise in more than one discipline; and the interdisciplinary **feminist critic** who learns the grounds of alien fields in order to engage in feminist critique from within those fields.

Participants agreed that interdisciplinary work requires considerable personal and professional commitment, effort, and expense, in part because institutional support is ambivalent. Universities often extol interdisciplinarity, encouraging interdisciplinary teams and "super scholars" (cf. University of Minnesota). In addition, there are a variety of institutionalized venues – Centers, programs, initiatives, and publications. Such venues might develop organically, emerging out of similar interests and related research among faculty in different disciplines or by institutional dictum in which a center, program, or publication is created for the purpose of bringing scholars from different disciplines together to work interdisciplinarily. Yet there are many institutionalized obstructions to interdisciplinarity, including ill-defined positions and hiring practices (e.g. "cluster hires"), competing demands and affiliations, departmental suspicion and stringent criticism, and lack of professional and institutional recognition and reward.

Participants spoke of roadblocks to interdisciplinarity not only in doing scholarly work but in curriculum and course design, classroom practices, and academic administration. For example, Women's Studies programs may realize interdisciplinarity by including a variety of discipline-specific courses united only through a common focus on gender or sexuality. Interdisciplinarity happens at the level of the individual student's course selections. And while there are team-taught courses that truly integrate disciplinary perspectives, institutional reward and recognition is rarely commensurate with the amount of effort and energy required to design and implement such courses. Even a journal like *Women and Language*, dedicated to interdisciplinary scholarship, has struggled to realize interdisciplinarity. While there have been exemplary issues and articles that demonstrate integrated scholarly work, the journal more often than not publishes multidisciplinary collections. One forum was dedicated to a cautionary tale about the entrenched disciplinary perspectives and protocols in gatekeeping practices like reviewing that resist interdisciplinarity.

Finally, various (often implicit) goals of interdisciplinarity were identified: to stretch beyond our scholarly boundaries toward truly integrative horizons, to nurture alternative perspectives, to mutually enrich our intellectual projects and processes, to advance academic processes of respect and collaboration and, in the case of critical interdisciplinarity, to realize feminist projects of challenge and critique that demand respect across and within disciplinary boundaries. Altogether, the blog evinces both hope for and caution over the potential of

interdisciplinarity to advance the study of communication, language, and gender.

## Appendix: Resources on/for Interdisciplinarity

Victoria L. Bergvall and Patricia Sotirin

This appendix responds to a call among the blog participants for websites and other resources pertaining to interdisciplinarity in academe. Even a brief search online will show that there has been considerable interest in interdisciplinarity in academic programs and scholarly inquiry; hence the following lists should be read as merely a sampling of various academic programs and possibilities, rather than as exhaustive or indicative of the full range of offerings or their quality.

Below, the first list offers the websites of the two primary journals devoted to this area, *Women & Language* and *Gender & Language*, and their associated professional organizations, OSCLG and IGALA. The second list is of Women's Studies programs, departments, and research centers. These listings seemed particularly pertinent to this journal's focus on gender, communication, and language and to this issue's topic. The third list is of websites devoted to research, and the fourth part addresses programmatic and pedagogical opportunities in interdisciplinary studies.

### 1. Women/Gender, Communication/Language

- *Women & Language Journal*  
<http://comm.gmu.edu/research/womenandlanguage.shtml>
- Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender (OSCLG)  
[www.osclg.org](http://www.osclg.org)
- *Gender & Language Journal*  
[www.equinoxjournals.com/ojs/index.php/GL](http://www.equinoxjournals.com/ojs/index.php/GL)
- International Gender and Language Association (IGALA)  
[www.lanacs.ac.uk/fass/organisations/igala/index.htm](http://www.lanacs.ac.uk/fass/organisations/igala/index.htm)

### 2. Women's Studies Programs, Departments, and Research Centers

Several websites compile lists of Women's Studies programs in the U.S. and internationally; many of these appear to be maintained by independent scholars and women's activists and updated periodically although note the lists maintained by Smith College and the University of Maryland. (All sites were accessed 27 June 2008).

- 700+ U.S. Women's Studies sites compiled by Joan Korenman  
<http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/programs.html>
- 415 programs Women's Studies programs in the U.S. compiled by Kate Robinson  
<http://www.artemisguide.com/>

- LGBT/Q (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) programs compiled by John G. Younger <http://www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/lgbtqprogs.html>
- Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals <http://www.lgbtcampus.org/about/>
- Graduate Women's Studies programs compiled by Smith College <http://www.smith.edu/swg/gradlinks.html>
- Women's Studies Database maintained by the University of Maryland <http://www.mith2.umd.edu/WomensStudies/>

### 3. Research on Interdisciplinary Work

Many organizations are beginning to sponsor interdisciplinary research, some with funding. Following are a few sample sites to consult:

- Interdisciplinary Studies Project at Harvard University (Project Zero) online publications on all aspects of interdisciplinary programs (accessed 27 June 2008) [www.pz.harvard.edu/interdisciplinary/index.html](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/interdisciplinary/index.html)
- Integrative Studies Association (accessed 27 June 2008) [www.units.muohio.edu/aisorg/index.shtml](http://www.units.muohio.edu/aisorg/index.shtml)
- The Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship (DPDF), sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, prepares students to address interdisciplinary questions in the humanities and social sciences (accessed 30 June 2008).

### 4. Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate and Undergraduate Degree Programs

Many universities have initiated interdisciplinary degrees or programs: a simple Google search on "interdisciplinary majors in" turns up over 900 possibilities, and "interdisciplinary studies" returns over 1.6 million. Among the manifold permutations of such programs in other U.S. colleges and universities, some are organized as major or minor programs requiring course selections that draw from at least two or three departments, offering hybrid degrees or disciplinary combinations. Other interdisciplinary programs offer individualized programs of study (often requiring students to submit a proposal that organizes course selections around a theme or problem), and others center on particular initiatives. Any list we might provide could only be on the most cursory level, but following are urls for a few programs chosen not as exemplars but simply to illustrate some academic possibilities (all sites accessed 26 September 2008):

- Florida State University "Vision for the Department of Interdisciplinary Humanities" <http://iph.fsu.edu/vision.html>
- MIT Program in Women's and Gender Studies <http://web.mit.edu/wgs/about/>
- University of Arizona's individualized Interdisciplinary Studies Program [www.arizona.edu/degrees/uc-interdisciplinary-studies.php](http://www.arizona.edu/degrees/uc-interdisciplinary-studies.php)
- University of Connecticut's Individualized & Interdisciplinary Studies Program [www.imjr.uconn.edu/](http://www.imjr.uconn.edu/)
- University of Southern California's problem-focused Interdisciplinary Major Program [www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general\\_studies/IDM/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general_studies/IDM/)
- George Mason's Interdisciplinary Studies program offering structured tracks <http://mais.gmu.edu/>

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**Cynthia Berryman-Fink** is Professor of Communication and Affiliate Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Cincinnati. She has published numerous books and articles on gender issues in interpersonal and organizational communication, including *The Manager's Desk Reference* (1989, 1996; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with Charles B. Fink, 2007); *Communication and Sex-Role Socialization* (1993), and *Inter-Act*, 11th ed. (with Kathleen S. Verderber and Rudolph F. Verderber, 2006). She has consulted with dozens of organizations, held university administrative positions including department head, interim dean and vice provost and served as president of the Central States Communication Association. She enjoys teaching, research and writing,

leadership and a well-balanced life. She can be contacted at [cynthia.berryman@uc.edu](mailto:cynthia.berryman@uc.edu).

**Janet Bing** is University Professor of Linguistics at Old Dominion University. Her research areas include phonology, phonetics, language and gender, frame analysis, and humor. She has published numerous book chapters and articles and her work has appeared in such journals as *Discourse and Society* and *Women and Language*. Her books include the co-edited collection, *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice* (with Victoria L. Bergvall and Alice F. Freed, 1996), and *GrammarGuide: English Grammar in Context* (1989). She can be contacted at [jbings@odu.edu](mailto:jbings@odu.edu).

**Deborah Cameron** is Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at Oxford University, and the author of numerous publications dealing with language and gender. Her most recent books include *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* (2008), *The Language and Sexuality Reader* (with Don Kulik, 2006), and *On Language and Sexual Politics* (2006).

**Amy Sheldon** is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota and a member of the Graduate Faculty of the Program in Linguistics. She has published on the interaction between language and gender as it relates to preschoolers' conversations, narrative production, and the representation of speech in print advertising. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Discourse Processes*, *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *Research in Language and Social Interaction*, and in collections such as *The Sociolinguistics of Narrative* (Joanna Thornborrow and Jennifer Coates, Eds., 2005), *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (Deborah Tannen, Ed., 1993), *Gender and Discourse* (Ruth Wodak, Ed., 1998). Her co-edited book, *Feminists Write About Mothering* (with Martha Roth and Maureen T. Reddy, 1994), won a 1995 Minnesota Book Award for non-fiction. She can be contacted at [asheldon@umn.edu](mailto:asheldon@umn.edu).

**Anita Taylor** is Professor Emerita of Communication and Women's Studies at George Mason University, Fairfax VA. She is Editor of *Women and Language*, a past president of the National Communication Association, and has published numerous materials related to gender, language and communication. Her books include *Hearing Many Voices* (co-edited with M. J. Hardman, 2000) and *Gender and Conflict* (co-edited with Judi Beinstein Miller, 1994). She can be contacted at [ataylor@gmu.edu](mailto:ataylor@gmu.edu).

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