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## Conversation Analysis and Gender: Establishing and Challenging the Relevance of Gender in CA Research

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## Conversation Analysis and Gender: Establishing and Challenging the Relevance of Gender in CA Research

### Abstract

In this book review, I addressed the ways that qualitative researchers have examined the links between Conversation Analysis (CA), which often is criticized as a method without context or theory, and the issue of gender. I consider the ways that the editors adopt the controversial position that CA is a politically laden method and that authors extend and challenge existing CA research. I point out the ways that this book both inconsistently connects its chapters and establishes its intended audience, while clearly offering a balanced examination of the ways that gender-in-talk is often relevant but not omnipresent in conversations.

### Keywords

Conversation Analysis, Gender, Qualitative Inquiry

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## Conversation Analysis and Gender: Establishing and Challenging the Relevance of Gender in CA Research

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*In this book review, I addressed the ways that qualitative researchers have examined the links between Conversation Analysis (CA), which often is criticized as a method without context or theory, and the issue of gender. I consider the ways that the editors adopt the controversial position that CA is a politically laden method and that authors extend and challenge existing CA research. I point out the ways that this book both inconsistently connects its chapters and establishes its intended audience, while clearly offering a balanced examination of the ways that gender-in-talk is often relevant but not omnipresent in conversations. Keywords: Conversation Analysis; Gender; Qualitative Inquiry*

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I recognized after the first time that I transcribed using Jeffersonian Conversation Analysis (CA) conventions (Editor's Note: See Gail Jefferson's memorial web site located at <http://www.gail-jefferson.com/index.html> for more information on her approach to transcription) that I had found a method that gave me incredible insight into my participants' talk and my data corpus. However, I chafed at the notion that any research approach could be conducted without being informed by theory and personal notions of the world. Specifically, as a queer feminist researcher, I was both enamored with CA because of all that I learned from the careful and slow process of doing the work and infuriated with the larger implications of any qualitative research approach claiming not to be grounded in particular perspectives and goals.

Many scholars insist that CA "does not set out to prove this or that theory" (Sidnell, 2010, p. 28), and as I worked to refine my CA transcriptions, I appreciated the difference between having a theoretical perspective and setting out to use qualitative data to "prove" a theory. However, a number of researchers approach this distance from theory as the grounds for arguing that CA is atheoretical and without contextual details (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005); that positioning has left many conversation analysts approaching verbal interactions as if there are no societal or theoretical underpinnings. Editors Susan A. Speer and Elizabeth Stokoe assembled *Conversation and Gender* to challenge this notion by specifically contesting that there are times when gender is an undeniable factor in conversation, whether it is explicit or implicit. Editors Speer and Stokoe set the book's tone early, when they state, "CA is already ideologically loaded and relies on the analyst's unacknowledged cultural and commonsense understandings. . . . It is 'imbued with politics'. . . and despite its claims to neutrality, is an example of male dominance and sexism within the academy" (p. 12). Scholars such as Garfinkel (1967) and Cameron (2009) have considered the ways that gender is constructed and performed, and a number of CA scholars argue that one can see these constructions and performances in language study (e.g., Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This book works to consider and expand on those works. Simultaneously, though, the book carefully argues and demonstrates that gender is not always a factor. Throughout each chapter there is a strong acknowledgement that to argue that everything is gendered in CA is just as counterproductive as the stance that nothing is gendered in conversation.

The collection features an Introduction and three parts with three or four chapters each. The collection features noted CA scholars, many of whom regularly consider the implications of gender in their works. Chapter 1: The Introduction notes that, in an effort to examine the controversy of CA in relation to gender, the book's authors present a wide range of approaches and ideologies in an effort to offer varied methods for exploring what counts as gender in CA (p. 26).

Part I is titled "Gender, person reference, and self-categorization." In this section, the chapter authors explore the ways that gender figures into "how people refer to themselves and other people" (p. 17). In Chapter 2, Clare Jackson examines the "gendered 'I'" in light of Schegloff's (1996) claim that the proform "I" is a "reference *simpliciter*" (emphasis in original) that resists gendered identities. Through examples taken from phone conversations, Jackson determines that "I" can be both gender-neutral and, at in other instances, heavily gendered. In Chapter 3, Victoria Land and Celia Kitzinger ~~first~~ reject the notion that a researcher can assume that a speaker's identity as male, female, or gay is sufficient for grounding analysis in gender or sexuality, and the authors instead through considering the ways in which participants achieve categorizations, especially first person categorizations. Chapter 4, by Noa Logan Klein, considers how speakers categorize non-present third parties according to gender. Klein concludes that in order to talk about a person, the speaker must have a gender, but that that need does not imply that gender is problematic for the speaker; she concludes the chapter by considering the implications of the omnirelevance of gender as a natural and binaried category in English.

Part II, titled "Gender, repair and recipient design," looks at the conversational practices of repair and recipient design in relation to gender and the act of gendering talk and people. In Chapter 5, book co-editor Elizabeth Stokoe concludes that speakers clearly understand that there are different ways of referring to women (e.g., "lady" or "girl"), and that different choices have different implications. Sue Wilkinson, in Chapter 6, first establishes what she means by "recipient design" and then considers the ways that even scripted and repeated talk, such as that used by a helpline operator, can still be designed for particular recipients, including designs related to recipients' genders. Chapter 7, by Alexa Hepburn and Jonathan Potter, is slightly different from a number of other chapters, in that the authors challenge the argument that the speech construction "tagging" is necessarily gendered. Their work contests Lakoff's (1975) claim that tag questions (e.g., You're going, **aren't you?**, emphasis added) are feminine in nature, and therefore weaker and more polite than other forms of questioning. The authors conclude that rather than being weaker forms of talk, tags often successfully manipulate recipients through the speakers' clear understandings of the recipients' responses and preferences.

Part III is "Gender and action formation." This section, informed by Schegloff's (2007) discussion of social actions, considers gender's role (or lack of a role) in specific social actions. Chapter 8, by book co-editor Susan A. Speer, examines the role of third party compliments that male-to-female transgender patients report in their efforts to successfully pass as women. Based on Sacks' (1975) discussion of the ways that social protocols prevent people from complimenting themselves, Speer finds that the reported compliments are important elements of the patients' efforts to assert their female status and to "do gender" successfully. In Chapter 9, Jack Sidnell considers the "cultural approach" to language argument made in 1982 by Malta and Borker, which suggested that women and men had specific gendered ways of speaking. Sidnell focuses on a dirty joke that a man tells to three other men and one woman. Sidnell concludes that while the essentialist notion of men and women speaking in particular ways is highly problematic, that the examined talk demonstrates that the heavily gendered joke and the participant interaction seem to rely on stereotypical notions of gender. Chapter 10 features Wayne A. Beach and Phillip Glenn's

discussion of the ways that, in particular interactions, gender roles may be foregrounded or remain in the background of a conversation. In one data set, male college students employ highly sexualized language as they describe a female acquaintance; in the other, a father and son discuss and share the mother's struggle with cancer. In the latter, the authors conclude that the talk is never sexualized but is nonetheless gendered, concluding that gendered talk does not necessarily equate to sexualized talk.

In Part IV, "Gender identities and membership categorization practices," the chapters focus on the ways that participants construct gender through membership categorization. In Chapter 11, Carly W. Butler and Ann Weatherall examine an extended conversation in which a six-year-old boy ("William") adopts a female identity ("Charlotte"), after a female classmate invites him to do so. The authors note the ways that the children use gendered words and categories, such as "boy" and "girl," as well as socially understood characteristics of the categories, such as hair length and voice quality, to construct William as Charlotte. Butler and Weatherall conclude that accomplishing gender is collaborative and verbal, in that Charlotte's existence relies on every child's verbal and social acceptance of Charlotte. Marjorie Harness Goodwin's Chapter 12 examines the ways that children in various settings and age groups use conversation to create gendered membership categories. In addition, while not the focus of the chapter, Goodwin considers the ways that adults monitoring the children (e.g., playground teacher's aide) and the social structures organizing the children (e.g., schools placing children in age- and gender-segregated groups) contribute to the categories. In Chapter 13, Angela Cora Garcia and Lisa M. Fisher examine divorce mediations as data that demonstrate the ways that participants can create gender inequality through language and categorization. An important point is that participants can "do gender" without explicitly discussing gender. Chapter 14, the final chapter of the book, as there is no Conclusion due to the detailed Introduction, considers ethnomethodology and CA as methods for considering ways that gender is a social and cultural practice in daily life. Jakob Cromdal examines children's playground interactions and finds that the children's language often reinforces gender stereotypes while accomplishing gender stereotypes through social actions.

As a whole, this book offers important and balanced discussions on how prevalent gender is in talk, while reminding readers that in focusing on language, every conversation is not necessarily gendered. In addition, in an effort to offer a variety of viewpoints, the collection offers some authors who unquestionably embrace the controversial concept of Feminist Conversation Analysis (e.g., Goodwin and Jackson), while others avoid the term and instead work to offer CA as a means of analyzing and discussing gender, sometimes in relation to other methods such as MCA and EM. Authors present a wide array of data, including natural conversation, research interviews, and television programs, as well as a range of discussions. Some chapters seek to advance existing literature, for example, while others work to challenge earlier research.

Throughout the collection, perhaps due to the wide variety of authors and topics, it is often difficult to tell for what type of researcher the book is intended. There seems to be a mismatch of levels, in terms of what authors do or do not explain. For example, Chapter 6 offers a detailed discussion of recipient design but uses other CA terms, such as "proform" and "TCU," with little or no elaboration. It is not clear if the book is working to make the chapters accessible for beginners, or if it is solely intended for those already familiar with CA terminology and research. In addition, though an edited collection, the chapters do not seem consistently connected, beyond the topics of conversation and gender. Though there is noticeable overlap of information between many chapters, with individual authors referring to the same resources or offering similar arguments in their sections, only Chapter 5 presents references to the arguments made in sections of the book. If the point is for each chapter to stand alone, then most could, but because a single chapter does make use of the information

found elsewhere in the work, it is unclear if the intent had been for there to be more communication between the authors' sections.

However, reading this book was a relief to me. It reassured me that I could use a method that I value while maintaining my participants' and my own contexts and identities in the research. The collection offers important, varied, and balanced considerations of the ways that conversation does construct gender, and given that CA is often criticized for being too mechanical and removed from contexts and issues such as gender (Sidnell, 2010), this book offers a careful and thoughtful array of ways that CA may advance considerations of gender, and potentially other issues in talk. *Conversation and Gender* was essential to me, not only in reading more scholarship related to both conversation analysis and gender, but in having access to thoughtful applications of CA within the context of gender issues. This book would not appeal to those who advocate for "pure" and "theoryless" CA, but for those who want to read examples of studies using CA, to consider arguments both extending and challenging previous assertions in the field, or to contemplate the ways that CA is far more than the mechanical method it is often assumed to be, this book is a great resource. And for me, an inspiration.

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