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**Re-theorising gender: Bakhtin's notions of monoglossia and heteroglossia as applied to gender productions in classroom environments**

Becky Francis
*Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom*

## Background

The development of an analysis of gender which avoids conflations with sex, but which also acknowledges the powerful role of embodiment in gender production, has tantalised gender theorists ever since the elaboration of accounts of gender as socially produced (e.g. Oakley, 1972; West & Zimmerman, 1987). While some commentators are concerned that social constructionist conceptions of gender as a performance insufficiently acknowledge the impact of embodiment on experiences and readings of gender (e.g. Paechter, 2006; Messerschmidt, 2009), others have critiqued the slippage back to sexed bodies underlying various apparently social constructionist analyses of gendered behaviour. The approach most frequently identified for this latter type of criticism is that of multiple 'masculinities' and 'femininities' (Connell, 1995). Here productions of masculinity and femininity are seen to be diverse, yet as MacInnes (1998) observes, tend to be read as inevitably tied to the 'appropriate' sexed body; with boys/men producing different 'types' of masculinity, and girls/women producing different sorts of femininity. Clearly, if sex is always the underlying categoriser of gender, we fall back to an essentialist position eschewed by many feminists (Hawkesworth, 1997).

Such essentialist problematics have been exploded by poststructuralist approaches to gender, most notably by Judith Butler's work, which understands both sex and gender as discursively produced by binary gender discourses that inscribe bodies according to a (false) duality (Butler, 1990). Her account has lent theoretical tools to a range of research analysing gender as uncoupled from the body, perhaps most notably the work of Judith Halberstam (1998; 1999), whose work on 'masculinity without men' queers the perception of gender as characterising the domains of exclusively sexed physical bodies.

Yet such approaches have not been without their criticisms (see, e.g. Paechter, 2006; Connell, 2008). Debate has been extensive, and cannot be fully rehearsed here, but such debate contextualises my endeavour to explore alternative conceptualisations of gender that avoid essentialism while acknowledging the impact of the body, and social structures, in gender production. Increasingly, I have drawn on the work of Bakhtin (1981) to realise these desires (Francis, 2008; Francis et al, 2010). His conceptions of monoglossia and heteroglossia have appeared particularly pregnant for application to gender. The paper seeks to elucidate thisperspective, by demonstrating and comparing analysis of empirical classroom data according to Halberstam's conceptions of 'female masculinity' (and male femininity), and the conception of gender monomglossia and heterogossia, in an endeavour to contribute to gender theory.

## Research Questions

The paper seeks to:

a) outline Bakhtin's concepts of monoglossia and heteroglossia

b) apply them to gender

c) illustrate their application to data on gender performance generated from classroom research

d) compare such application to the application of Halberstamian analysis of 'female masculinity/male femininity', arguing that the application of notions of gender heteroglossia facilitate a more accurate and nuanced account of gender performance.

**Methods**

The data is drawn from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project (RES062230462), which sought to explore the gender subjectivities of high achieving pupils[i]. It focused on high achieving pupils in Year 8 (12-13 year olds). In line with current educational policy, 'high achievement' was defined as expressed by educational credentials[ii]. The qualitative research was conducted across nine co-educational state schools, including an even representation of rural, suburban and urban schools from Southern England. In each (top stream) class involved, between 6-8 pupils were identified, ensuring an even gender representation. The final sample included 71 pupils: 36 girls, 35 boys; of whom 62 are White and nine are from other ethnic groups. Using parental occupation and residence (postcode) as indicators, 39 pupils were from middle class and 23 from working class backgrounds, with 9 pupils unassigned. Around half of those pupils included in the sample were also identified as popular with peers. This latter group were identified via an exercise with pupils to establish popularity.

'Popularity' is a complex and slippery concept; both in its actual meaning, and in perspective. In order to address this complexity, all pupils in identified top stream classes were asked to complete a short survey on popularity in their class, which approached the concept in different ways; and via analysis of which, popular pupils were identified[iii].

Classroom observation was conducted in each school to document the interaction taking place, focusing on the behaviours of those children identified as high achieving. Each class was tracked through different lessons for a full school day, with supplementary observation notes taken at break and lunchtimes. Semi-structured, individual interviews were then undertaken with the identified pupils. Interview recordings were fully transcribed, and names used are pseudonyms. The qualitative analysis has involved content analysis and Foucauldian analysis of discourse (Burman and Parker, 1993).

[i] Title: 'The Gendered Subjectivities of High Achieving Pupils'. Project team: Becky Francis (Principal Investigator, Roehampton University), Christine Skelton (Co-applicant, University of Birmingham), and Barbara Read (Roehampton University).

[ii] Albeit the project team do not subscribe to the view that achievement should be conceived so narrowly.

[iii] This involved all pupils undertaking a brief survey in which they were asked a range of indicative questions including 'Which student do you most like in your class?' 'Which student would other people say is most popular?', and 'Which student would you most like to be like?'

**Frame**

The paper is contextualised by debates in feminist theory and gender studies around the construction of gender and relationship (if any) to bodies (see Background section, above). It explores two theoretical perspectives - Halberstam's (1998) conception of female masculinity ('masculinity without men'); and Bakhtin's (1981) work, especially his conceptions of monoglossia and heteroglossia in language. The paper will elaborate my application of these latter concepts to gender, and why I see this as especially productive for gender analysis (and potentially, for analysis of other aspects of social identity). My arguments will be illustrated by use of classroom data on gender performance, comparing the possibilities of the different theoretical lenses.

It seems important to explain that in evoking 'sex' in this article (i.e. via allusion to 'girls' and 'boys'), sex difference is here conceived as discursively produced (Butler, 1990; 1993). Yet I assert the need to retain such distinction as a point of analysis to facilitate identification of continuing discrimination and inequality according to 'sex' (Soper, 1990; Francis, 2008b). It would be most accurate to refer to 'those discursively constructed as male' in place of 'boys/men', and 'those discursively constructed as female' in the female case; yet this is extremely clumsy, hence I have retained traditional terminology, with this explainer.

**Research findings**

Conceptual means of analysis of gender as 'disembodied' are tested in the paper, in relation to data from secondary school pupils. The concept of 'female masculinity/male femininity' is applied with some success, but is shown to be applicable only to a very small minority of pupils, and strong problematics emerge in the practice of such applications. The conception of gender monoglossia and heteroglossia appeared to effectively reflect the behaviours of a much wider range of pupils, as well as being able to explain how macro constructions of gender monoglossia are maintained in spite of heteroglossic practice at a micro level.

Although the problem of distinguishing characteristics as masculine or feminine may be said to beset the concept of gender monoglossia as well as female masculinity, the former position better allows for recognition that even apparently straight-forward delineations turn out on closer inspection to be fluid and inconsistent, incorporating contradiction, and readable as associated with different genders depending on the specific circumstances and associated discourses (Francis, 2008). Hence gender heteroglossia operates within the individual gender 'attributes', as well as within individual performances, and more broadly within the whole (apparently monoglossic) system of gender. As I argue elsewhere, this theoretical position addresses a tension in feminist analysis that has arisen between discourse analytic, 'disembodied' (micro) analysis of gender-transgressive behaviours, and analysis of continued gender distinction and discrimination (Connell, 2008). The conceptual tools of gender monoglossia and heteroglossia facilitate a marrying of these two positions: we may see patterns of gendered behaviours and inequalities as expressive of monoglossic gender practice, but within this be attuned to the complexity and contradiction at play (heteroglossia), both in the diversity of gender production, and in our categorisation of it. It is this attunedness to heteroglossia that offers potential for disruption and the avoidance of reification of gender norms, and the exposure of gender as discursively produced rather than inherent. Meanwhile, the recognition and continued analysis of monoglossic gender practices retains the possibility of broader analysis of inequity. Such simultaneous recognition of the power of the monoglossic account of gender also allows us to retain analysis of how this system renders 'unintelligable' lives 'unliveable' (Butler, 2004), and the continuing impact of the corporeal, discursively-sexed body on the discursive possibilities available to us.