

# POINT/COUNTERPOINT

In this department, CP invites discussion of reviews and of books reviewed. Typically, contributions are limited to half the space of the text criticized. CP edits letters in accordance with APA guidelines for style and expression.

Manuscripts should be sent in triplicate, double-spaced, and identified as contributions to Point/Counterpoint (to distinguish them from letters for the Editor's eyes only). Please include a suggested title.

## In praise of disagreement

As a long time reader of and reviewer for *Contemporary Psychology*, I am concerned about the tone and focus of Michele Tomarelli's recent review of Mary Crawford's book *Talking Difference* (CP, 1997, 42, 19–21). Ironically, as revealed by the language of the review, the reviewer's sexist and antifeminist biases appear to have prevented her from giving the book a fair hearing. She notes, for example, that Crawford has been influenced by what has come to be called "feminist theory" (p. 19) and suggests that the book is written for only a "small band of readers." She further suggests that the book is likely to offend feminists who dislike science and scientists who dislike feminism (p. 20). The reader is led to infer that only a small group of people exist who, like myself, value both viewpoints.

The probability of giving offense is not a relevant scholarly criterion for evaluating the merits of the book. This is particularly true for a book like *Talking Difference* that examines its target area from a multidisciplinary focus. One would expect that such a juxtaposition would produce controversy that would stimulate dialogue across fields. And, one would hope that most scholars are "thick-skinned" enough to learn from clashing paradigms. A juxtaposition of views can generate light as well as heat. After all, if we all agree with each other, what would be the point of writing most books?

Rhoda K. Unger  
Brandeis University

## Clearly talking to many

Michele Marie Tomarelli's recent review (CP, 1997, 42, 19–21) of Mary Crawford's book *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language* effectively highlights many of the excellent aspects and important contributions of Crawford's landmark book. Tomarelli's detailed review also raises interesting questions and critiques. However,

I was puzzled by two themes Tomarelli adopts in her review. The first theme is introduced with the question posed in the review title: "Talking difference, but to whom?" According to Tomarelli, the answer is that this "worthwhile" book is written with a "very narrow audience in mind" and that "Crawford writes for only a small band of readers who are radical enough to criticize social science as an inadequate, sexism-riddled endeavor, but not so radical as to reject it entirely" (p. 19). The second theme, present in the closing metaphor of a "thorny bush" with "good fruit" (p. 21), is made vivid by the statement: "traditional, quantitative psychological researchers, especially male ones, need a tough hide to read this book" (p. 20).

Small band? Tough hide? I don't think so. I am a cognitive research psychologist and I am assigning *Talking Difference* as required reading—indeed, the central text—in a graduate seminar I am teaching on language, gender, and cognition in which students from cognitive, social, and clinical psychology, as well as participants from other disciplines (including music history and philosophy) come together to discuss the central issues raised by a sophisticated analysis of language and gender. In the seminar we go beyond the popular questions focusing on gender difference to an understanding of the complex interplay of language, cognition, and social inequality. That is, we are considering not just whether women and men use language differently, but the more mechanistic question of how do facts about gender representation in language impact cognition and ultimately social behavior?

One of the stated objectives of my graduate seminar is to "articulate a scientific psychology research agenda" in this area, and it is for this reason more than any other that I have selected Crawford's book for the seminar. *Talking Difference* discusses and evaluates many approaches to gender and language evenhandedly. It is well-written, scholarly, and analytic at multiple levels. It addresses an important and big set of issues of relevance to scholars and scientists in a variety of disciplines, including experimental and quantitative research psychologists. I am thus puzzled by the implication that the audience is limited to a "small band" of feminist social scientists (and as an aside, I am puzzled by the implication that feminist social scientists form any sort of "band," and, band or not, I am also puzzled by the implication that feminist social scientists are "small" in number). I am even more puzzled

by the implication that traditional psychological researchers, "especially male ones," need a "tough hide" to read this book. This book is not a polemic, but a well-written, well-researched, and well-considered contribution to the scientific study of language and gender.

Jennifer J. Freyd  
University of Oregon

## Not a piece of esoterica

It would be a shame if psychologists were dissuaded from reading Mary Crawford's *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language* by the idiosyncratic and muddled review in CP (1997, 42, 19–21). The review erroneously characterizes the book as a piece of esoterica, mistaking its social constructionist approach as the province of a "small band" of "radical feminists." But social constructionism—formally stated by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966 and introduced widely to psychology by Kenneth Gergen in 1985—is neither new, nor narrow, nor radical, nor even distinctly feminist. Several journals (including *New Ideas in Psychology*, *Theory and Psychology*, *Philosophical Psychology*, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, *Feminism and Psychology*) routinely publish work in a social constructionist vein; an entire Sage book series is devoted to it.

"Traditional research psychologists" (p. 19), the review further asserts, are uninterested in ideas outside the field, and even unable to comprehend them, faltering over words like "discourse" and "privilege." (Parenthetically, two of my undergraduate classes read *Talking Difference* without difficulty.) Can it be true that most psychologists, apart from a "very narrow" subset, regard ideas from other disciplines only as "thorns" and "brambles?" If so, this insularity is sure to stifle innovative thought; at worst, such intellectual incest may breed imbecility.

Crawford's interdisciplinary vantage point enables her to undertake a nuanced and insightful examination of the multilayered and sometimes contradictory effects of psychologists' efforts to produce social change. The review deems this crucial reflection "unfair," insisting that any reasoned program should be applauded. Consider, however, H. H. Goddard and other psychologists who contributed the tools of intelligence testing to the anti-immigrationist and eugenics movements of the teens and twenties. No doubt they saw their efforts as a reasoned program that would preserve American so-