

Book Review: Griffin, Cindy L., *Beyond Gender Binaries: An Intersectional Orientation to Communication and Identities*, Oakland, California University Press, 2020, 320 pp., ISBN: 9780520297289.

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Cindy L. Griffin's book *Beyond Gender Binaries: An Intersectional Orientation to Communication and Identities* explores intersectionality, asking what it does to communication and how it can be used to unpack privileges. The aim of the book is to improve communication by utilizing feminist and intersectional lenses on differences in our lives as human beings. According to Griffin, "Understanding privilege, and learning to communicate about it, prevents us from ignoring or denying our differences" (p. 52). By becoming more informed about intersectionality, Griffin argues, we become better communicators and learn to talk about our differences "with respect, interest, and agency" (ibid.). Although being mainly US-focused, the topics in the book are topical also in other countries. In its twelve chapters, the book discusses identity, discourses of rights, the impact of privilege in communication, personhood and citizenship, safety in public and private spaces, sexual violence, bullying and violence in schools, workplace injustices, hegemony and structures of power, colonization, and communication with feminist and intersectional lenses. The book thus resonates strongly with current discourses within and beyond the USA, and provides tools to think through and with them, keeping a focus on communication, power relations, and intersectional thinking. Formatted as a textbook with lists of keywords, definitions and assignments, the intended audience of the book are "students of gender and of communication" (p. 6).

The book has important and respectful goals, and it covers an impressively wide range of contemporary topics. However, some of its aspects require more critical exploration. Griffin makes

a communicative distinction between hostile challenge and helpful correction, in which correcting is seen as a practice of caring, and as such, an essential part of communication (pp. 282–285). In this light, I offer my critique on matters and details that I consider require further discussion or clarification, doing this as an act of caring towards the future readers and teachers of the book – and arguing that these details are central when aspiring towards respectful and intersectional communication.

As a gender studies scholar educated in queer studies and trans studies, I would have expected more attention to be paid, as the title of the book suggests, to what lies beyond gender binaries in terms of gender. As it stands, the book’s message encourages readers to be mindful of intersecting differences in addition to the binary category of gender, such as race, class, sexuality and (dis)ability, which is, of course, a much-needed goal in itself. However, elsewhere, and particularly in trans studies and activism, moving beyond the gender binary means doing so within the category of gender itself. In Griffin’s book, the discussion on non-binary genders and gender non-conformity remains rather thin, and thus the book could have been better served with another, a more fitting title.

As an underlying theme of the book, Griffin calls for more civil communication. According to Griffin, “When we are civil, we don’t need to agree. Instead, we make a commitment to listen to people with identities much different from our own.” (p. 88). Despite the good intentions of Griffin’s advocacy for civil communication, there is a certain danger of relativism underneath: as if everything people say would and should be equally respected, regardless of how hurtful the discussion might be for the marginalized parties. Following the critique of tone policing as a form of microaggression (e.g. Nuru & Arendt 2019), I suggest that the demand for civility is rather

different for the privileged and the marginalized, and as such, a theme that could have been addressed in the book explicitly.

Language is in constant development in trans communities, activism and scholarship, and at times Griffin's vocabulary on trans issues seems outdated. For example, there has been a shift away from the formulation of "preferred pronouns" used by Griffin (p. 183) to simply "pronouns". Dropping the word "preferred" emphasizes that pronouns are not a mere preference but real and valid, "they are what they are" (LeMaster 2020). Somewhat ironically, when writing about the importance of using correct pronouns, the book also misgenders a person quoted in it (pp. 182–183), demonstrating thus in an unfortunate manner that correct pronoun use does indeed matter in respectful communication.

Although Griffin wisely emphasizes the importance of avoiding single-story narratives when talking about diverse and intersecting identities (p. 4), the textbook format with lists of definitions and instructions seems occasionally to work against this aim. When providing lists, the book offers single-story definitions and instructions par excellence. For instance, the book's definition of queer (p. 19) fails to mention its ambiguous and indefinable nature and groups it together with definitions focusing on gender and separates it from those referring to sexuality, failing thus to address its inherent multiplicity and association "primarily with non-normative desires and sexual practices" (Love 2014). This makes it thus appear more limited than how it is actually used in queer communities and academic research. Griffin's insistence on the formulation "queer-identified" (instead of simply "queer") also strikes me as odd, especially when other identity categories do not seem to require the same suffix (e.g. the straights are referred to as straight, not straight-identified).

Additionally, in a “Communication Checklist for Inclusive Language” (p. 191), the book gives fixed instructions on language use in matters that are, in fact, under critique and discussion in their respective communities. For instance, when instructing readers to “[p]ut people first” when talking about disabilities, the book ignores the ongoing debate between identity-first language and person-first language in disabled communities (e.g. Andrews 2020), in which the former is often seen as more respectful than the latter. Likewise, when instructing to avoid the word fat as a “negative word that can feel shaming” and suggesting to “use body-positive descriptors that are neutral like *large*, *big*, *robust*” (ibid., italics in the original), the book disregards the longstanding reclamation of the word fat in fat activism and fat studies (e.g. Harjunen 2009). While the rather simplified list format may be useful for students studying for an exam, I would welcome a more critical and nuanced analysis of definitions and instructions provided, emphasizing their complexity and the fact that defining people and their identities (or providing instructions for communication based on those identities) is not a neutral, straightforward nor easy task. Instead, definitions and vocabularies around our identities and differences are living constructs that keep changing along with research and – importantly – everyday life and activism within the variety of communities under discussion.

As a textbook, the book also provides assignments in each chapter, titled as “Guide to Communication”, encouraging readers to reflect on what they have learned. While this reflection can be conducted privately, the assignments also explicitly encourage group discussion and shared activities. Thus, it is worth noting that some of the assignments seem better to fit students with privileged identities, with no fear of marginalization happening in the classroom. For instance, the strictures to “[i]dentify the terms you would use to describe your own gender and sexuality”, to consider “[h]ow important do you feel these nonbinary terms are” and to have an “invitational rather than argumentative” discussion with someone who “felt different than you about their importance” (p. 23), can easily lead into stigmatizing and draining discussions for queer and trans

students – not all of whom may be out or feel comfortable discussing (or having to defend) their identities in a classroom. When assigning the class to communicate, I wish the teachers using this textbook to be mindful of the power relations and hierarchies between different identities – which the book in itself discusses in great depth – and to choose the communicative assignments wisely.

Despite these points of critique, Griffin’s book has value as an introductory textbook to intersectional thinking, diverse identities and communication. It is at its best when educating the privileged about their privileges and when describing the various ways communication would benefit from intersectional thinking. Griffin’s aspiration to communicative clarity makes the book reader-friendly and easily approachable yet leads to occasional over-simplifications as mentioned above. It would serve the students best if read critically along with texts from queer studies, trans studies, disability studies, and black studies.

References

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