Interview with Sara Mills

Conducted by Isabelle van der Bom

Editor of the *Journal of Language and Discrimination*, Dr Isabelle van der Bom, in conversation with Sara Mills, Emeritus Professor in Linguistics at Sheffield Hallam University. Professor Sara Mills' research has mainly focused on gender and feminism and politeness.

Isabelle: Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. I have a number of questions for you about your research, the *Journal of Language and Discrimination* and your career in academia.

I don't think your work needs an introduction; you have made significant contributions to numerous fields, including Language and Gender and the field of Politeness research. Although you have worked across a number of diverse areas, one thing that strikes me is that you have always argued consistently for more nuance in how we should analyse discourse, away from broad patterns and/or generalisations and for individual variation. Is this also something that you would agree with, and that you feel is also necessary in the field of language and discrimination?

Sara: In essence, I think it is important to hang on to both the broader areas and generalisations while not losing sight of the possibility of individual variation. In issues such as discrimination, we are discriminated against on the basis of a supposed shared membership of a group, which very often does not feel as if it is something that we ourselves would have chosen. When I am labelled as a woman or as feminine, I always feel a slight disjunct between others' perceptions of me *as* a woman, and my own perceptions

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of what it feels like to be human. While I am absolutely a feminist through and through, and I support women's rights in every context, when I am identified as a woman, rather than anything else, I have great difficulty with that, simply because of my perceptions of what people think a woman is and the reasons for people identifying me as a woman. Very often, identifying someone as a member of a group is intimately linked with discrimination. Within the group 'women' there are very few shared characteristics, apart from discrimination, and therefore it is difficult to work with these broad generalisations. However, I also have difficulties with the notion of individual variation as that seems to play into the 'but we are all different' individualism ideology, which for me is retrograde. We all experience within the Western context as if we were unique, but this has not always seemed the most productive way to conceptualise subjectivity or selfhood. I feel we need to be able to hold generalisations and individual variation critically.

Isabelle: Looking back at your career, what would you say were pivotal moments that shaped your work in its early stages?

Sara: Reading feminist theory was pivotal, as was reading art theorists such as John Berger, but to be honest the most important moment for me was living outside the UK for about seven years. Living in Arab countries and francophone countries forced me to re-evaluate English perspectives on civilisation, gender, politics, selfhood and also European perspectives. Post-colonial theory developed from within a francophone and African perspective made a huge impact on me, and enabled me to think of British colonialism and imperialism within a global context, rather than just from the perspective of Raj nostalgia.

Isabelle: Which areas of research do you find most important today? How do they differ, if they do, from your research interests in the past?

Sara: I have broadened my research interests into the issues of environmentalism, poverty, food waste and sustainability. As well as still being interested in linguistic politeness and feminist linguistics, I am interested in community activism. I have become slightly disillusioned with academic publishing, particularly the drive to publish led by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which has resulted in academics producing research papers in

a production line mode. I feel we need to take a step back and consider why we are publishing and who we are writing for; in the 1970s feminist standpoint theory argued that we should be clear about the *point* of research – whose lives we would impact with our work, what would change. I feel feminist linguistics could benefit from revisiting its roots in standpoint theory and having clearer goals about changing society.

Isabelle: How has the notion of discrimination come into your research?

Sara: Discrimination is obviously key to feminist research and is at the heart of our need to research – when individuals and groups are treated unfairly, it must drive us to take action. This must be at the basis of all of our research, publications and action. However, we need also to be aware of the complex ways in which discrimination works and the difficulty in combating it. Calling out someone on their discriminatory practices does not necessarily bring that discrimination to an end, nor does it necessarily enhance your status if you are then considered to be the victim of discrimination. Furthermore, we need to be aware of the multiple ways in which discrimination works – on the grounds of disability, race, age, sexuality and so on. It is precisely this complexity which has informed my work.

Isabelle: Which are areas where you think we could improve, or that require further research?

Sara: I feel we need to map out a range of strategies which can be used by individuals or groups who are being discriminated against. That is what is lacking in research at the moment. In the 1980s, we felt that it was enough to ensure that institutions had policy documents on gender and language to ensure that discrimination against women was curbed, and these policy documents did make an enormous impact and forced many people who had not considered their practices to be sexist to re-evaluate the way they behaved. However, those policy documents often do not exist any longer and we feel as if we have no need of such policies, but we do not have policies in place which deal with sexism and other forms of discrimination. Discrimination is often not as direct and blatant as it was, and just as we needed in the past to make those indirect forms of discrimination plainly visible, we need to find a way to pressure institutions and individuals to critically think

about their behaviour and their practices. We also need to help individuals and groups to consider ways of combating discrimination within the workplace.

Isabelle: From your perspective – whether that's in terms of discipline, country or research tradition – what are some of the key empirical, theoretical and/or methodological challenges currently facing language and discrimination/language, discrimination and gender research?

Sara: A great deal of the research on discrimination is inspired by Judith Butler's approach and the notion that one is interpellated by discriminatory language. This leads to the notion that all one has to do is to refuse that interpellation to combat discriminatory language having an effect on you as an individual. This seems to me to be in dire need of rethinking. Clearly, any language which positions you as a member of a stigmatised group needs to be tackled institutionally rather than the focus being on the recipient. So I feel that we need to consider ways in which we can influence institutions and their practices, and hence the individuals who work in the institutions. Once there is change at that institutional level, it will have impact on individuals.

Isabelle: Speaking of language and discrimination, what compelled you to set up the journal?

Sara: Along with my co-editors, we all felt that there was a burning need to consider discriminatory practices across the board rather than researchers working in silos, without having those interdisciplinary conversations which are so important for moving research along. Discussions with colleagues whose work is on racism and on disability has allowed us to see that, although discrimination does not always work in exactly the same way, the differences between discrimination against people on the grounds of race or sexuality are largely in terms of the way these are historically dealt with institutionally, rather than there being something intrinsically different between sexism, racism and homophobia. It was in order to foster that kind of interdisciplinary discussion that we decided to establish this journal, so that we could all read about research on sexism, disability discourse, racism and responses to those forms of discrimination.

Isabelle: My next question is about women in higher education, and specifically women in leadership positions. Statistics show that although there are more women in UK universities than ever before, they are underrepresented in leadership positions. *The Guardian* and *Times Higher Education* have drawn attention to this repeatedly in the past few years. Why do you think it's so hard for women in academia to climb the career ladder, and do you have any advice for them and others that are underrepresented in academic leadership roles?

Sara: It is vital for women to take up these positions and to put themselves forward for promotion. But it is also vital for institutions to have forward-thinking practices in relation to the promotion of women to leadership positions. There need to be strategies at an institutional level; several institutions that I have worked for have set up mentoring schemes to encourage women to apply for professorships, to talk through applications for promotion with women and enable them to highlight their strengths on the applications. That does not mean that I consider women naturally modest, but that institutions tend to encourage women not to consider their experience to be of value; it is important that female academics are schooled in the gender-specific nature of the institution and the race-specific nature of the institution, so that they can both bring their own experiences and qualifications into the limelight, but also so that they can see and promote their value within the context of a masculinist institution. Throughout the university, managers need to be trained to recognise the particular skills that women staff bring to the institution, and to encourage them to apply for promotion. At the moment, this is not happening sufficiently; there needs to be structural change to encourage women to see leadership positions as being 'theirs' in the way that the majority of male academics do.