Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable

By E. Zerubavel (2018)

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 142pp.

Reviewed by Sara Mills

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On the flyleaf of this book, it states that this is 'A little book about a very big idea'. This is indeed a very short book (ninety-eight pages of body text), but what surprised me was that the big idea is, in fact, a fairly simple one which was researched extensively in the field of gender and queer studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Very little of this research is referenced here, nor is the current research in these fields referenced. The 'very big idea' is that many terms can be split into those which are marked and those which are unmarked; this is not an equal relationship since one of the terms is generally represented as being the normal and the other one is represented as abnormal. The examples that Zerubavel gives are ones which have been thoroughly analysed by feminist and queer theorists, for example 'football' and 'women's football'; 'nurse' and 'male nurse' and those terms which have no real binary equivalent, for example 'openly gay', 'career women' and 'working mother'. Zerubavel is a sociologist venturing into the field of linguistics, and he unfortunately has not done the necessary research in current linguistics in order to be able to report on work on marked and unmarked. Surprisingly, Zerubavel even states that there is a 'paucity of studies on taken for grantedness' (p. 9). Where he does refer to linguistics he gives no references at all, for example stating 'linguists call this a lexical gap' (p. 9), but does not state which linguists. The feminist linguistic work that is referenced in this book is largely very outdated, some of it dating from the 1970s (for example, Bodine and de Beauvoir). To not include the work of feminist linguists such as Deborah Cameron, Penelope Eckert and

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Sally McConnel-Ginet seems absurd when you consider just how much these theorists have contributed to the analysis of binary terms in relation to gender.

The index reflects this lack of reference to current research; thus 'feminism' has one mention and 'women' and 'queer' none; whereas 'men's writing', 'men's literature', 'men's studies' and 'men candidates' have several entries. It seems as if the book itself is replicating the very binary opposition that Zerubavel is arguing that he would like to overturn or unsettle. There are many more male theorists referred to throughout the book, which is surprising given the wealth of research that there has been in this area by women theorists. Indeed, French feminist theory of the 1990s (Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous) was almost exclusively focused on this very issue of unequal binary oppositions, but these theorists are not referenced at all. The book serves a useful purpose in that it brings together a focus on terms which refer to gender and those which refer to race. But even here the examples which are given are often used on multiple occasions (Barak Obama being classified as Black rather than White is mentioned twice; openly gay versus openly straight is mentioned four times) and reference to current research on these terms is scant. Zerubavel states, 'I made considerable efforts while writing the book to avoid as much as possible taking my own default assumptions for granted' (p. xi). However, the way to ensure that one does not remain constricted by one's own preconceptions is to read current research which has been written by those who have a different perspective to your own. This is particularly important if you are writing as a white male. He argues: 'we are far more surprised that somebody is gay than to find out that he is straight' (p. 15). I would like to take issue with this particularly, since it depends on the social context within which one situates oneself. Perhaps Zerubavel is surprised to find someone is gay, but in my social circles, straight people are very much the surprise. Similarly, we do not need to assume that 'gay' refers to a male. Again, Zerubavel seems to have fallen into the trap of assuming the white male is the norm against which all are judged, despite this being the focus of the argument of his book.

Zerubavel takes a most unorthodox approach to statistical analysis of the distribution of binary opposites. For example, he argues that the word 'bisexual' is statistically part of a binary pair with 'monosexual' (a term which does not exist in English dictionaries). He then does a Google search and finds that bisexual is used more. What his study does not grasp is that there are some terms which are not simply in binary opposition with another term. Bisexual is one of the clearest cases of this, where bisexual is not a clear opposite to gay or to heterosexual. This book is not able to deal

with any of the complex relations between words and concepts which are not binary.

There are some interesting examples of rewriting binaries and revalorising one of the terms; for example the use of the terms 'vanilla sex', 'equal marriage' and 'neurotypical'. But all of these examples need reference to feminist, queer and disabled rights activists' campaigning on these terms, which has led to the revision. What is also left out is the sense of current campaigns around transgender issues and racial issues in relation to casting in films; for example when white actors are cast in Asian roles, and when straight actors are cast in transgender roles. The extensive research on the use of masculine, feminine and inclusive pronouns and titles is similarly not included for discussion.

The book is written for a popular market, but that should not prevent the author from engaging with the extensive research which has been done on this subject. It is a great pity that such an opportunity has been lost to produce a popular book on the real complexities of binary terms.