

Reproducing gendered violence through discourse: a comment on LSE Student Union's newspaper, the Beaver



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The latest print issue of *The Beaver*, the LSE Student Union's newspaper, includes a column of love advice for men entitled *Houghton Street Headaches*. The column is made up of degrading and potentially dangerous "Advice on keeping your girl in check and dealing with less attractive females", including the exhortation to remember that "it's not rape if you shout surprise", and "approaching intercourse with a more feisty (or fisty) attitude will certainly keep your hands full", as well as encouragement for men to engage in specific, non-consensual violent sex acts. The two editors of the paper are protecting the identity of the anonymous columnist(s) and refusing calls by the Women's Group of the Student Union to step down.

One would think that a paper that purports to represent the LSE student body has a responsibility to prohibit hate speech towards half of its members. However, it seems that both the writer(s) of the column and the paper's editors have neglected to think critically about the power of discourse to affect the way in which we see and perpetuate human relationships.

Discourse is not just talk without consequence—the discourse around an issue determines our social responses and actually *produces* what we come to understand as real. It gives us the words and conceptual frameworks by which we attempt to understand ourselves and our experiences as well as the larger world. It determines what can be said and even what can be thought.

Michel Foucault is generally considered the philosopher to have best articulated the concept of discourse. He pointed out that in modern and postmodern democratic societies where power is executed mostly through the control of attitudes and beliefs rather than through force, discourse plays a key role in constituting reality—as he said, discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak... they constitute them". Discourses are created and disseminated through *representations*, which in our society are generated almost entirely by the media, which includes publications like LSE's Student Union newspaper. Over time these representations and the discourses they create become the normalised patterns of thought on an issue, and appear to be the way things have always been—even though they are often propagated to serve certain interests. In the case of *The Beaver*, the column risks reproducing the idea of women as subservient objects on which to vent anger and insecurity.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu similarly wrote about the dynamics of power relations in shaping discourse in his theory of *symbolic violence*, the subtle imposition of a way of viewing the world which makes the existing social order appear as just, and his formulation of the *habitus*—the unconscious internalisation of these acquired dominant values. He contended that we then reproduce the systems of our own domination by acting out these internalized belief structures. Symbolic violence is in some ways much more powerful than physical violence because it is embedded in our very structures of thought and resulting actions, giving legitimacy to a social order that is often deliberately unjust.

Bourdieu, as with Foucault, was concerned not with simply the origins of discourses, but their implications – their power effects and the types of knowledge they produce and institutionalise. Thus, the concepts of discourse and symbolic violence are tools which can help us recognise the

very real ways in which words, and hence understandings, shape lived experience. But you don't have to read theory to see these concepts taking place; a careful observation of how power and discourse operates all around us is an ample laboratory for thinking about these issues, and it's important that we articulate them for ourselves in our own voices. The words and images we create and consume matter, and part of engaging thoughtfully with the world is taking the time to think them through. *The Beaver* is a more democratic publication (due to its nature as a collective and its elections for editorial staff positions) than one backed by corporate interests and should use this relative freedom to be a site where thoughtful and responsible engagement takes place, not the perpetuating of a discourse of women as logical and appropriate targets for violence.

Additionally, the responsibility to understand how power is enacted in gender relations applies to men as well as women. Why is violence against women tacitly considered something only women should invest time to combat? I hazard that if a similar level of violent speech was directed against another oppressed group, people of colour for instance, men would also be collecting signatures and writing letters, because that oppressed group would include men among its numbers. It's high time greater numbers of men joined women in audibly denouncing and actively combating misogyny. Those interested can start by reading the letter to the Editors and [signing the petition online](#).

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