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Words and Values

Harry Cohen
Iowa State University

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Words and Values, by Peggy Rosenthal. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, 295 pp., \$7.95 paper.

Harry Cohen
Iowa State University

Symbolic interactionists have emphasized the importance of symbols in social life. Phenomenologists, and even Zen Buddhists, attempt to strip away social constructs embedded in words to reach to the essence of a phenomenon. Words set patterns of thought, feeling, action, and interaction. This too brief introduction—in my sociological manner—lays the frame around the work *Words and Values* by Peggy Rosenthal.

Rosenthal jumps into this world of words and social realities to analyze roots of words, their interconnections, and consequences of definitions (boundaries put on reality) for social and human life. She traces ideologies hooked on words, especially ideologies linked to humanism and social science. She picks out some leading words to determine where they lead us. She not only picks out words but “picks on” them too, because she is critical of consequences of certain common uses. Words such as individual, feeling, develop, growth, alternative, opinion, relationship, self, holism, and systems are worked over by the author.

Rosenthal, Adjunct Instructor in Humanities, College of Continuing Education, Rochester Institute of Technology, is especially good at tracing root meanings of words. She moves from the history of words to social criticism when she perceives limiting consequences of words and their ideological bases. One example: The word “develop” and its ideological base are analyzed. We judge by standards of “development,” and rarely question the values behind the word as we use it. According to the standard of “development,” “developing” and “developed” are of course good while “undeveloped” is bad. It is this judgment that leads us to “develop” “undeveloped” forests into resorts. To call real “neighborhood wreckage” “urban development” leads to massive destruction viewed as a good. It is hard to stand against “development.”

She delivers a blow to humanistic psychology, especially in its perceived excesses. People under the influence of such ideology search for “feelings” and “growth.” But what is meant by that? What does it mean for those in love “relationships” torn asunder by someone because “I needed to grow”? The loose uses and misuses of such common words as “grow,” “relate,” and “feel”—I admit—give an opening for cult leaders and even manipulative dates to lead targets to drop their defenses. Talk “feelings,” and “relationships,” and how I need to “grow” and someone “feels good” enough to “give body and soul,” sometimes to be hurt later when dropped by the person who, now sexually and emotionally satiated, needs “space” to grow—in another direction.

The words Rosenthal analyzes have the ability to have a lot of ideological "stuff" loaded on them with consequences for freedom of thought and actions. But the very nature of those words which easily allows ideology to bond to them also allows uses for clinical intervention and change. She emphasizes the negative consequences and neglects the clinical uses. The loose, metaphorical, analogical uses of many words she analyzes and others are prime tools of clinicians who use them to "trance" clients to "reframe" past, present, and future, to change symbols, to shift social structures, leading anorexics to eat, suicidal people to stay alive, and relief of many other symptoms. Salvador Minuchin, practitioners of therapy in the model of neuro-linguistic programming, clinical hypnotists such as Michelle Ritterman, and Ericksonian therapists, all in their own ways "mix it up" in mind and in social systems (mainly family systems).

They help access deeper parts of the mind. They help people to "see through the mind's eye," and "listen with the third ear." The subconscious mind, and the power of social systems, are accessed by metaphors, parables, fairy tales, and induced "feelings." A shift is achieved by linking the words with many meanings to deeper and alternate feelings, thoughts, perceptions, skills, and biological responses. When it works, people and groups are changed. Rosenthal evaluates the words and their uses *logically* and they fall short of precision. Therapists use the words *analogically* and they rank high in clinical utility because they link into the force where change occurs, the place in the brain cells where codes are tapped, which release pain-killing chemicals, new visions, immune system disease-blockers, and more.

I can order you with logically precise words to make your immune system work, or to be happy, and strain as much as you wish it is to no avail because the flow is not touched. But "talk up a storm" in the "talking up function" (coaches and other charismatic leaders do this with followers), tell a tale and use words with appropriately layered multiple meanings, and if the brain gets the message, the necessary chemicals flow with curative clinical consequences.

Tell a tale of a delicate flower with soft velvet petals, densely packed in foliage, dripping with dew drops, flushed with nectar. In that perfect flower lies a glistening pearl, a magic pearl, a pearl which grows, feels, heals, appeals. There are times and places where a logical discussion of sexuality in precise words do the job, as in some medical texts. There are other situations where the analogical story of a magic pearl creates responses, even clears clogged neural pathways, beyond logical reasoning.

The analogical in loose use goes beyond the bounded world of things to no-thing, to the flow of life as the cells know it, in a language they respect. "Nothing is perfect." Reread this as "No-thing *is* perfect." Words come from thinking. They set boundaries around loose force and mass and we have the social world we call "things." Words which are amorphous—by which I mean boundaries that throb, that envelop much, that have many sides, that are vaguely

defined—are closer to the reality of the physical and biological world of no-thing than words with sharp and clear boundaries. These fluid characteristics provide clinical power. The sharply bounded words “thing” and reflect a socially constructed world we think, especially so the constructed world favored by logical scientists.

Rosenthal is aware of metaphorical utilities of words. It would have made, I think, a better book if her precision in tracing root meanings and her ideological critique could have been balanced by a portion of the book devoted to the functions of the fluid uses of these words, as in love, in sweet nothings (read it as unbounded “no-thing”) whispered in a lover’s ear—and in clinical work.

The New American Poverty, by Michael Harrington. New York: Penguin Books, 1984, 271 pp., \$7.95 paper.

Sarah Brabant
University of Southwestern Louisiana

In 1962, a book was published that awakened the social consciousness of many in this nation to the existence and plight of the poor and moved a young presidential hopeful to make poverty a major issue in his campaign. John Kennedy was assassinated before he could bring his idealism into fruition, but his successor, Lyndon Johnson, launched an attack on poverty that rivaled the New Deal in potential if not reality. The book was *The Other America*; the author was Michael Harrington.

Harrington’s most recent book, *The New American Poverty*, is not, by the author’s own account, “The Other America Revisited.” It is just as well. There is no knight to hear a call to arms. Camelot’s round table is gone and in its place sit the representatives of corporate America whose goal is maximizing profits for an increasingly entrenched elite. The poor, if considered at all, are an unnecessary expense. In Harrington’s words, his most recent book deals “not with an ignorant indifference that makes the poor invisible, but with a sophisticated and ‘scientific’ attempt to define them out of existence” (p. 7). The books differ in other respects as well.

The 1962 book can be described as “the shaming of America.” In it, Harrington described those Americans untouched by and outside of an affluent society. Hungry, without adequate housing, education and medical care, they lived, for the most part, in the hidden recesses of the richest country in the world. They included the unskilled workers, the migrant farmworkers, the aged poor, minorities, and society’s rejects: the disabled, the retarded, and the disturbed. That two nations, one affluent and the other impoverished, could live side by side in a society dedicated to the ideal of equality, was for Harrington not only unconscionable but unnecessary. The author was and is a writer with