

Gender in Applied Communication Contexts

ORGANIZING GENDER • GENDERING HEALTH • CONSTRUCTING PEDAGOGY • EMPOWERING FAMILY

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Gender in Applied Communication Contexts

We would like to dedicate our book . . .

*To the women and men of OSCLG, and to our families, especially our
children and grandchildren, who must carry on our work . . .*

*Patrice: For my partner, Steve Wilson, and our children,
Sgt. Brendan Sheahan (and his wife, Ashley Sheahan),
Sheridan Sheahan, Ashlee Sheahan, Lisette Sheahan,
Annie Grace Sheahan, and Robyn Wilson.*

*Helen: For my husband, Mark Van Halsema,
and our children, Gerard and Katie.*

*Lynn: For my family (named and unnamed)—Roberta, Jerry, Ted III,
Sabrina, Billy, Sophie, Leila, Russ, Zoe, Dylan, Ted IV, Sally, and Ely.*

Foreword

In 1992, the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, in the wake of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings, published a special issue that provoked a good deal of discussion within the communication discipline. The issue featured stories of sexual harassment from members of the discipline, presented as written, along with critical analyses of those stories from the perspective of organizational communication and performance studies. I was privileged to edit the journal at that time and to work with Professor Julia Wood of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, to execute her idea. Looking back, I believe that issue provided a turning point for feminist scholarship in communication. The articles in that special issue demonstrated that feminist theory could be used to analyze and provide correctives for the lived experiences of those in the discipline.

If anything, the communication discipline has become even more gendered since 1992. Women far outnumber men in both graduate and undergraduate programs in communication. The Women's Caucus is the largest unit within the National Communication Association, and the Feminist Studies in Communication Division is the third largest of the substantive units in membership, behind only Rhetorical and Communication Theory and Interpersonal Communication. Clearly, the contributions of both women and feminist scholars to the communication discipline are substantial.

The hallmark of gendered applied communication scholarship is a focus on social issues, the content of which serves either to reveal gender discrimination or to highlight the empowerment of women in a variety of settings. This development particularly pleases me because it coincides with a call I issued following the conclusion of my *JACR* editorship. In that call (Eadie, 1994) I indicated that the communication discipline could achieve its goal of becoming a greater part of the public consciousness by producing a body of research that presented insight into the solution of social problems. To do so, I argued, the discipline needed to become more deliberate about pursuing collective research agendas and about synthesizing and publicizing the research conducted as part of those agendas.

The National Communication Association (NCA), where I served as Associate Director from 1993 to 2001, created a research agenda for studying the impact of communication technologies on people's lives. In a booklet describing that agenda (Poole & Walther, 2002), the participants at an NCA-sponsored conference identified four "scientific and social challenges" to study. These challenges included the following:

1. To maintain and enhance a vigorous, self-renewing democracy
2. To promote the health and well-being of all
3. To help our organizations and institutions change in ways that enable our society to prosper in the emerging global economy
4. To enable people to live happy, meaningful lives and to have fulfilling relationships

The research reported in this volume responds to several of these challenges. Part I presents papers on telecommuting, the subtle linguistic features of sexual harassment, and alternative approaches to organizing, all of which respond to NCA's third challenge. Part II presents research that can certainly assist in the promotion of the health and well-being of all. Parts III and IV present research that can easily be construed as responding to the fourth challenge in the NCA brochure. Moreover, these contributions are not formed simply as a collection of studies. Their findings, several of which challenge conventional wisdom, are synthesized and commented upon by a series of expert scholars in each area. In my opinion, the structure of this volume enables the discipline to move forward in a more systematic manner than we have done previously.

Finally, these studies demonstrate the value of smaller, more specialized, scholarly organizations as vehicles for carrying out scholarly research agendas. Although I would be the last person to denigrate the value of discipline-wide associations such as NCA, their very nature does not lend itself well to systemic research. As groups such as the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender (OSCLG) demonstrate, having a concentrated period of time each year in which an "invisible college" of colleagues can be created is a key to doing the sort of intellectual work that produces agenda-driven research. These organizations are usually operated through the "sweat equity" of volunteers and take a great deal of time and energy to manage. Nevertheless, they promote a set of common research values, and they generate a set of questions that excite the scholars who participate year in and year out. In addition, the level of identification with and commitment to the organization produces excellent results.

My congratulations and thanks to all of the scholars whose work is represented in this volume. You have done a great service to the communication discipline by producing this work.

—William F. Eadie

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Introduction

Challenging Common Sense

*Patrice M. Buzzanell,
Helen Sterk,
and Lynn H. Turner*

Common sense, in terms of gender, tells us that men will be men and women will be women. This supposes that femininity and masculinity are stable, essential qualities inscribed in our genes that make women and men very different from one another. Further, this commonsense belief explains communication dilemmas between women and men by pointing to those seemingly essential differences. Sandra Bem (1993), in *The Lenses of Gender*, describes essentializing as one of the three culturally constructed ways that people use to understand gender. The other two are acting as if maleness were the norm for humanity and seeing women and men as polar opposites. Because people tend to believe that these three lenses answer all questions concerning gender, they are taken as normal and commonsensical.

Our book challenges culture's common sense. We illustrate some of the many and varied ways in which gender plays out in applied communication contexts, arguing through example that gender is best analyzed in specific historically and culturally situated places. In our book we offer examinations of gendered difficulties, struggles, and tensions in specific settings. These analyses include managing relationships with adolescent daughters, coping with intimate violence, communicating with health care providers, balancing work and home responsibilities, and integrating feminist practices in school settings.

Our two main goals are *first*, to illustrate how commonsense dichotomies fail to hold in the applied communication contexts of organizations, health institutions, educational settings, and family life; and *second*, to show how

gender infuses and influences our everyday, ongoing communicative choices in these contexts. Our desire to reveal the complexity and importance of gender as an organizing and explanatory construct underlies and unites both these goals.

Four Critical Threads in *Gender in Applied Communication Contexts*

With these two goals in mind, we wove four critical threads throughout this book: (a) the importance of context, specifically the contexts of organizational, health, family, and instructional communication; (b) the ongoing tensions about how to frame central processes of gender, discourse, and context; (c) the necessity of keeping praxis visible in communication research; and (d) the critical task of advocating feminist transformation of communication practices.

The first thread, *the importance of context*, is exemplified in our belief that “difference” research (which assumes men and women are different and searches for general differences) oversimplifies situations because gender is not given, but enacted. Gender tests and creates as well as responds to contexts, and it is best analyzed as situated in specific times and places. Seeing gender in action in educational, family, organizational, and health contexts clarifies the ongoing process of gendering. We observe how gendering occurs through our linguistic choices, ordinary interactions, policies, routine ways of handling situations, and so on. Further, we view context as constitutive of gender. As people engage each other, they enact gender in ways that respond to and are shaped by situations.

Our foci on the complex interplay of gender, context, and discourse and the ways in which these processes shape and are shaped by each other are consistent with ongoing interdisciplinary feminist research and theorizing. Work by Karen Lee Ashcraft (in press) provides a schematic for organizing and critiquing gender, communication, and organizations. She suggests that there are four frames encompassing contemporary gender research: (a) discourse as outcome: gender identity organizes discourse; (b) discourse as performance: discourse (dis)organizes gender identities; (c) discourse as text-conversation dialectic: organizing (en)genders discourse; (d) discourse as social text: societal discourses (en)gender organization. We adapt her outcome, performance, dialectic, and social text lenses to focus on gender in applied communication contexts. The first thread of our analysis, and the chapters that reflect it, is reminiscent primarily of Ashcraft’s third frame of gender. In it, Ashcraft establishes how applied communication contexts act as gendered discourse communities that suggest gendered scripts for members to enact and/or contest. In this frame,

contextual discourses interpellate with gender. Although context may direct member practice, it does not determine it. Rather, gender and power narratives are constructed collectively. Buzzanell's chapter analyzing sexual harassment in academe (Chapter 2) is one example of research that emphasizes this sort of collective construction. Fink and Tucker's chapter (Chapter 17), which describes male abusers in domestic violence episodes and the interventions designed to break the gendered (masculine) scripts that they routinely follow, provides another example of gender's collective construction. Further, Fink and Tucker explore cultural contexts that foster certain kinds of masculinities, evolving legal (and other) remedies, and political controversies about defining violence and funding intervention programs. And Hylmö (Chapter 3) foregrounds telecommuting and in-house work arrangements in a hybrid (governmental and private sector) agency to show that where and how labor is performed can produce particular work, gender, family, and status identities.

Our second thread of *ongoing tensions about how to frame central processes of gender, discourse, and context* suffuses the chapters. Chapter authors are *not* writing about applied communication as either a prescriptive set of recommendations or a static entity. Instead, most are describing ways in which gender, discourse, and applied contexts intersect, shift, and form varied communication practices. In many of the essays in this collection, gender identities and communication structures have been destabilized, emerging as relatively fluid.

This thread of ongoing tensions resonates with Ashcraft's (in press) second frame, attending to the ways in which discourse (dis)organizes gender identities. Ashcraft focuses on the ways in which mundane interactions and situated discourse construct gender. Because the emphasis is on how individuals "do gender," the production and reproduction of gender differences, identity(ies) construction, and shifting power relations are central. In our collection, Meyer and O'Hara's chapter (Chapter 1) on the diverse interconnections between traditional institutions and temporary organizations (i.e., Ball State University and the National Women's Music Festival), heterosexual and lesbian identities, and co-opted discourses of dominant and subaltern groups portrays a revealing and exciting picture of behind-the-scenes negotiations among permanent and temporary residents of a particular site as they go about their activities. In addition, Ellingson's chapter (Chapter 5), about the ways women cope with the physical and emotional aftermath of disfiguring and disabling illnesses, shows how institutional norms and cultures both enable and constrain gendered identities, acting as underlying dynamics in the construction and resolution of identity dilemmas. Sotirin echoes this theme in Chapter 7 when she examines the cultural baggage related to women's bodies, specifically their breasts. Sotirin illustrates the tension between a woman's sense of her identity and cultural messages about the breast.

The third thread that pervades our edited collection is *the necessity of keeping praxis visible in communication research*. From the beginning, we envisioned this book as one that uses theory and research as a starting place for not only describing, but also challenging, everyday practices. This commitment to praxis infuses each chapter, connecting theoretical insights and contributions with pragmatic situations. The situations described in these chapters are those confronted by our students, ourselves, our family members, and our friends in daily life. For instance, Penington and Turner's chapter (Chapter 16), which focuses on mother-adolescent daughter interactions, challenges the accepted idea that mothers and their daughters are at odds during adolescence. Their respondents provided a fresh look at differences and commonalities within gender and across race and generations.

The central theme of praxis cuts across chapters concerned with different sites of communication, showing that feminist change need not be only at the level of formal or macro-level interventions. Rather, possibilities for change may take place in spontaneous conversations about body image (Russ, Chapter 12), in explorations of figurative language in a classroom (Buzzanell, Chapter 10), in interactions with family members while conducting paid work at home (Edley, Chapter 15), and in the talk and procedures of gynecological exams (Brann & Mattson, Chapter 8) and music festivals (Meyer & O'Hara, Chapter 1). Our authors use research/discovery, teaching/learning, service/active engagement as means of bettering the world for women and men (see Calás & Smircich, 1996). They explicitly state what can be done by whom with their theoretical insights, data analyses, and findings.

The fourth thread woven throughout the book is our hopefulness that the research promoted through the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender (OSCLG) will contribute to *feminist transformation of communication practices*. Specifically, *Gender in Applied Communication Contexts* uses feminist theory to analyze situations and construct realistic interventions for achieving greater workplace equity, for enhancing women's health outcomes, for developing more inclusive and thought-provoking classroom (and training workshop) practices, and for constructing family relationships that enable positive enactment of masculinities and femininities. This collection of essays reflects optimism about the possibilities for improving the lives of women and men.

Consciousness of our options enables us to bring the possibility for feminist transformation to the forefront. When people comprehend what is going on in a given situation, they possess the ability to challenge, contest, and sometimes change it. As such, our chapter authors are grounded in advocacy. We wish to change gendered practices in the direction of greater equity between women and men. We wish to challenge everyday assumptions about institutions such as health care, family, organizations, and schools, and transform them

into spaces where women and men exercise their strengths and develop their sense of individuality.

We wish to explore local pockets of resistance to traditional thinking and practice. In so doing, we hope to give insight into how transformational processes begin. The chapters explore such transformational processes as social movements against domestic violence (Fink & Tucker, Chapter 17), Web sites and chat rooms where entrepreneurial mothers find and create empowerment (Edley, Chapter 15), friendships and interactions that can (re)assess women's body shaping discourses (Russ, Chapter 12; Sotirin, Chapter 7), legitimization of alternative health care practices and understandings of women's bodies (Ellingson, Chapter 5; Brann & Mattson, Chapter 8; Quintanilla, Cano, & Ivy, Chapter 6), alternative work locations (Hylmö, Chapter 3), and innovative classroom strategies based on feminist theory and engagement (Meyer, Chapter 11; Buzzanell, Chapter 10; Jaasma, Chapter 13; Russ, Chapter 12).

Insofar as research brings about awareness of some social or cultural issue, the implied next step is to motivate toward change. As Bowers and Buzzanell (2002) state,

The process of translating awareness into advocacy often requires assistance of others not only to determine which of the many change strategies might be useful in a given situation but also to continue the process of interpreting and evaluating lived experiences in light of feminist commitments. (p. 29)

We invite you, as readers of this book, to be part of the process. We believe a fundamental task for feminist research involves not only describing communication situations and choices, but making sense of them within a feminist worldview and suggesting meaningful change strategies.

Gender in Applied Communication **Contexts—Our Organizational Pattern**

We developed four sections for *Gender in Applied Communication Contexts* based primarily on the applied communication context in which authors positioned their work. Because chapters share commonalities of framing and reframing discourse, applied contexts, gender, and identity construction, they could have been partitioned in a number of different ways. For instance, Meyer's discussion about feminist transformation in an organizational communication classroom (Chapter 11) could logically be placed in either Part I, "Organizing Gender," or Part III, "Constructing Pedagogy." Similarly, Edley's analysis of entrepreneurial mothers' discourse and practices as located on their Web sites and chat rooms (Chapter 15) provides insight into both "Organizing

Gender" (Part I) and "Empowering Family" (Part IV). Fink and Tucker's description of male abusers and the group-based interventions developed to prevent domestic violence (Chapter 17) could be placed within "Constructing Pedagogy" (Part III) as well as in "Empowering Family" (Part IV). So, our choice of where chapters should be situated displays some level of arbitrariness. However, our choices also indicate the ways gender, context, identities, and discourse shift depending on how one examines each process.

All the chapters view gender as socially constructed in ways that restrict opportunities for expression by both sexes, but they reflect a partial view of all the different points that could be made. For example, we could have focused more on men and masculinities and different sexual-social orientations. However, we do include masculinities and varied orientations in our chapters on domestic violence and male abusers (Fink & Tucker, Chapter 17) and lesbian music festival participants and organizers (Meyer & O'Hara, Chapter 1). Yet, because we believe that most applied communication theory and research still focuses more on men and traditional ways of constructing health, organizations, pedagogy, and families than on women and alternative perspectives of processes and issues, this book fills an important gap in the field's literature.

We also could have chosen to publish only empirical research articles. However, we wanted to portray the varied ways by which we come to know about and experience human nature, communication processes, identity construction, and the shifting boundaries around reason/emotion, work/family, masculine/feminine, and so on. Presentational formats range from traditional literature reviews and empirical studies to interviews, stories, autoethnographic sketches, and essays. We think the variety of methodological and theoretical approaches represented in this volume does justice to the many faces of current feminist research.

We acknowledge that we opted for depth rather than breadth in our collection. We maintain that most chapters in each section provide detailed and richly contextualized views of some ways women and men construct their identities, challenge public-private boundaries, and discursively (re)frame and (re)construct their lives.

In **Part 1:Organizing Gender** (editor: Patrice Buzzanell), we challenge the beliefs that organizational communication must focus on corporate America and on work prioritization. Instead, we look at the ways in which our different gendered, professional, familial, and organizational identities come into play as we try to figure out positive courses of action in our everyday interactions and in institutional policies. We highlight the ways in which our conceptualizations of and remedies for sexual harassment have proven woefully inadequate. We see how dominant and subaltern members exert agency while simultaneously feeling as though their options are constrained. We pull apart advice and procedures for alternative work arrangements, such as telecommuting, to

locate different lenses that both undermine the possibilities for workplace change and that push organizational members to do work differently.

In **Part II: Gendering Health** (editor: Lynn Turner), we interrogate the beliefs surrounding medical practices: the supremacy of the physician, the passivity of the patient, and the benevolence of the system. This section explores the communication behaviors that may deconstruct these beliefs and bring better health care to women. The chapters focus on the ways in which gender is embodied and constructed through discourse: discourse with physicians, with supportive friends, and in the media. Further, discourse is viewed as a way to (re)construct gender in a more productive and healthful manner. The chapters in this section challenge commonsense responses to disease and health and, in so doing, they situate alternatives in language and practice.

In **Part III: Constructing Pedagogy** (editor: Helen Sterk), we argue that educational settings provide a key site for enacting feminist ways of knowing, teaching, and learning. The authors use their own experiences or research studies to suggest that sharing one's life with students, taking the risk of creating a safe space for discourse about gender and life, engaging in discourse about body shape, and intervening in middle school violence through gendered pedagogy flip ordinary ideas about how to educate. Instead of endorsing the notion of professor as the source of disembodied, objective knowledge, this section provides visions of feminist classrooms.

In **Part IV: Empowering Family** (coeditors: Patrice Buzzanell and Lynn Turner), we break from hegemonic constructions of family to delve into both the hopeful and the dark, tension-filled sides of close connections with others. Instead of concentrating only on white, middle-class families and assuming generational differences and problems, we look at racial/ethnic influences and commonalities in talk between black and white mothers and their adolescent daughters. Instead of focusing only on women and on positive aspects of relationship development or family life, we direct attention to men caught in unproductive masculinities and cultural directives that can prompt domestic violence. We describe some complexities in designing group-level interventions that emphasize choice and agency for male abusers. Instead of detailing corporate women's work-family dilemmas, we present resourceful groups of ordinary women who negotiate family and paid work time (and space) while conducting their businesses from their homes. In their daily struggles, they use technology to learn from, support, and assist each other in their work-life balancing and in their desire to be role models for their children.

To support the insights of the four sections and the chapters contained in each, four well-known scholars developed **commentaries** that respond to, interpret, and extend each section. In each commentary, the author talks about what is theoretically and pragmatically significant about the work in a particular section and how the ideas could be extended. We are pleased that Connie

Bullis, Gary Kreps, Richard West, and Kathleen Galvin provided thoughtful, provocative commentaries for the organizational, health, instructional, and family communication sections, respectively.

How This Book Came to Be

This collection of essays had its inception when the three editors planned the October 2000 conference for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender (OSCLG) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Patrice Buzzanell, at that time President of OSCLG, designed breakfast discussion tables (at 7:30 a.m. with more than 60 people attending!) and panel sessions, workshops, and program details. Lynn Turner and Helen Sterk planned the conference program together, which meant not only a stimulating program of paper presentations but also an inviting social atmosphere with plenty of fabulous food and breaks for conversation between panels, art exhibits, and other events. We three worked to create a context for creative interaction and productive research.

We were so taken by the quality of the manuscripts presented at the conference that we began talking about a book immediately. We heard our themes articulated throughout the conference presentations and discussions and we realized that we had the basis for a collection focusing on gender enactment in applied contexts. The submissions coalesced around several main areas of applied communication—organizational, health, instructional, and family communication. Further, we saw in the papers ongoing tensions about how to frame central processes of gender, discourse, and context. We noted that the papers shared the basic value of keeping praxis visible in communication research. Finally, we believed that the research promoted through OSCLG could contribute to feminist transformation of communication practices. These observations coalesced into the four central themes that now inform our book.

These factors led us to propose an edited volume to Sage Publications—not just an anthology of the papers presented at the program, but a coherent set of essays that are tied to a central vision. To ensure the highest quality of chapters and the greatest opportunity for involvement, we opened up the submission process. In addition to OSCLG conference papers, we solicited manuscripts by placing a call for papers in outlets frequented by feminist communication researchers. To safeguard the high quality, coherence, and transformative nature of the book, the submitted papers underwent a rigorous and masked review process.