

Rethinking Organizational & Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives



Patrice M. Buzzanell

Editor

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*To my parents, Francis G. and Marie J. Buzzanell,
and my siblings, Charles A. Buzzanell, M.D.,
and Doreen Buzzanell Koehler.*

Preface

Patrice M. Buzzanell

This edited book began with an invitation to submit a book prospectus on organizational communication for a possible feminist series with Sage. Sonja Foss requested works that could contribute to a more holistic understanding of specific areas within communication through feminist analyses. Her invitation prompted me to begin a discussion with several feminist organizational communication scholars about how different theories, research, and practices could be reconsidered from multiple feminisms. These scholars enthusiastically responded to my request that they participate in a 1996 National Communication Association (NCA; then called the Speech Communication Association) conference panel held in San Diego, California. They each identified an area in organizational and managerial communication studies that they believed could be enhanced through feminist analyses. Our NCA panel was a well-attended (beyond our expectations) and very encouraging beginning to this edited volume.

After the conference, the authors revised their conference presentations into draft chapters that were then reviewed by feminist researchers, non-feminist organizational and managerial communication experts, and myself. What emerged is an edited volume that offers a counterpoint to the ordinary ways in which organizational and managerial communication researchers have approached topics such as socialization, ethics, and negotiation. As such, our chapters in *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives* intend to critique and supple-

ment existing approaches with alternative insights, practices, and research agendas.

Our chapters are not as much about "women's issues" as about the ways that conventional approaches often exclude the concerns, values, and life experiences voiced by members of traditionally underrepresented groups. Our hope is that, within this volume, the reanalysis of some aspects of organizational and managerial communication will stimulate greater thinking about how organizing itself can be gendered and exclusionary and about how we (as researchers and organization members) can prompt continued change toward greater equality, dignity, and justice for women and for men (Buzzanell, 1995, 1999). As M. G. Fine (1993) argues,

A feminist perspective tells us why we study organizational communication—to create organizations that allow all people to express fully their human potential, and that allow them a genuine and free voice rather than a voice constrained by false ideology. A feminist perspective rejects research that is intended to further the economic goals of the organization without regard to the well-being of the people who constitute the organization. (p. 132)

In short, feminist approaches to organizational and managerial communication are grounded in the belief that we can create an equitable and ethical vision for organizational lives and processes.

Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives continues the ongoing feminist critique of traditional organizational and organizational communication theory and research (e.g., Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994, 1999; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Mumby, 1996, 1998). As our field has progressed from a variable analytic sex/gender difference approach to a more complex and situated understanding of gendered processes, we have seen feminist reanalyses of phenomena such as diversity (e.g., Allen, 1995a), bounded rationality/emotionality (e.g., Mumby & Putnam, 1992), ethics (Mattson & Buzzanell, 1999), and pay for (house)work (e.g., Clair & Thompson, 1996).

Just as these trends have emerged in gendered organizing, we can see related themes reflected in this volume. The first commonality among the chapter authors is their desire to suffuse, rather than insert, in their writings what has been excluded from traditional organizational and managerial communication: namely, the complexities of sex and gender, race and ethnicity, class, and sexual-social orientation. In this way, they delve into taken-for-granted assumptions that expose invisible gendered relations. Second, the authors ground their feminist analyses in processes rather than in singular aspects of organizing, sense making, and communicating. Not only do they focus on sites where multiple feminisms offer distinctive contributions to knowledge and practice, but they also note where and how change can be

enacted. Third, the authors retain the centrality of communication as the fundamental organizing process that produces and reproduces both inequity and justice in daily life. In all cases, the authors eschew the metaphor of organization as container by blending concerns of work and family, organization and environment, public and private, and inclusion and exclusion (see Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996, for an overview of metaphors). Finally, the authors envision their chapters as works in progress. They may vary in style, but each chapter explores and stimulates dialogue on some concerns rather than providing a comprehensive or best analysis of issues.

These themes of feminist organizational communication scholarship and of *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives* have helped us create a book that can serve both research and pedagogical purposes. *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives* provides critical and heuristic analyses of organization by outstanding researchers. As a research tool, this book can assist graduate students and professors in organizational and managerial communication, women's studies, organizational behavior, organization theory, and organizational sociology. These materials can be used for reference or be incorporated into classrooms (e.g., as the main text, a special topics course reading, or a supplementary text that extends—and often counters—the teachings of traditional organizational and managerial communication textbooks), particularly in graduate seminars or upper-division undergraduate courses. At present, there is no other edited or authored feminist book that can be used as a companion to advanced undergraduate and graduate texts and handbooks of organizational communication.

Because of our research and teaching goals, most chapters begin with either references to or critiques of literature in specific areas of organizational and managerial communication, such as chaos theory, leadership, or careers. Sometimes this overview is relatively brief, but readers will find that the initial combination of mainstream and alternative thinking about particular communication phenomena enables authors and readers to revisit issues, examine changes in scholarship and practice, and offer feminist analyses and change initiatives. Readers also will note that there has been no attempt to cover all possible topics or to use every feminist perspective. There have been recent overviews of organizational communication: Jablin and Putnam's (in press) *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication* and Putnam et al.'s (1996) chapter in *The Handbook of Organizational Studies*. There have also been refereed articles and yearbook chapters that have provided broad feminist overviews of organizational communication and organization theory (e.g., Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994, 1999; Calás & Smircich, 1996; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Mumby, 1996). Rather than publish another broad overview or include all feminisms, we intended to provide an in-depth feminist treatment of some major issues.

There are many individuals who deserve acknowledgment in this preface. Each chapter lists reviewers who commented on earlier drafts. I have not repeated their names here but they deserve (and have) my undying gratitude. Their enthusiasm for this project and detailed comments for individual chapters are greatly appreciated. In addition, I would like to thank Sonja Foss, Julia Wood, and Linda Putnam, and the members of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG) for their support and insights over the years. In addition, Erin Smith and Judi Dallinger helped with text-reference checks—Judi and I sat on the airport floor before our flight from an OSCLG conference in Maine checking off references.

I also thank the fabulous editors and production staff at Sage, particularly Margaret Seawell and Marquita Flemming whose humor and warmth have made this process and journal editing so very enjoyable.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner (Steve Wilson) and my six children (Brendan C. Sheahan, Sheridan A. Sheahan, Ashlee M. Sheahan, Lisette M. Sheahan, Annie Grace Sheahan, and Robyn F. Wilson) for their love and ability to always draw me back to what matters most in life.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Francis G. and Marie J. Buzzanell, and my siblings, Charles A. Buzzanell, MD and Doreen Buzzanell Koehler.

Introduction: In Medias Res

Patrice M. Buzzanell

Our first chapter begins “in the middle of things.” The chapters in this book continue the current trend of rethinking organizational and managerial communication from critical, particularly feminist, approaches. In 1993, Sheryl Perlmutter Bowen and Nancy Wyatt published an edited book, *Transforming Visions: Feminist Critiques in Communication Studies*, that focused on how feminisms could prompt scholars to pose research questions and use methods different from those conventionally employed in the primary areas of the communication discipline (e.g., performance studies, interpersonal communication, and organizational communication). Until *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives*, there has not been a single organizational communication volume similar to Bowen and Wyatt’s (1993) project. *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives* is designed to fill this gap and is expected to roughly coincide with the publication of *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin & Putnam, in press).

Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives focuses attention on feminist approaches to some organizational communication issues. As such, it begins in *medias res* and contributes to the ongoing dialogue about reframing communication to better incorporate diverse perspectives and members. This edited book is not intended to be a

comprehensive treatment of current organizational communication issues. Rather, our chapters delve into specific topics and provide frameworks and analyses that could be useful for additional feminist organizational communication critiques. I see these chapters as illuminating traditional organizational and managerial communication work. Like Western medieval religious documents in which the pictures told stories both separate from and coinciding with the words, our chapters add to the conventional text by highlighting emotions, embodied experience, and standpoints of traditionally under-represented groups. Our work does not intend to dismantle the past but to augment the rich scholarly tradition of our discipline.

There are three main sections in *Rethinking Organizational and Managerial Communication From Feminist Perspectives*: Part I, "Confronting Our Past"; Part II, "Rethinking Present Processes"; and Part III, "Authoring Our Future." The sections progress from theoretical analyses that reconceptualize and extend boundaries in our thinking about work and organizing processes; through the use of marginalized voices to question ordinary acts, identities, and critiques of organizational constructs; to the incorporation of difference in such a way that questions and proposes concrete remedies for those micropractices and structures that (re)construct injustice. Each chapter within these three parts is a self-contained feminist analysis of some aspect of organizational life.

PART I

The four chapters in Part I, "Confronting Our Past," discuss themes of binary oppositions, exclusion, contradictions, and power in organizational and managerial communication literature. Each proposes an alternative view of public-private discourse, stakeholder ethics, socialization processes, or negotiation by contrasting traditional approaches with feminist values.

In Chapter 1, "Communication, Organization, and the Public Sphere: A Feminist Perspective," Mumby returns to some of the foundations of the field to describe the ways in which traditional conceptualizations of the public sphere in democratic institutions are linked to individuals' rhetorical effectiveness and identities. Mumby proposes that the public-private issues from a critical feminist approach are how the *relationship* between the public and private spheres is articulated discursively and how this *articulation process* (re)produces power imbalances and/or creates opportunities for resistance and transformation. Opportunities for individuals to make their arguments public depend on availability, resources, and ideological associations. These opportunities assume a reified social structure in which members of marginalized groups are restricted because they voice competing interests and needs.

Mumby defines the public sphere as "a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews," and he argues for a multiplicity of overlapping public spheres. By using feminist analysis to critique binary thinking and to propose action that can eliminate the oppression of women (and others), Mumby illuminates the complexities within and between spheres. If public spheres are contested sites, then organizational and managerial communication researchers can reframe the public sphere to open possibilities for participatory exchanges. This means that forms of discourse and knowledge traditionally associated with different spheres (e.g., the private sphere and personal opinion, and the public sphere and social knowledge) can no longer be considered legitimate, can no longer serve dominant interests, and can no longer limit possibilities for dissent and alternative views. A feminist articulation of participatory democracy requires: admission of social inequities; further development of discursive spaces in which women renegotiate identities (i.e., spaces to formulate "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs"; Fraser, 1990-1991, p. 67); and problematizing what "counts" as public and private matters. Through a critical feminist analysis of public-private relationships, Mumby exposes the "contradictions between the rhetoric of democracy and enfranchisement, on the one hand, and the reality of social, political, and economic inequality, on the other."

Haas and Deetz also examine conditions necessary for participatory exchange. In Chapter 2, "Between the Generalized and the Concrete Other: Approaching Organizational Ethics From Feminist Perspectives," they claim that multiple-stakeholder models can address the complexities of varied political interests and values that need representation in internal corporate decision making.

They address two ethical concerns: the implementation of procedures to identify stakeholders' interests and values, and the implementation of procedures to ensure that stakeholders' interests and values are represented in corporate decision-making processes. They use Benhabib's (1985, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1992) feminist perspective on ethics to extend Habermas's (1973, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1993) theory of communicative action, discourse ethics, and his description of the ideal speech situation. Specifically, Benhabib contends that generalized and concrete other standpoints operate as moral orientations that reflect binary thinking (e.g., autonomy/nurturance, public/private, independence/interdependence, commonality/individuality, impartiality/connection, universalistic norms/contextually sensitive criteria, and "ethic of justice and rights"/"ethic of care and responsibility"). Benhabib (1992) requires the use of both standpoints simultaneously in moral conversation to transcend dualities. The objective of moral conversation is the willingness to engage in discussion that can affect understanding and, perhaps, consensus.

Although Benhabib (1992) argues that moral conversation does not require copresence because individuals can have an "imaginary dialogue" with others, Haas and Deetz believe that an "actual dialogue" among participants—even if participants are not in the same spatiotemporal location—is necessary for an ethical stakeholder model of internal corporate decision making. Their reasoning is that management often is so isolated from corporate stakeholders that it lacks the imaginary resources to adequately represent divergent interests. They suggest some preliminary applications of their theorizing to corporate decision-making processes but caution that their ethical ideal may be difficult to pursue in practice.

Chapter 3 also addresses ways to include marginalized voices in our theorizing. Rather than reframing public-private to incorporate discourse previously belonging exclusively to one sphere (Mumby) or establishing conditions necessary for the inclusion of disparate stakeholder interests through the use of concrete and generalized others (Haas & Deetz), Bullis and Stout argue that greater attention to class and race ("Both go unmentioned and are thereby erased"), among other contextualizing processes and outcomes, can help researchers better understand oppression, resistance, and change. In "Organizational Socialization: A Feminist Standpoint Approach," they critique the usual socialization assumptions to demonstrate how feminist organizational and managerial communication researchers can enlarge traditional emphases. In general, researchers have most often studied socialization strategies and tactics, newcomers' sense-making and information-seeking strategies, and communication processes. Bullis and Stout position standpoint feminisms as a means of advocating "oppositional, politically conscious understandings with the hope that such understandings provide resources for a critique of domination as well as change."

Bullis and Stout suggest several possible lines of inquiry. First, communication researchers can explore the meanings of organizational boundaries and the ways in which containment metaphors maintain dominant/subordinate relationships. Second, by focusing on the variability of experiences that are inadequately represented by phase models and trajectories, feminist scholars may better depict the experiences of those who otherwise might be considered "outliers." Finally, researchers can question the assumption that individuals and organizations mutually influence each other. They conclude with a review of published work that can serve as exemplars for how organizational and managerial communication theory and methods can be changed.

The final chapter in Part I displays how negotiation and bargaining can be changed. In Chapter 4, "Rethinking Negotiation: Feminist Views of Communication and Exchange," Putnam and Kolb argue that distributive, integrative, and principled negotiation and bargaining are gendered because they privilege masculine characteristics of exchange over feminine qualities of connectedness and co-construction. To develop an alternative approach, they

highlight normative aspects of the normative negotiation model and contrast these with parallel but feminist processes. In this way, they explore the assumptions and communicative implications of conventional negotiation dimensions (i.e., exchange, instrumental goals and optimal settlements, and independent parties). Through contrastive analyses, they advocate: co-construction (mutual inquiry that encourages expansive thinking and contextualization of issues within a communal approach); goals of self- and mutual understanding and jointly developed courses of action; and relational interdependence that emerges during bargaining processes and reflects trust, empathy, and shared emotional expressions.

Like the other authors in Part I, Putnam and Kolb expand our conceptualizations of organizational and managerial approaches. They explore what these feminist dimensions would mean for bargaining processes. Rather than exchanging proposals, generating options, and exchanging concessions, negotiators in the alternative approach would reframe the ways multiple parties understand the situation. They would use dialogue as a process of co-learning and inquiry, rather than as problem solving for option generation. Instead of converging on debate and persuasion as core processes, negotiators in the alternative perspective would center on invitational rhetoric and circular questioning as fundamental social interaction processes. Invitational rhetoric "urges participants to move beyond the here-and-now issues and raise questions about peak experiences, times of exceptional performance, and what people value most about their lives, careers, and work." Circular questioning is a series of queries that begins with personal experience and assesses responsibility. This inquiry cycles back to narrative details about the shared personal experience so that the original experiences are destabilized and, thus, open to alternative interpretations. By critiquing, then extending current negotiation models, Putnam and Kolb develop an alternative model guided by feminist thinking.

PART II

Whereas the authors in Part I lay some conceptual groundwork about exclusionary discourse, interests, and experiences, the authors of the three chapters in Part II, "Rethinking Present Processes," present (mostly white) women's voices through interview excerpts, poems, diary entries, stories, and personal involvement with these constructs. They explore the ways in which these concrete details of ordinary lives represent missing facets and nuances of our organizational and managerial communication work. These chapters are the least "finished" because all the authors raise issues that defy closure. Each of their overviews and feminist reanalyses acts as a springboard for additional research.

In her work on embodied experience, Trethewey links the development of sophisticated control mechanisms with the ways in which women's bodies are disciplined by themselves and others. In Chapter 5, "Revisioning Control: A Feminist Critique of Disciplined Bodies," Trethewey develops Foucauldian and poststructuralist analyses of female workers' bodies as sites of power and resistance. Women's embodied experiences enable and constrain their self-identities and material results (i.e., competence evaluations and outcomes) to such an extent that the terms *female bodies* and *professional bodies* appear contradictory. Through analyses of her interview data on (primarily white heterosexual) professional women's embodied experiences, she finds that women's discourse repeatedly portrays professional women's bodies as fit, as tools to emit intentional messages, and as excessive. Unable to meet the masculine ideal of a professional body despite self- and other-disciplinary action, women's bodies mark them as "other."

Trethewey admits that her analyses do not account for the ways that many women celebrate and resist disciplinary mechanisms. She argues that greater attention to the social construction of women's embodied identities could illuminate the kinds of resistance that can lead to organizational change and innovative organizational (and managerial) communication research programs.

In Chapter 6, "Walking the High Wire: Leadership Theorizing, Daily Acts, and Tensions," Fine and Buzzanell use a revisionist/revalorist feminist analysis to create a vision of leadership, administration, and management as serving. This vision exposes the deficiencies of both mainstream and alternative views of leadership. Fine and Buzzanell first explore how traditional (adaptive, transformational, and self-leadership and superleadership) and alternative (gendered and servant) leadership and management aspects are exclusionary and/or incomplete. By using feminist epistemological and methodological commitments (i.e., women's ways of knowing, feminist problematics, feminist synalitics, and revolutionary pragmatism; see Fine, 1993), they bring together their own life experiences (in the form of diary entries) and theory in such a way that tensions among differing values and approaches are exposed and sustained.

They find that four main paradoxes emerge when *servant*, *leadership*, and *feminine* are examined simultaneously. When women lead by serving, they face double binds because (a) the juxtapositions of subordinate/servant and superordinate/served gain power for males but fulfill traditional (unvalued) roles for women; (b) the qualities built into the servant leadership role are evaluated according to their instrumental worth, making most feminine ways of enacting and describing servant leadership devalued; (c) the implications that leaders can change styles easily to suit situations do not rest easily with "serving" as a lifelong ethical process; and (d) women who serve threaten the status quo. To revision *serving* as a feminist form of leadership, Fine and Buzzanell situate serving as a form of resistance. Women who serve resist

others' definitions of what they should do and how they should do it. They resist judgments of selfishness and unfemininity that often occur when women prioritize service by and for themselves *as highly as* service for others. And they resist static notions of serving by constantly reevaluating whether their serving is ethical (i.e., whether serving empowers or makes different stakeholders vulnerable and whether serving creates a more equitable world for white women and members of other traditionally underrepresented groups).

Serving embodies the struggle to move toward feminist transformation. Serving is transformative and emancipatory because it provides freedom to confront oneself and to act for the betterment of women and men. Serving challenges community-diminishing norms by its very existence. However, serving also can lead to the development of strategies and practices that initiate "microemancipation" (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992) within the organization because of the self-reflexivity that serving prompts in others and in organizations.

In the final chapter of Part II, Mattson, Clair, Sanger, and Kunkel use the storytelling of narratives and poems to draw readers into a reframing of what stress means in our everyday lives and why those meanings do not reflect the experiences of women. In Chapter 7, "A Feminist Reframing of Stress: Rose's Story," they observe that traditional research has resulted in prescriptive measures for reducing stress; however,

none of the prescriptive measures suggest altering the way we do business so that we do not have "high-pressure deadlines" . . . [or altering the] onus for change [that] is placed on the individual rather than on the way we organize our work practices.

Moreover, stress typically is described as negative. Popular writings about time management are presented as ways of managing deadlines, demands, and outcomes of burnout. Models that incorporate communication as a means of alleviating stress propose either that social support operates as a buffer against the harmful effects of stressful life events or that emotional communication can lessen the impact of stress on burnout. Other lines of research connect interpersonal linkages and attributes of workers with different stress levels.

To reframe stress, Mattson et al. recommend that organizational and managerial communication researchers be "open to the sequestered stories, the marginalized stories, or the stories of stress that are labeled as categories other than stress." As one example, they recount Hazell's (1997) narrative of a call to a radio talk show in which Rose, a young mother with five children under the age of 3, pleaded for help after social services had rejected her appeals. Mattson et al. point out that popular and academic reports would not catego-

size the story as stress, work, or public policy but as “domestic.” This framing does not question who assigns meaning to an event or how power imbalances can be made visible so that frames can be challenged, resisted, and opened to change. The more that frames are accepted as taken for granted, the more they become reified. Their communicative potential for creating and persuading self and others about realities becomes less obvious.

Mattson et al. draw from core feminist concerns rather than single feminist approaches. They endeavor

to highlight stressful situations that may not have received the same legitimation as current “workplace” conceptualizations of stress; to advance a more holistic understanding of stress as a sociopolitical phenomenon; to point out the discursive as well as the material aspects of stress; and to expose the ways in which women’s work-related stress is far too often privatized.

Each of these “reframings” is elaborated on but also is connected to Rose’s story and the stories of others whose tolerance for life’s demands and deadlines is exceeded. They recommend that these four areas provide a counterpoint for traditional research.

PART 3

Part III, “Authoring Our Future,” contains three chapters that rewrite organizational and managerial communication constructs. These chapters not only offer alternative reconceptualizations but also suggest specific tactics and long-term strategies derived from feminisms to revise organizational and managerial communication processes and practices. These chapters deal with intersections of sex and gender, race and ethnicity, and class not by adding phrases like “and people of color” but by delving into concerns raised when women and men of color and economically disadvantaged groups are excluded from organizational and managerial communication theory, research, and practice. These chapters lay bare—with no excuses—how limited our views of organizational life have been. Indeed, by failing to think about difference holistically, we have unwittingly perpetuated exclusionary thinking, micropractices, and macrostructures. These chapters question our taken-for-granted assumptions in theorizing and practices and find our prior work lacking. They are most explicit in their recommendations for the transformation of daily practices and organizational policies.

As Allen explains in Chapter 8, ““Learning the Ropes’: A Black Feminist Standpoint Analysis,” she can offer a personalized and contextualized account of organizational socialization by describing and critiquing her experience as an “outsider within” (i.e., a black woman in the U.S. white male academe; see Allen, 1998a; Collins, 1991). Although the communicative content