Transforming Rhetoric Through
Feminist Reconstruction:
A Response to the Gender Diversity Perspective

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In this response to Condit's essay, the tenets of her gender diversity perspective are outlined and addressed. The authors conclude that although Condit's tenets concerning gender are visionary, those concerning rhetoric constitute a defense of a traditional conception of rhetoric, unchanged by gender and feminism. They then outline the tenets of their feminist-reconstructionist perspective, one which focuses on the reconstruction of rhetoric through a feminist lens.

In her essay, "In Praise of Eloquent Diversity," Condit (1997) has made a significant contribution to feminist scholarship in the communication discipline through her efforts to clarify the nature and goals of feminist perspectives on rhetoric. We found her formulation of the gender diversity perspective to be provocative and insightful and appreciate the impetus she has provided for us to explicate the nature of our feminist perspective in a more systematic way than we have done to date.

We will respond to Condit's essay first by outlining the tenets of her gender diversity perspective and showing where our perspectives converge and diverge. Then we will identify the tenets of our own perspective—what Condit calls a feminist-dichotomous perspective and what we call a feminist-reconstructionist perspective. We want to acknowledge, as we lay out the tenets of our position, that our description of it may not be shared by the other scholars Condit identifies as holding our perspective or a similar one. We do not know whether these scholars would include themselves in the perspective we outline and, given the opportunity, they might have written very different responses to Condit's essay and outlined feminist perspectives very different from ours.

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We also want to acknowledge that although the exchange between Condit and us in this journal may suggest that there are two primary feminist perspectives in communication—a gender diversity perspective and a feminist-reconstruction perspective—this is not the case. Feminist perspectives are numerous, not easily categorized, and not mutually exclusive. They all deserve the same kind of explicating that Condit provides for the gender diversity perspective and that we attempt to do here with our perspective. We hope, then, that this exchange is simply the beginning of a much longer conversation among feminist scholars from divergent perspectives in the communication field that will encourage others to explore feminist perspectives and the contributions they can make to communication.

Gender Diversity Perspective

The major tenets of Condit’s gender-diversity perspective, as we understand them from her essay, deal with two primary topics: gender and rhetoric. We begin by presenting the two tenets that deal with gender—those concerned with the goal of feminist scholarship in communication and the source(s) of gender differences.

The goal of feminist scholarship in communication is to implement a multiplicity of genderings. Condit sees as the common agenda of those who embrace the gender diversity perspective disruption of “the traditional categories of male and female” as a means “to liberate women from the strictures of oppression” (p. 96). She advocates a “multiplicity of genderings” (p. 100) so that women will not be recognized as women, as they are within traditional, dominant gender relations. The results, she suggests, will be emancipation from gender oppression.

Although Condit’s explanation of a culture built on a multiplicity of genderings is appealing, she does not explain how such a multiplicity might be achieved. Simply to decree that our culture should abandon its emphasis on biological dimorphism (p. 97) or that it now is rid of this emphasis does not make it so. A woman cannot simply take herself out of the category of “woman” because of the visibility—as Condit herself acknowledges—of the secondary sex characteristics that culture uses to categorize and evaluate women and men (pp. 99-100).

Our largest disagreement with the goal of feminist scholarship in the gender-diversity perspective, however, is one of scope. Although we do not disagree that one of the purposes of feminist scholarship is to destabilize the current construction of gender, our primary goal is broader than Condit’s. We are not particularly interested in constructing multiple genders because to have many gender categories rather than the traditional two does not necessarily mean liberation for the individuals in those categories.

We prefer to move beyond a focus on the construction or reconstruction of gender to a focus on creating a society in which gender is de-emphasized and where certain qualities that are likely to produce equality and mutuality—cooperation, self-determination, and immaterial value, for example—are implemented. The primary connection these values have to gender is that theorizing from them began, for many feminists, from a study of women’s communication (as well as the cultures of other marginalized groups). We see these values most frequently (but not exclusively) enacted in women’s communication and see the positive impacts they often have on the development of fulfilling human relationships.

As we identify and articulate communication practices and perspectives traditionally held by women, theorize about them, recognize them as viable, and remove them from association with one sex so that anyone may choose to engage in these practices, we hope we are able to contribute to the creation of a non-dominating culture. Invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Foss & Foss, 1994) is one example of this kind of scholarship; it is an effort to create a rhetoric built on a new set of values and to envision how such a rhetoric might work for both women and men in ways that contribute to the transformation of our culture. We want a different kind of society, then, but the route we choose to help achieve it is not primarily through the construction of multiple genders. Our preferred route is to begin theorizing new ways of communicating that enact the values we envision as characteristic of this new society.

Communication differences between women and men do not derive from essential biological traits. A primary feature of Condit’s gender-diversity perspective is that gender is seen as constructed and not as an essential, pre-given quality. Condit asserts that “all efforts to use biological categories to dichotomize human gender ultimately break down” (p. 98). A core component of the gender-diversity perspective is that human beings do not have stable, autonomous identities. The individual self (including the construction of gender) is fluid and is formed and reformed constantly by exposure to symbols.
Despite her attribution of the opposite position to us, we agree with this tenet and see gender not as an essential, pre-given quality but as a social construction. Never, when we talk about women or men's communication, do we mean to suggest that the qualities we attribute to women are biologically determined. In fact, we know of no feminist scholars in communication who believe that the communication differences between women and men are due to essential biological qualities.

In contrast to Condit, however, we do believe that some features tend to characterize women's and men's realms and the communication that occurs in these realms. We believe that some biological differences between women and men (such as menstruation, which most women experience) affect individuals' life experiences. But we see the differences between women's and men's communication as attributable primarily to socialization practices—which construct women and men differently—and to the different power positions that sexes are accorded in this society.

We also agree with Condit that the category of "woman" is not monolithic but that it varies dramatically by race, class, and other dimensions and, consequently, that not all women communicate in the same way. We do believe, however, that although there is considerable variation among women, we do have things in common with one another. Particular socialization practices, marginalized positions, and lack of access to traditional forms of power, for example, tend to be shared by many women.

We acknowledge that when we and other scholars in communication first began to employ feminist perspectives in our work, we used terms such as women's perspective, women's communication, and women's voices as though some major commonalities exist among women; our use of such terms did not reflect the differences that exist among women. As feminist scholarship has developed, we hope we have become more sophisticated in our understandings so that we no longer talk about women's voices as though women speak in one unified voice.

We do acknowledge, however, that we do highlight women's experiences and women's communication in our scholarship. We agree with Condit's assertion that our "approach foregrounds women and highlights women's interests directly by trying to privilege women and valorize their concerns" (p. 110). Yes, we "always and obviously talk about women" (p. 110), and we do not apologize for such talk. We want to celebrate women's communication, diversity, eloquence, and power because these constructs generally have been neglected in communication scholarship. We talk about women because many other scholars do not.

The two tenets concerning gender in Condit's gender-diversity perspective, then, are that feminist scholarship is designed to facilitate the implementation of a multiplicity of genderings and that the self, including the assignment of gender to it, is socially constructed. Although we have a few minor disagreements with Condit concerning her view of gender, we do not disagree with any of the critical aspects of her perspective in this area. This is not the case, however, when we turn to Condit's tenets concerning rhetoric in her gender diversity perspective. We have identified five tenets in Condit's perspective concerned with rhetoric, and these are largely responsible for our departures from the gender diversity perspective.

A masculine bias is not a primary characteristic of rhetorical studies. Condit claims that "the history of rhetorical studies and the practices of rhetoric should be understood not as 'male' but as diversely gendered" (p. 100), and she provides support for this position from a number of sources. She cites rhetoric's alignment with classically feminine attributes, particularly in comparison to such academic practices as economics, history, and political science, to support her claim. She also offers as evidence for rhetoric's diverse gendering the fact that Plato's theories include a "variegated placement of homoerotic relationships and women in public life," suggesting a "distinctively complex view of gender for his era" (p. 101). In addition, Condit asserts that "in many historical eras," such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, "Dame/harlot Rhetoric" was depicted as female, often appearing in statuary as "a busty woman bedecked in pearls" (p. 102). Finally, she suggests, "the decoration of words associated with rhetoric often has been despised by many men as effeminate," contributing to the perception that "men who practiced rhetoric were more androgynous than men who did not" (p. 102).

We disagree with Condit in two ways concerning the gendering of rhetoric. First, we make a distinction between patriarchal and male or masculine, which Condit appears not to do. We define patriarchy as a system of power relations that privileges and accords power to the white, heterosexual male; anyone who does not fit this category is devalued in this system. Many men—gay men and
men of color, for example—usually are not accorded power and privilege in patriarchy, just as women are not. Furthermore, all individuals who live in patriarchy are encultrated into its norms and values so that all individuals—those whose concerns are featured and those whose concerns are muted—engage in patriarchal practices and reinscribe the values of the patriarchy. Thus, we do not believe that rhetorical studies are male or masculine, but we do believe they are patriarchal. For us, the association of rhetoric with female or feminine attributes is irrelevant to the question of whether rhetoric is patriarchal.

We are not the only ones to suggest that what we call a patriarchal bias pervades the rhetorical tradition, one that excludes a number of perspectives. Many other rhetorical scholars argue similarly, suggesting that traditional conceptualizations of rhetoric do not take into account perspectives outside of the privileged perspective of the white, heterosexual male. Recent explications of Afrocentrism (e.g., Asante, 1987); an Asian perspective (e.g., Garrett, 1991); a Chicana perspective (e.g., Flores, 1996); whiteness (e.g., Nakayama & Krizek, 1995); and queer theory (e.g., Morrison, 1992), for example, all suggest that a bias exists in rhetorical theory that privileges a particular perspective, excludes other perspectives, and unnecessarily limits our conception of rhetoric.

Our second difference with the gender diversity perspective in terms of bias in rhetorical theory turns on what constitutes a positive representation of the feminine. To equate a statue of a busty woman in pearls with a positive representation of the feminine dimensions of rhetoric denies the complexity of the image of rhetoric conveyed in the statue and the ways in which that image trivializes rhetoric and removes it from the "important" affairs of the world. The statue represents women as the patriarchy prefers them to be—contained and constricted by ladylike garb and induced to submission by material comfort and elite status. Similarly, to suggest that the feminine dimensions of rhetoric are valued when preachers and politicians see their careers as lacking in manliness because they are centered in rhetoric ignores the denigration of the female explicit in this conception. An exploration of the gender assigned to rhetoric throughout history, then, suggests that rhetoric does not gain in value because of its association with the feminine, a view consistent with patriarchy's denigration of the female.

The rhetor has authority over the beliefs and behaviors of others. In the gender diversity perspective, not all aspects of audience members' beliefs are viewed as integral to their identities. Condit suggests that because "all aspects of audience members' beliefs" are not integral to their identities, they should not "be treated as authentic and correct" (p. 93). Condit also assumes that rhetors have the capacity to distinguish between what is and is not integral to audience members' identities so that, presumably, the focus of rhetors' persuasive efforts can be on those dimensions that are not integral (p. 93). This assumption thus gives the rhetor, according to Condit, the right to attempt to change the beliefs and actions of audience members, particularly if the rhetor judges those beliefs and actions to be "egregious" (p. 93).

In contrast to Condit's view, we do not believe that we, as rhetors, have the right to suggest to others which of their beliefs are integral or not, egregious or not, or correct or not. We believe that individuals should be allowed self-determination so they may make their own decisions about what they want to believe and how they want to live. Individuals make choices in these areas for reasons that make sense to them, and our initial inclination is to try to understand and respect others' beliefs rather than impose our judgment on them and to attempt to change them. We also do not know how to make decisions about which beliefs are integral to another's identity so that we might respect those that are integral and focus our persuasive efforts on those that are not.

At the same time, we acknowledge that many people hold views with which we strongly disagree and that we wish were different—racist and sexist views, for example. Trying to understand a racist's or a misogynist's position and inviting that individual to consider alternative perspectives, as is the case in invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995), is one approach to interacting with such individuals—one that is no less viable or predictive of change than is persuasion. Exposure to alternative perspectives on the part of these individuals and our greater understanding and acknowledgment of their positions very well may serve as catalysts for change for these individuals. Finally, there are times when rhetoric, as traditionally conceived, is the most appropriate option, and racist and sexist behavior on the part of individuals may constitute an exigence for the use of traditional rhetoric. We do not offer invitational rhetoric as an ideal, nor do we suggest that it ought to be used on all occasions.
Elegance in rhetorical skill determines individual value. All "human beings can communicate," Condit suggests, and "all human beings employ rhetoric" (p. 106). Some, however, are more eloquent than others, she continues. When "cooperation on an issue" is needed, it is more likely to be achieved by an eloquent spokesperson than through the communication of a rhetor (or many rhetors) of ordinary communicative skill (p. 107). The primary role of these eloquent spokespersons is to help "people understand their experiences in new ways" and "to coordinate their behavior around these understandings" (p. 107). "Eloquent spokespersons," then, help "others to give voice to their own interests by showing ways in which those interests might by re-articulated" (p. 107).

Despite Condit's claim to the contrary, we are not "frustrated" (p. 108) with the notion of eloquence. We agree with the gender diversity perspective that some rhetors, in some moments, are more eloquent than others; in certain situations, they do a particularly effective job of creating and managing symbols. We evidence our belief in this position through our studies of rhetors we consider exemplary, such as Judy Chicago (Foss, 1988); Mary Daly (Griffin, 1993); Pauli Murray (S. K. Foss, 1994); Robin Morgan (K. A. Foss, 1994); Starhawk (Foss & Griffin, 1992); Mary Wollstonecraft (Griffin, 1994); and Ursula K. Le Guin (Foss & Foss, 1991). We also believe, with Condit, that the standards for eloquence need to be expanded; this was precisely our goal in Women Speak, which we subtitled The Elegance of Women's Lives (Foss & Foss, 1991b).

Our primary concern with the traditional conception of eloquence is that it implicitly suggests that individuals deserve acknowledgment or value only when they achieve in extraordinary or spectacular ways. What Trinh (1989) suggests about the opposition between the masses and the elite in the art world is equally applicable to the notion of eloquent rhetors: "Yet to oppose the masses to the elite is already to imply that those forming the masses are regarded as an aggregate of average persons condemned by their lack of personality or by their dim individualities to stay with the herd, to be docile and anonymous" (p. 13). We believe that the talents of everyone, whatever they are, deserve to be acknowledged and affirmed, even when they do not stand out in dramatic ways. In our view, everyone possesses inherent or immanent value that "does not have to be "earned, acquired, or proven"" by a particular position in a hierarchy (Foss & Griffin, 1992, p. 334).

In a certain context, one individual may emerge as eloquent, but given similar contexts, many others with similar opportunities to use their rhetorical skills might have done the same. In addition, in many day-to-day situations, all of us express our uniqueness eloquently.

But we do not want to restrict eloquence to one function, as Condit appears to do; she sees the primary function of eloquence as helping individuals "understand their experiences in new ways," showing others how their "interests might be re-articulated" (p. 107). This is certainly one way in which eloquence might function, but it is not the only way. In addition, this function has a patronizing edge to it that is problematic for us; the rhetor presumes to know about others' experiences what they, themselves, do not, and we would not want to assign such a role to the rhetor. The notion of eloquence employed on behalf of the masses allows the "elite-versus-masses opposition" to remain intact and unchallenged and thus able "to enforce its elitist values" (Trinh, 1989, p. 13).

Change occurs most effectively through public and mass-mediated persuasion. In the gender diversity perspective, change is inevitable because "interaction with others constantly produces change in ourselves because we are the symbol-using animal, and language is the medium by which interests take form, are shared, chosen, and distributed" (p. 104). Change happens, according to Condit, when a rhetor has "some self-interested agenda to forward" (p. 108), and it is most effective if conveyed through the mass media. As Condit suggests, to some extent, the limitations in the perspectives offered by rhetors "can be reduced by concentrating on structural access to the mass media" (p. 108). She asserts, in fact, that one goal for feminist scholars is to articulate positions "of what ought to be modeled and represented in the media or public arena" (p. 112). Condit does not appear to recognize the validity of change efforts through strategies that eschew traditional persuasion in the public realm, and she implicitly disputes our claim that activities such as ritualized sewing (Foss, 1996) may constitute a mechanism of emancipation (p. 95).

We agree with Condit that interaction with others constantly produces change in individuals. Although she suggests that implicit in our work on invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995) is the assumption that individuals should live "in a conservative fashion, closed to the suggestions and input of others" (p. 105), this is a misreading of invitational rhetoric. Critical to invitational rhetoric
is a reliance on the input and suggestions of others; the invitational rhetor's goal is to understand the positions of others and not to close the self off from them.

Where we do depart from Condit's perspective concerns the process by which change happens. We call into question how change happens and believe it can happen not only as a result of mass-produced rhetoric but also through an understanding of diverse perspectives on an issue. This understanding may happen in any number of contexts—from interpersonal to mass media—and not simply in those that involve public and/or mass-mediated communication.

To see rhetoric and communication as synonymous denigrates rhetoric. In the gender diversity perspective, Condit distinguishes rhetoric from communication. She defines rhetoric as "public persuasion" (p. 96) or "persuasive endeavors in the public sphere" (p. 96) and defines communication as "private, putatively non-persuasive discourses" (p. 96). Condit sees the maintenance of a distinction between these terms as desirable—and perhaps even critical—if rhetoric is to continue to be held in high regard. For a reason that she does not disclose, she does not want to label her work communication scholarship.

Condit is correct in suggesting that we use the terms rhetoric and communication synonymously. We believe that both rhetoric and communication involve the study of human symbol use and that to confuse rhetoric to symbol use that occurs in the public sphere and communication to symbol use that occurs in the private sphere is dichotomous and unnecessarily constraining. We see value in the fact that all scholars in our discipline may study symbol use in all contexts and forms, applying their particular perspectives to the same data and texts. For us, the distinction between the terms is purely historical. Those of us who grew up professionally in the humanistic tradition of the field tend to call our area of study rhetoric; those whose orientation is toward the social scientific tradition tend to call it communication.

We also want to note that Condit's definition of rhetoric is not the definition of the term held by the majority of rhetorical scholars. A cursory review of the definitions of rhetoric in our field reveals no tendency to restrict the term to the public sphere and suggests that Condit's is a highly unusual conception of rhetoric. A few examples of the definition of rhetoric will serve to illustrate. Ehninger (1972) defines rhetoric as "the rationale of symbolic inducement" (p. 3). Richards (1936/1979) as "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (p. 3), and Black (1965/1978) as "persuasive discourse" (p. 14). For Wallace (1971), rhetoric is "an art of discourse" (p. 3) Brock, Scott, and Chesbro (1989) define it as "the human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols" (p. 14); and Covino and Jolliffe (1995) see rhetoric as "a primarily verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical and gives rise to potentially active texts" (p. 5). Even Condit suggests that the dominant definitional trend in rhetorical studies is toward an interactional orientation, and she cites Farrell's (1990) definition as an example: "a collaborative manner of engaging others through discourse so that contingencies may be resolved, judgments rendered, action produced" (p. 83). Although she seems to approve of this definition (p. 101), it does not restrict symbol use to public contexts.

Condit's tenets concerning gender are visionary, and she provides a means for revolutionizing the construction and conception of gender in our society. The great majority of her tenets, however, have less to do with gender than with rhetoric. What emerges from her articulation of these tenets is that the radical vision of gender she articulates does not engage or transform rhetoric in any way. Although Condit asserts that her perspective "is about the envisioning of new possibilities" in rhetoric (p. 112), "encouraging it to bloom" (p. 113), and "re-envisioning rhetoric" (p. 110), her gender diversity perspective has been formulated in such a way that where and how new conceptions of rhetoric do and can emerge are unclear.

Although Condit calls her perspective the gender diversity perspective, it seems to us to be simply the traditional perspective on rhetoric when the tenets about rhetoric are identified. Her tenets concerning rhetoric claim that a masculine bias is not a primary characteristic of rhetorical studies, which suggests that rhetorical studies currently are sufficiently inclusive of multiple perspectives and diverse rhetorical practices. In the gender diversity perspective, because the rhetor has the authority to decide that beliefs of others must be changed, the rhetor assumes the traditional authoritarian role that has gone unquestioned in rhetorical studies for centuries. Condit's view that eloquence is a useful construct for according value is, again, a traditional view. Eloquence is used to show those who are less skilled or sophisticated in their thinking how they might articulate their thoughts and communicate their interests better. Furthermore, in the gender diversity perspective, change is seen as occurring most effectively through public
and mass-mediated persuasion, a view very much in accord with
the traditional view that speeches are seen to have the most impact
of all rhetorical forms.

Not surprising, then, is that the final tenet of the gender diver-
sity perspective is that rhetoric and communication are not syn-

onymously. Condit’s perspective is a defense of traditional rhetoric, which
means that rhetoric must be kept separate from communication to
maintain its particular characteristics. Rhetoric is seen as having
its own inviolate turf as a means to generate respect for the term,
the scholarship done in its name, and its tradition. Condit’s gender
diversity perspective, radical as it is in its conception of gender, is
equally conservative in its devotion to the traditional conception of
rhetoric.

Feminist-Reconstructionist Perspective

Like Condit, the three of us grew up as scholars in the rhetorical
tradition; its appeal for us was such that we all chose to specialize in
its study and to contribute to its theory and literature. We do not be-
lieve, however, as Condit appears to, that the tradition as it is provides
the only legitimate perspective on rhetoric, that it must be defended at
all cost, and that it cannot or should not be changed. We believe that to
take a feminist perspective and to study gender mean that those inter-
ests and commitments must engage rhetorical studies and that rhetorical
studies must be transformed by the exchange.

To clarify how we see the nature of this exchange, we now turn to
an articulation of the basic tenets of our position—the feminist-recon-
structionist position. Obviously, our description will not be as com-
prehensive or elaborate as Condit’s because of space constraints, but
we hope this articulation will provide a coherence to our position that
may not be as evident in our earlier specific responses to Condit’s
tenets. What follow, then, are the tenets of the feminist-reconstruc-
tionist perspective as we see them.

A patriarchal bias characterizes rhetorical theory. Traditional
rhetorical theory is patriarchal in that it privileges the interests and
concerns of white, heterosexual men. Patriarchy is a system of pow-
er relations that places the communicative practices of these rhetors
at the center and devalues and marginalizes those who are not white,
heterosexual, and male. Not only a particular category of rhetor
but a particular set of values characterizes patriarchy as well as the
rhetorical theory produced within it. These values, which are com-
patible with an ideology of domination, include competition, hier-
archy, elitism, the assignment of personal worth on the basis of
possessions and position, domination, and exploitation.

The rhetoric that derives from patriarchy, not surprisingly, has
been concerned with winning—gaining audience acknowledgment
of the superiority of the rhetor’s position, establishing the superi-
ority of the rhetor over others, and inducing the compliance of oth-
ers. Although the patriarchal bias that characterizes rhetoric is not
unlike pollution in that it is so omnipresent that we fail to notice it,
it is not the only available system or ideology. Other values or ide-
ologies could be used to create rhetorical theories, which would
have dramatically different features from those of patriarchal rhet-
oric (Foss, Foss & Griffin, in press).

The goal of feminist scholarship is the eradication of the ideology
of domination that permeates Western culture. Our primary goal as
feminists is to transform the ideology of oppression that characterizes
most human relationships and Western culture in general. For us, fe-
minism is the effort to disrupt and transform this ideology of domina-
tion; our aim is not only women’s liberation but also the liberation of
gay men and lesbians, people of color, old people, and any oppressed
groups (hooks, 1984, pp. 24, 34; hooks, 1989, p. 25; Wood, 1994,
p. 4). We share this goal with hooks (1989), who explains that the
ideology of domination is marked by “the belief in a notion of superi-
or and inferior, and its concomitant ideology—that the superior should
rule over the inferior . . .” (p. 19). This ideology is so pervasive, hooks
(1994) asserts, that “most citizens of the United States believe in their
heart of hearts that it is natural for a group or an individual to domi-
nate over others” (p. 200).

With hooks, we seek to challenge the entire structure of domina-
tion, seeking to transform relationships and the larger culture “so that
the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize hu-
man interaction can be replaced with feelings of intimacy, mutuality,
and camaraderie” (hooks, 1984, p. 34). We believe that the commu-
nication discipline, through its traditional constructs and theories, par-
ticipates in this culture of domination, and we seek ways in which its
theories and practices can contribute to the creation of more humane
lives for all of us.
The methods of feminist scholarship transform rhetorical theory. The methods used by feminist reconstructionists focus on reconstructing communication constructs and theories so they engender non-exploitative, non-dominating ways of living and communicating. The first step in the process is to identify whose concerns, communicative practices, and values are privileged in current rhetorical theory. In doing so, feminist reconstructionists point to ways in which rhetorical scholars have a limited view of symbol use because of the rhetorical tradition's patriarchal bias, one that privileges the concerns and communicative practices of white, heterosexual males.

A second way in which we seek to transform the ideology of domination is through our efforts to reconceptualize, revision, or reconstruct rhetorical principles and theories that we believe contribute to the ideology of domination. In their place, we attempt to create new, non-dominating constructs and theorists. Our basic approach here is to try to formulate a construct or theory by "forgetting," as much as possible, the traditional conceptions of that construct or theory and trying to formulate how it might look were it to be developed from a different perspective. We might try to reconstruct the notion of ethos, for example, by deliberately paying no attention to the dimensions of intelligence, moral character, and goodwill that typically define it and by trying to reconstruct the concept as it is manifest in the communication of marginalized groups.

Two primary sources serve as data for feminist reconstructionists' efforts to challenge and reconceptualize rhetorical theory. One source is the communicative practices and perspectives typically held by women and other marginalized or oppressed groups. We draw on these to develop different explanations from the mainstream for the nature and function of communication. Because of socialization practices, lack of access to traditional forms of power, and experiences of oppression, these groups often communicate differently from those who are privileged.

Because we sometimes see non-dominating forms of communication in use among such groups, we are able to use these different forms as springboards for envisioning new possibilities for rhetoric and thus to theorize rhetoric differently. These communicative practices thus expand our conceptions of communication and the options available to rhetors. Ultimately, we hope that the new constructs and theories developed will be available for use by all rhetors—women and men, those marginalized and those privileged—so that we all can come to communicate in more equal, reciprocal, mutual, non-exploitative, and humane ways.

A second source of data for our reconstruction efforts is feminist principles. To transform the ideology of domination and to create an emancipatory culture requires, we believe, a commitment to particular principles and values, including self-determination, immanent value, equality, and freedom. We theorize from these principles to try to formulate constructs and theories that facilitate the emancipation concomitant with them. So, for example, because we see the traditional definition of rhetoric as embodying an oppressive and limiting stance, we work to formulate alternate conceptions of rhetoric that are not, at their core, exploitative and oppressive but that contribute to a more respectful way of being a rhetor in the world. Instead of conceptualizing the audience as native and uninformed, as traditional conceptions of rhetoric often do, we apply the value of self-determination and see audience members as authorities on their own lives, with the decisions they make deserving of our respect and understanding.

Gender's role in feminist scholarship is as a heuristic device. As was implicitly suggested in the previous tenet, gender plays a particular role in the feminist-reconstructionist perspective—one that is different from the role seen of gender in the gender diversity perspective. In the feminist-reconstructionist perspective, gender provides a starting point for thinking in new ways about communication; it serves as a heuristic device. The communicative practices used to construct gender, for example, provide opportunities for studying how communicative practices reinscribe patriarchy. The communicative strategies used to silence, marginalize, and oppress women and others serve as case studies for explicating the practices of exploitative communication. The communicative practices of women and other marginalized groups provide options for alternative means of communication to those practiced by the dominant group and inscribed in communication theory. Of particular interest to us are strategies of resistance used by women and others who are oppressed—strategies that lead to new conceptions of personal and social change through communication.

Although early feminist scholarship in communication focused on bringing into the study of communication the voices of women, for us, gender now plays a different role in a feminist perspective.
We continue to value and celebrate women and to work to emancipate them and all people from oppression, but we focus on what women's experiences can tell us about communication.

The ideology of domination should be eradicated not only in rhetorical theory but in our practices as scholars. Just as we cannot separate our feminism from our rhetorical theory, neither can we separate our feminism from our lived practice. We thus try to enact non-dominating practices not simply in the content but also in the form of our scholarship. For us, this commitment is operationalized in a number of ways.

We try not to enact hierarchy and elitism by claiming that our particular position or perspective is superior to another's. To assume that our view is the right way would be to assume an elitism and an effort to dominate the thinking of others that is incompatible with our feminism. Many feminist perspectives exist, and we believe that all of them increase our understanding of communication as it interacts with domination. Likewise, we try not to devalue perspectives with which we disagree, knowing that they are useful positions and catalysts for many other scholars. We work to recognize and acknowledge the contributions of all scholars, including those who have perspectives different from ours.

Another way in which we try to enact our feminism in our scholarly practice is through an accessible style of writing. As we disseminate the results of our thinking and research, we try to do so in an accessible way so that our ideas are understandable to the widest possible audience. Work that is “difficult to comprehend” and “linguistically convoluted” (Hicks, 1989, p. 40) reinscribes the politics of domination and perpetuates elitism. An accessible style of writing not only allows ideas that may be useful to be disseminated but also embodies an equality that challenges hierarchy and structures of domination.

Conclusion

The above description of our feminist perspective should make clear why we have chosen the label of feminist reconstruction for our position rather than the label of gender dichotomist that Condit uses to describe it. We have chosen to feature the term feminist rather than gender for two reasons. One is that feminist carries with it the commitment to a political position—the commitment to disrupt and transform the ideology of oppression—that the term gender does not. In addition, because feminists were among the first to question and challenge the hegemony of communication theory and practice, we want to honor that history by using the term feminist that they originally used for themselves and their work.

The reconstruction aspect of the label points to the engagement or dialectic we see as crucial between our political commitment to disrupting the ideology of domination and rhetorical theory. To see through a feminist lens, for us, means that we must call into question all aspects of our lives, including our scholarly products and practices. For us, feminism necessarily exposes the biases of rhetorical theory, its commitments, and the resulting limitations; thus, the rhetorical tradition cannot remain pure, isolated, and untouched by our feminism. We thus claim the label feminist reconstruction to suggest the reconstruction of rhetoric through a feminist lens that is at the heart of the kind of feminism we try to practice.

Feminist scholars in rhetorical studies conceptualize the relationship between gender and rhetoric in strikingly different ways. The results are very different kinds of feminist rhetorical scholarship, representing very different perspectives. We applaud the diversity represented in the two perspectives outlined here, knowing that the conversation about gender and rhetoric is enhanced through diverse perspectives that challenge all of us to think in more careful, systematic, and sophisticated ways about gender, its impacts on rhetoric, and the emancipation of the rhetorical tradition from its strictures.

Notes

1All quotations and references to Condit in this essay are from Condit, C. M. (1997). In praise of eloquent diversity: Gender and rhetoric as public persuasion. Women's Studies in Communication, 20, 91-116.
2We acknowledge that other dimensions of the identities of white, heterosexual men may affect the status they are accorded in patriarchy—class and physical ability, for examples.

References


