

A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

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Much can be said about what we know and believe about gender and gender differences. We know, for example, that some differences and similarities exist in the communication behaviors of men and women, that language itself characterizes men and women in different ways, and that our communication sometimes changes according to whether the receiver is male or female. In the process of discovering such knowledge, however, we rarely stop to examine the structure on which this knowledge is based—the structure that enables us to know what we know. Neither do we tend to question whether this structure is an appropriate one for our study.

Michel Foucault's notion of the "discursive formation" makes clear the connection between a structure or framework and the kind of knowledge that is able to be known within it. A discursive formation is a characteristic system, structure, or network that defines the conditions for the possibility of knowledge; it is a style for the organization of knowledge. This framework for knowledge is constituted by a shared body of discourse or particular discursive practices. Only a particular kind of knowledge is allowed by particular discursive formations, and nothing else receives support in the discourse.¹

A discursive formation assumes the character it does because of the rules that govern it. These rules are not likely to be conscious and often cannot be articulated without difficulty, but they determine the possibilities for the content and form of the discourse. Rules, for example, determine what is able to be talked about, who is allowed to speak or write, the qualifications these individuals must

meet in order to engage in discourse on a subject, the kinds of discourse they must produce, which terms in the discourse are recognized as valid, and how concepts and theories are formulated.²

Foucault's notion of the discursive formation, which determines knowledge through a particular set of rules, seems applicable to research in gender and communication. By narrowing Foucault's notion of the discursive formation (which he sees as operating throughout all of the disciplines in a culture), we can see research on gender and communication as one discursive formation. This formation is governed by certain rules about what is able to be talked about—and thus known—in our research and kinds of discourse that must be produced in order to "count" as research.

An examination of the discursive practices that govern our research reveals some very clear rules about what is considered to be a "true" statement or to be of significance in research. In the following list, I suggest some of the rules that appear to govern research in gender and communication—and, in fact, research on communication in general. These rules point to some of the characteristics and qualities our discourse must have in order to be accepted as research and thus knowledge.

Rules Governing Research on Gender and Communication

1. *Form of Study:* Research studies produce knowledge. They are characterized by elements such as the citing of appropriate literature, setting the context for the study, qualifying one's findings, and reporting on data in prescribed ways.

2. *Contributions to Theory*: Theoretical knowledge is developed through linear contributions to theory, in which one study builds on previous studies and adds in a building-block fashion to those studies. We begin studies, for example, by citing relevant previous literature and conclude them by relating our findings to that body of literature.
3. *Stance of Investigator*: Knowledge is achieved through an objective stance by the investigator. Even when the impossibility of such objectivity is acknowledged, it still is the goal for which the investigator strives.
4. *Breadth of Study*: Knowledge is produced by limiting and controlling a small number of variables. Studies must have a narrow focus so that variables can be controlled.
5. *Reliability*: A particular relationship or phenomenon is regarded as true if several studies attain the same results and if replications of a study over time produce the same findings.

Certainly, there are many other such rules that govern our research and that tell us what knowledge is valid and what is not. But what is interesting about these rules is their conformity to what has been labeled the "male perspective" or the "male system." Psychologist Anne Wilson Schaef discusses how a "White Male System" operates in our culture, surrounding and permeating our lives: "We all live in it. We have been educationally, politically, economically, philosophically, and theologically trained in it, and our emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual survival have depended on our knowing and supporting the system."³ Although this currently is the dominant system in our culture, Schaef argues, alternative systems or perspectives exist, including the Black, Chicano, Native American, and female systems.⁴

Schaef delineates what she believes to be the characteristics of the male system in contrast to the female system. While the male system makes decisions through majority rule, the female

system's view of decision making is that it is a consensual process. The male system emphasizes a clock-oriented conception of time; in contrast, the female system has a view of time as a process. The male system focuses on work as the center of one's life, while the focus in the female system is on relationships. Differences exist in the view of power in the two systems as well. The male system sees power as limited and something that must be hoarded, while the female system's view of power is that it is limitless and should be shared. Finally, the female system largely employs an intuitive method of thinking, while the male system uses a logical one. Without going into a great deal of detail on these two systems, we can see how the rules that govern our investigations of gender and communication—concerned with producing "research" studies, linearity, objectivity, and the like—seem to conform largely to a male perspective.

On what is our knowledge based, then, in research on gender and communication? Notions suggested by Foucault and Schaef seem to suggest that our knowledge is rooted in a discursive formation characterized by a male perspective and governed by rules that perpetuate that perspective and do not see as valid or true knowledge what is derived from and informed by a female perspective. Suppose we adopted a female perspective, thus creating a new discursive formation for our research with new rules. What kinds of rules might govern such research? A few examples will illustrate how different these rules might be from those that govern our current structure for the generation of knowledge:

Rules Governing Research on Gender and Communication: A Female Perspective

1. *Form of Study*: Poetry, drama, diaries, and works of art produce knowledge about gender and communication in and of themselves. They do not have to be made the subject of research studies in order to produce knowledge. A play, a poem, or a work of art such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, for

example, generate valid understanding of how gender relates to communication.

2. *Contributions to Theory:* The goal of investigation into gender and communication is conversation about data, which often may be accomplished best by going outside of the linear framework established by previous research. Instead of building on previous research and simply adding to that line of theory development as a result of a study, we might "introduce new topics of conversation" or "speak in new ways" about our findings, deliberately not fitting them into previous research to discover new ways to converse about the topic.
3. *Stance of Investigator:* Investigation of a subject through personal involvement with it or personal intuition about it is legitimate. Rather than striving to collect data that reflect a similar perspective by a number of people, the investigator builds a case for the legitimacy of his or her personal intuition about and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied.
4. *Breadth of Study:* Rather than focusing on the study of limited, controlled, narrowly defined variables, a holistic perspective defines a much broader type of study. Such a study focuses less on specific "facts" and data and more on the over-arching, holistic principles that govern and give significance to the "facts." A Marxist perspective would provide a different interpretation to findings about power and status in our research, for example, than would a democratic perspective, just as a view of power as limited would lead us to interpret data differently from a view of power as shared.
5. *Reliability:* The expression of one voice at one moment constitutes valid and significant knowledge. Thus, one individual's speaking style, method of interaction, or expression through a poem constitutes significant knowledge about gender and communication.

One individual's perspective need not be repeated by numerous others before it is "heard" and seen as providing valid knowledge. In fact, those whose expressions are different from any others well may provide us with the most interesting and significant knowledge.

A specific example of how research conducted using the rules of a female perspective might look will clarify the differences between our current research structure and a female one. Assume we want to investigate what women's communication behaviors reveal about their perceptions of their status or power in particular situations. Using a female-oriented perspective or structure for knowledge, we might examine plays and works of art by women as part of our data-gathering process. We might ourselves be part of our study, employing our own reactions to the phenomenon under investigation as data and considering them to be important. In our research report, we might deliberately formulate as many interpretations of our data as possible—many that oppose findings and interpretations in previous research in order to create a break with it and to allow new perspectives on the data to be heard and discussed. Rather than discussing the results of the study by relating the data to theory, we might begin with various theoretical perspectives on power and seek to discover the many ways in which they allow us to view our data and findings.

Admittedly, a study characterized by such qualities probably seems to us worthless and even absurd at this point. Yet, how much of our reaction is the result of the discursive formation in which we have been trained—that of the male, rather than the female, perspective?

If we are serious about our research in the area of gender and communication, we need to question the framework of our knowledge and replace or supplement it, if necessary. Perhaps, as a result, we will discover new ways of doing research, new concepts to investigate, new kinds of data to consider as valid, new populations to study, new ways of reporting research, and as a result, new conceptions of communication.

Notes

¹For a discussion of Foucault's notion of the discursive formation, see: Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), pp. xx, 191, 216.

²Foucault's concept of rules and the various rules he sees in discursive formations are discussed in Foucault, *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge, pp. 41-44, 56-57; and Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 216-19.

³Anne Wilson Schaef, *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in the White Male Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), p. 5

⁴Schaef, p. 3.