

WHAT DISTINGUISHES FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES?

Sonja K. Foss and Karen A. Foss

The question that is the subject of this program really could be considered two separate questions: "What ought to distinguish feminist scholarship in communication studies?" and "What presently distinguishes feminist scholarship in communication studies?" We argue that two different responses must be given to these questions. What feminist scholarship ought to be and what it is now are not one and the same. We first will discuss the ideal—what ought to be—and then will examine the current status of feminist research.

What Ought to Distinguish Feminist Scholarship?

We do not see feminist scholarship distinguished by a unique set of methodological practices. Feminist research shares many assumptions and methods with "new-paradigm" scholars. Taking the label from Thomas Kuhn's work on how paradigm shifts occur in the scientific community, scholars who identify with the new paradigm exhibit a collective sense of dissatisfaction with the dominant research paradigm; many of them incorporate into their approaches to inquiry assumptions and methods consistent with the qualities of women's experiences that are fundamental to the feminist perspective.¹ For example, both feminist and new-paradigm scholars emphasize wholes rather than parts, process rather than structure, knowledge as a

process of interconnection rather than hierarchy, approximate descriptions rather than absolute truth, and cooperation rather than competition.² What does distinguish feminist research, then, is not methodology but the objective of research.

The distinguishing feature of feminist scholarship is the question it asks. Its focus is on how gender is constructed through communication and how gender informs communication. Thus, gender is not one of many variables studied by the feminist scholar; it is the major element studied.

The central concern with the construction of gender means that feminist scholars challenge the established research system in three basic ways. First, feminist research considers women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences as appropriate and important data for analysis. Rather than generalizing from men to create an explanation for the experience of both men and women, feminist inquiry incorporates the values and qualities that characterize women's experiences—qualities such as interdependence, emotionality, a sense of self-questioning or vulnerability, wholeness, a focus on process rather than product, multiplicity, and paradox.³ In the development of constructs and theories within the feminist perspective, the qualities of women's experiences are taken into account, taken seriously, and valued.

A second way in which the feminist perspective constitutes a challenge to the existing research framework is in its formulation of new rules for how knowledge is constructed. Adoption of the feminist perspective does not mean simply grafting women's concerns onto the construction and theories of men's knowledge that

Dr. Sonja Foss is Associate Professor of Speech at the University of Oregon, and Dr. Karen Foss is Associate Professor of Speech Communication at Humboldt State University.

are already in place. Rather, feminist scholars seek to change the rules for the construction of knowledge so they reflect women's experience and incorporate women's values. When qualities of women's experiences such as self-questioning and multiplicity are used to create rules for the construction of knowledge, very different kinds of knowledge result. Roberts provides examples of such different knowledge:

But what if the masculinist world view, which has depended on a logic of time lines, is erroneous? What if the most fundamental error is the search for monocausation? What if the world is really a field of interconnecting events, arranged in patterns of multiple meaning? What if the search for simplistic "orderliness" is, itself, the common problem . . . 74

Third, the feminist perspective has a practical, activist dimension that constitutes a challenge to the established research tradition as well. Adoption of a feminist perspective in research asks that the basic constructs of masculinity and femininity be changed. Thus, the ultimate consequence of research informed by a feminist perspective is social change. In contrast to the current dominant research paradigm, which seeks to predict human behavior, the feminist perspective seeks to understand human behavior and through that understanding, to change social life. Feminist scholars see how gender has been constructed to denigrate women and seek to change that construction.

What Distinguishes Feminist Scholarship Now?

What we have been describing are the features of feminist scholarship as it ideally should look. We do not believe, however, that most of what is labeled feminist research looks like our description. Rather, the distinguishing feature of current work is accommodation.

A major obstacle to feminist researchers in any field, including communication, is publishing the results of the research. But publication of feminist

research is difficult because such research constitutes a challenge to the dominant research mode, represented by the accepted publishing outlets of the field. Thus, a major dilemma facing feminist researchers is how to challenge and simultaneously gain visibility and legitimation for the feminist perspective in the publications of our discipline, which may be unsupportive or unaware of it.

As a result of this dilemma facing feminist scholars, they have had to try to adjust their work to the established research tradition. Thus, feminist work in communication currently is characterized by accommodation. To be published in a mainstream journal, the reputation of which is based on publication of research derived from a non-feminist framework, a scholar likely will have had to alter the presentation of feminist notions. Accommodation strategies include the use of traditional, non-feminist approaches to a study about gender⁵ or highlighting features of women's experience in a traditional study.⁶ Another strategy of accommodation is the use of women's experiences as data—data connected to women's lives but regarded as unimportant in the traditional research framework.⁷ Or, feminist researchers might cite non-gender research that already is accepted in the discipline of communication as a backdrop for their studies.⁸ Still another strategy of accommodation includes using the conclusion of an essay to highlight and raise issues germane to the feminist perspective.⁹

We argue, then, that at present, the distinguishing feature of the feminist perspective is accommodation. In order to gain initial visibility and begin to be acknowledged as an alternative research frame, the feminist perspective must find its way into publication, a process that requires adjustments to the expectations of the status quo. While we understand the need for adaptation in order to succeed in making the feminist perspective an accepted and valued research framework, feminist scholars in communication now need to move beyond accommodation to a phase where the *challenge* of the feminist perspective takes precedence over *accommodation*. A plateau seems to have been reached with the feminist perspective; it is visible only when it ac-

commodates in major ways. In fact, we might argue that the accommodations have become institutionalized patterns for publishing feminist research. We would like to see the feminist perspective move to the next stage of development so that it can become a fully realized—rather than just a partially expressed—voice in the discipline of communication.

Notes

¹The new paradigm is not an identifiable and cohesive group of scholars who share a singular purpose and methodology. In fact, the movement is multidisciplinary and manifest in a variety of formats and vocabularies. Clifford Geertz in anthropology, Rom Harré and Kenneth Gergen in psychology, Richard Rorty in philosophy, and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in sociology are identified with various aspects of new-paradigm thinking in the social sciences.

²These characteristics are adapted from Fritjof Capra, "The Concept of Paradigm and Paradigm Shift," *ReVision*, 9 (Summer/Fall 1986), 11-12.

³These qualities are suggested in, among other works, Gayle Kimball, ed., *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1981) and Anne Wilson Schaef, *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in the White Male Society* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1981).

⁴Joan L. Roberts, "Pictures of Power and Powerlessness: A Personal Synthesis," in *Beyond Intellectual Sexism: A New Woman, a New Reality*, ed. Joan L. Roberts (New York: David McKay, 1976), p. 46.

⁵For an example of this strategy of accommodation, see Patricia Hayes Bradley, "The Folk-Linguistics of Women's Speech: An Empirical Examination," *Communication Monographs*, 48 (March 1981), 73-90.

⁶Sandra L. Ragan and Victoria Aarons discuss silence, for example, in "Women's Response to Men's Silence: A Fictional Analysis," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 9 (Fall 1986), 67-75.

⁷Women's use of the telephone is an example of such data that is briefly discussed in Lana F. Rakow, "Rethinking Gender Research in Communication," *Journal of Communication*, 36 (Autumn 1986), 11-26.

⁸For an example of the use of this strategy, see Martha Solomon, "The 'Positive Woman's' Journey: A Mythic Analysis of the Rhetoric of STOP ERA," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65 (October 1979), 263-74. Solomon uses Northrop Frye's notions of the *mythoi* of romance to study the ERA.

⁹For an example of this strategy, see Myra W. Isenhardt, "An Investigation of the Relationship of Sex and Sex Role to the Ability to Decode Nonverbal Cues," *Human Communication Research*, 6 (Summer 1980), 316.