

INTRODUCTION: THEORIZING COMMUNICATION FROM MARGINALIZED PERSPECTIVES

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*There's more than one answer to these questions,
Pointing me in a crooked line,
And the less I seek my source from some definitive
The closer I am to fine.*

*"Closer to Fine"
Indigo Girls*

This special issue provides an outlet for work that theorizes communication from marginalized perspectives. Although we may appear to be a methodological odd couple—typically, Sonja uses rhetorical methods and Eileen uses quantitative methods—we share at least one common frustration: many of our questions cannot be answered adequately by traditional communication theory. We are not alone in this frustration. More and more conference papers, journal articles, and books are addressing the imperative to expand or transform the boundaries of communication theory, a need underscored by the 40 submissions we received for this special issue. We advocate theoretic pluralism and an appreciation for different theorizing and methods that expand our explanatory lenses rather than constrain us by the myopia of dogmatic theory.

The communication discipline has theorized interaction primarily within traditional hegemonic models. As a result, alternative theories that are derived from different communicative experiences have been marginalized. These theories, however, have the potential to transform the study of communication in important and useful ways. Not only do they unsettle and challenge common assumptions about communication and foster reconsideration of what has been taken for granted in the communication tradition, but they remind us not to lose sight of the everyday applicability of communication theory for all people. The goal of this special issue of *Communication Studies* is to provide examples of such alternative theories and to demonstrate how they can expand understanding of the nature and function of communicative processes.

Challenges to mainstream communication theories through the construction of theory from marginalized perspectives usually are developed through two approaches. In one, the goal is inclusion, a process in which scholars seek to highlight the communicative practices of marginalized groups and to incorporate them as data in the investigation of communicative processes. Brenda J. Allen's essay, "Feminist Standpoint Theory: A Black Woman's (Re)view of Organizational Socialization," exemplifies the contributions such an approach can make to the study of communication. She applies feminist standpoint epistemology to an analysis of organizational socialization, the processes by which individuals become integrated into organizations. By giving voice to the experiences of a woman of color, Allen helps to redress the long-standing exclusion in research and theory of the experiences of Black women, who constitute a significant segment of the workplace. As a result, she deconstructs a core construct in organizational communication and provides a more accurate picture of it than previ-

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ously had existed. Work such as Allen's is important because it expands awareness of the variety and scope of communicative activity, makes problematic forms of communication assumed to be universal, and provides new data that eventually will not be able to be fit into previously formulated communication constructs and theories.

A second approach for theorizing communication from marginalized perspectives involves the reconceptualization of communicative constructs using the knowledge gained from the study of alternate communication practices. When the communicative processes of people of color or other marginalized groups no longer can be confined to the boundaries of already conceived communication notions, the rules for the construction of knowledge must be changed to reflect the experiences and values of these groups. When scholars truly take seriously the communicative practices of marginalized groups, their practices must be allowed to reconstruct our traditional theories, constructs, and models.

The work of reconceptualization commonly is accomplished by beginning research from non-traditional starting points. Some scholars who engage in this work begin with a different ideological starting point—usually one aligned with or espoused by members of a particular marginalized community—and develop communication theory from it. Feminist theory used as a starting point, for example, might begin with a commitment to the principles of self-determination, equality, and immanent value. Similarly, a study in which Afrocentric theory is used as a starting point might be rooted in a featuring of principles such as community, harmony, and *nommo* (action). The theory created from these various starting points is likely to be significantly different from that created from the principles that typically undergird communication theory.

Yet another means for accomplishing the reconceptualization or revisioning of communication constructs and theory is to work inductively from communicative texts or artifacts produced by marginalized groups. In this process, scholars examine communicative practices to discover what a construct or theory would look like if it were formulated from these specific data. Key to success in this process is the scholar's effort to "forget" the configuration of the traditional construct or theory so that new conceptions of it are allowed to emerge.

Cindy L. Griffin's essay, "A Web of Reasons: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Re-Weaving of Form," provides an example of reconceptualization from a specific text. She uses Wollstonecraft's book as data from which to develop a non-linear web model of argument. She suggests that Wollstonecraft's arguments best are understood as a web of ideas, woven together through definition, redefinition, repetition, and a pattern of interconnection. As such, the web model challenges linear theories of argumentation and raises questions regarding the nature, function, and criteria used to determine appropriateness of form.

Dwight E. Brooks and Walter R. Jacobs provide another example of this kind of reconceptualization in their essay, "Black Men in the Margins: *Space Traders* and the Interpositional Strategy Against B(0)acklash." They use the televisual narrative of Home Box Office's *Space Traders* to theorize the notion of interpositionality, the ability to traverse disparate cultural identities and traditions, which they suggest as an alternative to the classical notion of marginality. Their analysis of *Space Traders* offers a communicative strategy for responding to backlash, one in which interposers work to become critical social agents. Rather than using marginality as a strategy to fit in, Brooks and Jacobs suggest that marginalized individuals use interpositionality as an act of resistance in an attempt to create anti-essentialist identities and more democratic spaces.

"Narratives of Silence: Rethinking Gender, Agency, and Power from the Communication Experiences of Battered Women in South India," by Radha S. Hegde, is an example of the process of reconceptualization through an exploration of the experiences of battered women in south India. She challenges and reconceptualizes the notions of the autonomous individual agent and the idea of power (as well as resistance to power) as a result of her study and suggests that these concepts be problematized in communication theory to reflect the complexity of the communication of battered women.

Heidi M. Reeder's essay, "A Critical Look at Gender Difference in Communication Research," models another part of the process of reconceptualization—its deconstruction. Her essay analyzes the assumptions, ideologies, and methodologies that undergird the foundation for much of the research conducted on gender differences in interpersonal communication. She thus illustrates the kind of hard thinking that precedes the development of marginalized communicative practices. Reeder offers suggestions for research on gender difference in interpersonal communication by questioning the difference, and research on gender differences.

The reconceptualization that is the ultimate goal of theorizing from the perspective of marginalized groups is difficult work, a fact to which the scholars featured in this special issue can attest. It requires the same careful observation of data and theory building required of all scholars. But, in addition, it requires a stance—the courage to transgress and to challenge well-established, traditional communication theories that some scholars have come to believe constitute accurate representations of communication. It also requires a willingness to defend the final product—which often is untested and sacred conceptions—in the face of sometimes vicious critiques (hooks (1990, p. 149) suggests, locating oneself in "this space of radical openness" and "difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk.")

So why do those of us who engage in this difficult process do this kind of work? After all, often rewarded with cries of heresy and sometimes very real professional outcomes. We do this work in part because we want to facilitate a comprehensive description of communication processes—to describe as fully as possible the diverse communicative experiences that characterize symbol use in communication. We also are committed to the use of communication to challenge and transform the ideology of domination that pervades Western culture and to the communication discipline is not exempt. Marginalized voices allow us to see how the center of the discipline is constructed through the devaluation of domination, the maintenance of privilege, and the devaluation of difference. We clarify the values and ideologies of our discipline by showing us alternative ways of seeing.

Many individuals' commitments to voicing marginalized perspectives constitute this special issue. We wish to thank all of the scholars who submitted essays to this issue as well as the reviewers whose insightful comments enabled it to come into being. We also are grateful to the editor of *Communication Studies*, J. Kevin B. Reid, for the opportunity to showcase and encourage scholarship that produces theory from marginalized perspectives. All of those who contributed to this issue truly do enact a resistance to the marginalization of which hooks (1990, p. 153) writes. This is not a marginality that oppresses structures but "that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—of radical openness and possibility." As a result of the efforts of all of these individuals, we "are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical care-

which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world."

REVIEWERS FOR THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

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