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Taking a Feminist Turn

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Applied communication researchers seek to make a difference in the world by focusing on critical features of communication grounded in everyday discourse and practices. Wood (2000) noted that applied communication research creates a distinctive “posture toward the goals of scholarly inquiry, an inclination to ask particularly pragmatic questions about how communication does, might, and should operate in a range of settings and how communication practices in sundry settings inform theory” (p. 189). Feminist research takes this pragmatic posture a step further by requiring attention to the ongoing tensions between reinforcement of dominant societal expectations and personal agency. When gender is seen as an organizing principle for everyday interactions as influenced by institutional and societal structures, and when researchers advocate for equitable participation of women and men in communication venues, applied communication scholarship and practice takes a feminist turn.

A feminist perspective also challenges the biology-is-destiny approach, from its simplest form in sex-difference research to more complex understanding of gendered processes and practices. In this feminist turn, scholars question how cultural reifications of difference, particularly those assumed to be caused by biology, influence people’s understandings of self and other (Turner & Sterk, 1994). For scholars in the field of communication, feminist research has grown and expanded in all contexts since initial publications over 30 years ago. As Dow and Condit (2005) noted, much of contemporary feminist communication research cuts across traditional contexts in ways that emphasize sex-difference research, analyses of gender ideology and practices that perpetuate gender injustice, and construction of feminist theoretical frameworks. As such, feminist scholarship responds to challenges, such as appropriate ways to deal with ethical concerns and develop systems that promote diversity, that people face and will continue to face in a global society (E. Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004).

In this chapter, we attend to the processes by which gender politicizes communication
across applied communication contexts. The research we highlight is not just “gender sensitive” in terms of including sex as a demographic variable but is overtly feminist with respect to uncovering inequitable power relations based on biological sex and psychological gender, and suggesting alternative, more equitable, ways of communicating. Feminist applied communication research not only highlights how communication enacts gender but also how communication can contest and change gender roles and relations, leading to a fuller life for all participants. As such, this research flows from an emancipatory agenda.

In a publication sponsored by the National Communication Association, Poole and Walther (2002) argued that the communication field should work toward enhancing a “vigorous, self-renewing democracy,” the “health and well-being of all,” organizational and institutional change to “enable our society to prosper in the emerging global economy,” and people’s abilities to enjoy “meaningful lives and...fulfilling relationships” (p. 4). Taking our cue from that agenda, we propose a feminist agenda for applied communication research whose aim is to (1) promote full, empowered participation of all people in communication that dispels gender hierarchies; (2) define well-being as equitable access to material and symbolic resources, as well as voice in the distribution of those resources; (3) suggest alternatives to normative, gendered communication processes across contexts; and (4) promote fulfilling human relationships that honor women and men as full human beings.

We begin by describing feminist research developments in four applied communication contexts: family life, educational institutions, organizations, and health care. Although there are many other contexts that we could have included in this chapter, we selected these four for several reasons. Not only do these contexts represent key applied areas that span a person’s life but they also progress from an individual’s “first group” (i.e., family) to more macrosettings in which contexts overlap (e.g., health communication is shaped by and shapes organizational and interpersonal communication, as well as instruction in health education). More important, we included contexts that have been institutionalized in our field as some of the earliest settings in which communication was studied (i.e., instructional and organizational communication), as well as some newer areas that have grown out of and cut across intradisciplinary areas (i.e., family and health communication), and that show great promise in terms of interventions, policy making, and policy implementation.

Within each of these four contexts, we review recent published research and, in particular, discuss the impact of historical, social, economic, and cultural forces on the lives of people in the United States, as well as around the globe. We draw the sections together by questioning the differences that this research should make for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. We use the United States as one example of how applied communication research affects and should affect public policy. As a result, we integrate research on applied communication contexts in a section on politicizing gender, which focuses on how this research makes a difference in U.S. public policies and beyond. In our conclusion, we reaffirm feminist commitments to put scholarship into practice and to develop applied communication research programs around human needs, particularly those of women. This chapter, thus, provides a comprehensive, yet concise, feminist view of gender in applied communication research.

Overview of Gendered Communication within Applied Contexts

In this section, we describe some traditional and emerging developments in gendered communication research. In each subsection, we begin with investigations of sex dif-
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ferences and then broaden the review with studies on gendered interaction, organizing processes, and societal ramifications. As mentioned, we focus attention on four applied communication contexts: (1) empowering family, (2) constructing pedagogy, (3) organizing gender, and (4) gendering health.

Empowering Family

The family forms a key context for learning and enacting gender. As Galvin (2004) observed, “Gender is embedded in all family interactions as a thread or theme, implicit or explicit” (p. 311). Gender literally is talked into being through family encounters, ranging from stereotyped admonitions (e.g. “Boys don’t cry” and “Girls don’t like math”) to discussions about task allocation and a wide range of other everyday conversations. However, according to Wood (2006), any approach to understanding the relationship between family and gender presupposes a definition of family, but defining family is not a simple or innocent undertaking; it involves ideology and “depends on the particularities of specific cultures that exist in specific historical moments” (p. 198). These considerations make defining family a site of struggle (Coontz, 1999).

We continue this struggle, in large part, because of the importance of family in shaping individuals’ personalities and enduring communication patterns. The family has been called “the first group” (Socha, 1999) because members of a family-of-origin typically constitute the first and longest lasting set of connections of a person’s life (see Socha, this volume). As Bochner (1976) observed, families are characterized by a state of structural permanence that makes them, unlike any other group, significant socializing agents.

Despite the acknowledgment of the family’s critical importance, our understanding of what constitutes a family is not universal. By some counts, there are over 200 definitions for family (Jorgenson, 1994). To contend with this conceptual confusion and to avoid excluding any type of family, Turner and West (2006) argued for an inclusive definition, asserting that any group whose members call themselves a “family” is one. Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1993) also circumvented the definitional problem by focusing on metaphors about family that underscore researchers’ approaches to the study of family communication—metaphors that include a private miniculture, a resource-exchange system, and a set of relationships.

It is possible to review the literature focused on gender in the family context using the metaphors discussed by Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1993). The metaphor of a private culture privileges family narratives, storytelling processes, and other meaning-making practices (Wood, 1998). Langellier and Peterson (2004) maintained that the processes of constructing stories and the narratives themselves actually define family, asserting that “family is a human communication practice—as much a way of ‘doing things with words’ as it is a set of ties and sentiments” (p. 33). Narayan (1997) also argued that family storytelling embodies a feminist tension, noting that daughters and mothers often recount the same stories in different terms, which reflects their different approaches to issues affecting women.

Langellier and Peterson (2004) pointed out the importance of focusing on how storytelling tasks, such as ordering narrative events, construct gender in the family culture. They contrasted a mother–daughter interaction with a father–son interaction in two families. Although both pairs came from comparable families in the same geographic locale, the interactions in these families proceeded differently, in part, because of gendered processes. Langellier and Peterson observed that the female pair told their story through conarrating, capturing a sense of playfulness and establishing alliances across generations. In the father–son interaction, “the son serves as a host who announces and
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showcases his father’s stories” (Langellier & Peterson, p. 92). The son’s contributions supported the father’s story and persona; the son did not further develop the story in the same way the daughter did for her mother. The two storytelling patterns emerged out of the strategic demands of the situation, and Langellier and Peterson concluded that family provides a context for gender performance, a process that is “strategic and multiply contextualized” (p. 93).

In viewing family as a resource-exchange system, Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1993) focused on family members’ provision of resources to one another. In family interactions, gendered notions of resources surface in multiple, layered ways. According to Jurik (1998), many women work at home to reconcile or balance the competing demands of career and family, a movement that Jurik called a “gendered phenomenon” (p. 8). Buzzanell and Turner (2003) observed balance in other ways, finding that, in White, middle-class U.S. families where a male wage earner had lost his job, a main function of the family’s communication was to reinstitute traditional masculinities, which was accomplished through complex message transactions allowing family members to maintain viewing these men as firmly ensconced in the world of work, despite having lost their jobs. Specifically, Buzzanell and Turner asserted that men created this construction themselves, but because their masculinities were fragile, they required family members’ active collaboration to sustain their perception. One result of this collaboration was to situate men’s stories of career, work, and other activities as primary in the family and to reify men’s place in the public space.

Finally, considering family as a set of relationships means that a cluster of overlapping relationships (e.g., mother–daughter, mother–son, husband–wife, brother–brother, aunt–niece, and grandmother–grandson) taken together constitutes family (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). Examining the family through a relational lens has been common in the communication literature. In their reviews of family communication literature, Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1985) and Vangelisti (1993) noted that few studies examine communication in the whole family; instead, most use this relationship metaphor to examine some specific family dyad. Although scholars have critiqued this metaphor as underrepresenting family, it continues to be a dominant approach, with mother–daughter relationships being the dyad studied most in the literature on family (Penington & Turner, 2004).

Some researchers, however, have established connections between and among family dyads in complex ways. Woodward (1999) called female intergenerational relationships in the family the “motherline,” by which she meant the three-generational line from grandmother to adult daughter/mother to daughter/granddaughter. Edelman (1999) touched on the motherline’s continuity and differentiation as she watched her daughter play: “She is a child and I am her mother; she is me and I am my mother; she is my mother and I am my grandmother” (p. 254).

In addition, researchers have examined gender differences in the family context. For example, Fitness and Duffield (2004) reviewed gender differences in marital emotion communication, noting that women generally are better than men at both encoding and decoding emotions. In discussing family influences on health, D. J. Jones, Beach, and Jackson’s (2004) literature review noted gender differences in responses to conflict, leading them to conclude that women are more likely than men to suffer adverse health effects as a result of family conflict.

Although all of this research is important, most of it does not provide a specifically feminist approach to examining family and family communication. This turn is needed to interrogate some of the taken-for-granted aspects of families and to more fully illuminate family communicative practices. As Cassidy (2001) commented, entrenched gen-
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Adopted notions permeate the family context and frame U.S. homes as the site of women’s labor and influence (see also Bem, 1993; Sullivan & Turner, 1996; Tronto, 1993), in contrast to the public sphere, where men exert influence.

This gendered bifurcation has been problematized in the literature examining the relationship between work and family (e.g., Garlick, Dixon, & Allen, 1992; Jorgenson, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). As Edley (2004) noted, “At work, individuals are located predominantly in the public realm of business and economics but do not shed private roles of parent, significant other, sibling, child, and friend” (p. 257). However, Kanter (1977) found that corporate America requires its workers to forget about loyalties to anyone or anything in their private lives, and J. Martin (1990; see also Buzanell & Liu, 2006) argued that this requirement creates suppressed gender conflicts in the workplace, as home-related concerns are ignored.

Wood (2006) noted that training a feminist lens on family prompts scholars to ask different questions than previously posed, such as how fathers reconcile careers and parenting, why a father’s home chores are called “helping out,” and why sex discrimination is accepted in task assignments at home but not in the workplace. As Wood (2006) pointed out, these are merely some of the questions that taking a feminist turn prompts us to ask. By pursuing such questions, we would discover a wealth of information that addressed policy and other applied issues with reference to family.

However, no matter what lens is used to conceptualize family, the enactment of gender is an inescapable fact of family life. Gendering, through communication, is embedded in the fabric of family encounters, and family encounters reflect gendered assumptions endemic to the family, as well as those superimposed from the general culture. It is impossible to speak of family, therefore, without acknowledging gender, and it is impossible to speak of gender without acknowledging that the context of family animates gender in specific, significant ways. Taking a feminist turn, consequently, demands that applied communication scholars examine this relationship in a more critical manner to empower both women and men.

Constructing Pedagogy

Ever since the American Association of University Women’s (AAUW; 1992) pioneering work on the chilly climate for women in the classroom, the impact of gender on the applied communication of teaching has been a key topic. After the family group, school acts as a “second group,” serving as a crucial training ground for relational learning, in general (e.g., T. H. Allen & Plax, 2002), and gender relations, in particular. Whether the particular context is elementary, middle, or high school, or college/university, what constitutes gender-sensitive pedagogy has been a site of struggle for the past decade.

Early scholarship on gender and education focused on differences between the sexes, such as girls’ seemingly lesser abilities in math and science and boys’ higher standardized test scores, and how such differences turned into disadvantages for females, such as less access to higher level courses and less ability to get into highly selective colleges (Bunch & Pollack, 1983). Publication of the book *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* in 1986 by Belenkey, Clincy, Goldberger, and Tarule heightened the realization that gender makes a difference in learning styles more than for learning outcomes and led to more responsive teaching, with teachers implementing techniques such as group learning for girls and encouraging girls to take math and science courses. Very soon, public attention focused on girls’ schooling, with books, such as Sadker and Sadker’s (1995) *Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls*, appearing, helping teachers to develop communication strategies that encouraged young women to speak up
in class. Soon, a sophisticated scholarship on feminist pedagogy flourished, incorporating feminist content and developing distinctive feminist theories of teaching that highlighted issues of authority, power, class, and race.

When attention focused on feminist teaching content and practices, key characteristics of applied communication immediately emerged. Feminist analyses, such as those conducted by the AAUW, showed how: (1) girls and women routinely received less attention in class than did boys and men; (2) topics especially germane to women and girls were given short shrift; (3) girls and women were directed away from math, science, and computers; and (4) role modeling within education reflected the dominant cultural gender hierarchy, with women overrepresented as teachers in elementary schools and underrepresented in colleges/universities and as administrators at all levels. Without greater equity in the areas mentioned in the AAUW reports, girls and women are assured a lower quality education as compared to men. Education as a particular type of communication is markedly pragmatic and contextual; its communication choices have direct effects.

Women’s studies, as a stand-alone department and as a subarea within communication (and other) departments, has become a mainstay of most college campuses. From a time when that area of scholarship needed advocacy (Culley & Portuges, 1985) to now, progress has been made in terms of theory, research, and courses about women’s history, and about ways in which gender affects communicative processes (Meyer, 2004). Textbooks and scholarly texts support the study of women’s rhetoric (e.g., Campbell, 1989; K. A. Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999; S. K. Foss & Griffin, 1995; Ritchie & Ronald, 2001) and how gender operates in communication (e.g., Buzzanell, Sterk, & Turner, 2004; Ivy & Backlund, 2008; Jaasma, 2004; Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995; Wood, 2007).

More germane to pedagogy as an applied communication endeavor, feminism has transformed ways of teaching through encouraging teachers to enact key feminist principles. One such principle is to reduce hierarchy in the classroom by engaging students in interactive learning. This principle begins with recognizing that the position of teacher itself imposes authority relations between teachers and students (e.g., Ropers-Huilman, 1999). Recognition often leads to a conscious leveling of hierarchy through engaging in interactive pedagogies (e.g., Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 2001; Robertson, 1994; Shue & Beck, 2001), whose goal echoes another key feminist principle—empowerment, which emerges when students engage with faculty in a mutual quest for knowledge (Bell, 1997; Cohee et al., 1998; Cooks & Sun, 2002; Falk-Rafael, 2004; Fraiman, 1997; Luke, 1996, West, 2004). Indeed, students and faculty are encouraged to interrogate the concept of authority itself to intervene actively in traditional power dynamics and produce more democratic attitudes toward teaching (Maher, 1999).

Feminist theory, however, has been challenged to recognize its inherent biases, particularly the bias in favor of White, middle- to upper class experience (e.g., Culley & Potuges, 1985; hooks, 1994, Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). As a counter to that bias, scholars encourage teachers to pull in students’ lived experience through exploring their life metaphors (Buzzanell, 2004), engaging in service projects that are directly related to their lives (Meyer, 2004; Novek, 1999), and studying and discussing women’s embodiment as a means toward self- and cultural awareness (Russ, 2004). By far, the strongest marker of feminism in pedagogy is a critical stance against the status quo of asymmetrical gender relations, a stance that motivates feminist principles and styles of teaching discussed above (Cooks & Sun, 2002; Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Safarik, 2002). Critical pedagogies, collaborative learning, and service learning all contribute to the erosion of hierarchies, highlighting race and class as influential in gender relations, showing concern for empowerment of relatively powerless people, and privileging experience (see Darling & Leckie, this volume).
In effect, the feminist premise that asymmetrical power relations are not healthy is based on a core belief in the values of mutuality and respect. As S. K. Foss and Griffin (1995) argued, communicative practices that grow organically from respecting the authentic, authoritative identity of all people enact invitation, which encourages interactants to enter into communication and other action because they desire it, not because they are forced to do so. This idea of invitation infuses feminist pedagogical practices, including reduction of hierarchy, practices of empowerment, and interrogation of the concept of authority.

Feminist perspectives also opened the door to considering how traditional educational communicative practices have disadvantaged men and boys, as well as women and girls. The American Association of University Women (1999) published an update to the earlier work cited, showing that although girls had caught up in almost every educational category, boys had fallen behind girls in literacy—the ability to read and write in a wide variety of genres. Research shows that feminist principles of invitation, listening, and understanding embody lived experience and also meet boys’ and men's needs in educational settings (e.g., Gurian & Smithson, 2000; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994).

In sum, the aim of feminist approaches to applied communication study in the area of pedagogy is, first, to increase awareness of gender hierarchies as key problematic social structures. This awareness, in turn, undermines those structures and empowers students to enter actively into communication, seeing their experiences as valid sources of thought, and speaking and listening for themselves, with increased empathy for others. Research in the applied communication of pedagogy should continue to analyze and evaluate how gender hierarchies affect girls/women and boys/men in school settings, encourage the use of transformative teaching styles, and suggest new areas of content related to gender, to help people empower themselves to live a full life.

Organizing Gender

All of the communicative contexts we discuss are “organizational” on some level, in the sense that families, educational settings, and health organizations can be studied as organizing processes and outcomes. However, this section focuses specifically on exploring ways that gender, discourse, and organizational contexts intersect, shift, and conflict. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) posited that organizing is inherently and necessarily gendered, arguing that studies of organizations and organizing, therefore, are incomplete without serious consideration of gender.

Until recently, most applied organizational research addressing gender did so either from a sex-difference perspective, in which researchers assumed or focused on how gender is related to different communicative behaviors, styles, and patterns, or by emphasizing communication associated with the integration of women in the workplace (Fairhurst, 1986). Early research examined gender differences in management and leadership styles, and included women's contributions to organizing processes that previously had been neglected (e.g., Calás & Smircich, 1992; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Such research suggested that women in the workplace indicate preferences for affiliative communication strategies (Baker, 1991; Lucas & Lovaglia, 1998); indirect negotiation strategies, such as suggesting and withdrawing (Sagrestano, 1992); and participative, democratic styles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). However, in a study of 302 managers and employees from 11 companies, Gayle (1991) found no significant differences between the conflict management styles of women and men. More recently, Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, and Gallois (2003) found that male and female managers both rated a feminine style of delivering negative feedback in the workplace higher than a mascu-
line style. They described a feminine style as including concern about the context of the feedback, affirming the subordinate prior to offering criticism, and taking into account her or his reaction. This research offers conflicting findings and relatively unproblematicized notions of sex and gender outcomes.

Employment interviewing research also has emphasized consequences over processes, with empirical investigations analyzing the roles and outcomes of same- and cross-sex applicant–recruiter dyads (e.g., Chapman & Rowe, 2001; Graves & Powell, 1995, 1996). For example, Graves and Powell (1996) found that female interviewers evaluated female candidates more favorably than male candidates. Buttner and McEnally (1996) found that males were more likely than females to receive job offers by using assertive tactics in an interview, whereas females were more likely than males to receive offers if they used rational, unemotional approaches, suggesting that gender influences the interview styles that applicants can use successfully. Despite its popularity, however, a sex-difference approach renders inconclusive, and sometimes conflicting, findings (Buzzanell & Meisenbach, 2006; Conrad, 1991).

Such contradictions in empirical research findings create problems, as an outcome perspective regarding the influence of gender has difficulty accounting for individuals who deviate from typical patterns. Furthermore, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004, p. 7) pointed out that outcome studies “suffer from a general lack of context,” an untenable situation for applied research. Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) critiqued existing studies of the intersections of gender and employment interviewing, specifically calling for studies that go beyond the outcome perspective on gender and organizing. Buzzanell and Meisenbach (p. 22) argued that “analyses of employment interviewing as gendered performances embedded within specific contexts” still are missing from the literature. Thus, outcome studies not only fail to predict the behaviors of males and females within or across contexts but they also overlook cyclical and structural relations among gender, discourse, and organizational contexts.

Moving beyond an outcome focus, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), in their articulation of a feminist communicology of organizing, highlighted three other ways to understand relations among gender, communication, and organizing that address these concerns. Their first alternative frame focuses on ways in which individual discourse of microlevel talk organizes gender and gendered identities; their second frame stresses ways in which middle-level organizational discourses, such as formal published job descriptions, engender and are gendered by organizations and organizing; and their third frame directs researchers’ attention to ways in which societal discourses engender organizations. Thus, their lenses expand understanding of gender in organizational contexts from consideration of the gendered nature of microlevel individual discourses, through midlevel organizational discourses, to societal discourse–gender intersections. We believe that gendered applied communication scholarship should explore all of these levels.

Feminist researchers already have begun addressing many of these intersections. Collinson and Collinson (1989) argued that the surface-level desexualization of the workplace has only masked the deeply seated masculine nature of organizations, and other scholars have offered evidence for this claim. For example, Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) considered how middle-level discourses engender and are engendered by organizing processes when they argued that standard organizational practices are couched in traditional masculine frameworks that become “normal.” Hylmö’s (2004) consideration of gendered telecommuting experiences offered an example of an organization reproducing patriarchal systems of meaning in new forms of organizing, with telecommuting at that organization articulated as “another way to enact and embrace masculine rationality and efficiency without question” (p. 68). Her work goes beyond a sex-difference perspective
to consider how telecommuting easily reproduces gendered identities and norms, offering an example of gendered research that considers how discourse both engenders and is engendered by organizations and organizing.

Recent gendered and feminist research in organizational communication focuses on a variety of applied issues, such as workplace sexuality and harassment policies from these mid- and macrolevel perspectives. Early definitions of sexual harassment, for example, articulated it as unwelcome, nonreciprocated “male behavior that asserts a woman’s sex role over her function as a worker” (Farley, 1978, p. 14), but understanding of harassment has expanded to include women harassing men and harassment within same-sex dyads. The wide range of possible harassment now is a frequent topic of gender-related communication research in organizational contexts (e.g., Clair, 1998; Dougherty, 2001; Jansma, 2000; Taylor & Conrad, 1992; Townsley & Geist, 2000).

Buzzanell (2004) reviewed existing theoretical frameworks for describing and predicting sexual harassment before outlining how poststructuralist and standpoint perspectives stemming from a feminist ethical approach can enrich understanding of harassment and direct different courses of action for multiple stakeholders in harassment processes. Buzzanell maintained that it is the struggle to enact equity in everyday life that differentiates feminist from other ethical stances. A feminist ethical approach stresses an iterative and highly contextualized sense-making process (i.e., an ongoing construction of pivotal and mundane events arranged in various ways at different times to make sense to the different storytellers) that evolves over time and place as particular events, people, and details emerge into the foreground of competing versions. This vision of ethics is one in which the embodied, daily struggle of redefining and reframing discourse focuses on the ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions in “doing ethics” (Haney, 1994), and sets standards for what an equitable workplace community looks like (see also the discussion of ethics in applied communication scholarship by Seeger, Sellnow, Ulmer, & Novak, this volume). Some implications for this vision are that training sessions should devote time to participants’ construction of highly contextualized accounts that incorporate their reactions to real cases. These sessions should take place in small, informal groups where discussion is prominent.

Just as sexual harassment research has moved beyond an assumption that women are always its victims, other applied feminist organizational research recently has moved in the direction of studying gender as being broader than only a woman’s issue. The past decade has seen an emergence of applied scholarship regarding the social construction of masculinities in the workplace (e.g., Cheng, 1996; Collinson, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Knights & McCabe, 2001). Furthermore, feminist communication researchers have called for “a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes diversity in organizations” (Meyer & O’Hara, 2004, p. 3; see also B. J. Allen, 1995; Fine, 1996; Nicotera, Clinkscales, Dorsey, & Niles, this volume). For example, Meyer and O’Hara (2004) used a feminist lens to investigate how the subaltern counterpublic of the National Women’s Music Festival and the festival’s host (Ball State University), as a dominant public, contributed to and resisted various power-laden identity constructions and discourses. Ashcraft and Kedrowicz’s (2002) study highlighted how existing models of empowerment used even in a nonprofit feminist organization limit participation and emancipation of diverse members. These areas of exploration have begun the project of seriously advancing feminist consideration of gender in applied communication research. These studies, however, have tended to take a descriptive approach to these issues, describing problems of sexual harassment, feminist organizing groups, and the like, but offering few solutions to the problems revealed. Just as the broader field of organizational studies has grown from descriptive and interpretive studies into critical research that offers emancipating options, so should applied feminist organizational research move toward a focus on solutions.
Gendering Health

According to the International Communication Association’s (2009) Health Communication Division, *health communication* is concerned with “the role of communication theory, research and practice in health promotion and health care. Areas of research include provider–patient interaction, social support networks, health information systems, medical ethics, and health policy and promotion” (¶1–2; see also Kreps & Bonaguro, this volume; Thompson, Dorsey, Miller, & Parrott, 2003). Using this definition as a springboard, we use the phrase *gendering health* to foreground the active processes by which health is gendered continuously from the microlevel of individual, dyadic, and group concerns to the macrolevel of health policies at the national and global levels, as well as the ways in which the health-care context evokes gender in particular ways.

Health communication research often looks at one sex group or comparisons between the sexes in terms of diseases, treatments, information acquisition and use, and related issues. The focus on one sex group only makes sense insofar as particular illnesses tend to strike primarily members of that group rather than the other. Hence, research on breast cancer, menopause, and other relevant health concerns focuses on how women deal with these issues in terms of physical changes, perceptions of their physical attractiveness, drug use or treatment protocols, support from others, and effects of communication about these health phenomena on overall quality of life (e.g., Ellingson, 2004; Parrott & Condit, 1996a; Quintanilla, Cano, & Ivy, 2004; Sotirin, 2004). For instance, aging breasts or mastectomies may prompt questions about one’s femininity given societal constructions of ideal breast appearances and functions (Sotirin, 2004). Feminist research has highlighted the importance of situating women’s experiences, such as menopause, within the context of particular women’s lives, so that the diversity of their perceptions, biological or physiological changes, treatment choices, and relational changes with significant others can be addressed (Quintanilla et al., 2004).

Comparisons between women and men also have become a staple of health communication research. Through studies exploring gender, culture, and illness, researchers have found that depression manifests itself differently in males and females over the course of their lifetimes and relationships (Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003). Different antecedent conditions, treatments, and consequences for depression, as well as other health concerns, provide insight into ways in which communication about and surrounding health can be changed to enhance treatment and preventative measures for women (and men). For instance, promotion of community support, whether face-to-face or online, seems important for women because it fits feminine values and approaches that emphasize connection, personal knowledge, and relationships as the heart of personal development (e.g., Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996). Thus, it comes as no surprise that social and community network involvement are essential for women’s well-being (e.g., when women live in violent relationships; see Klein, 2004), and that a more personalized approach by health-care providers to medical procedures, such as gynecological exams, are preferred by many women (Brann & Mattson, 2004).

Besides looking at health concerns for one sex group or at differences between women and men, health communication researchers also note how specific interactions within health-care contexts are gendered in ways that sustain traditional power imbalances (Kreps, 2004). As an example of power imbalances, physicians attend to female patients’ concerns less carefully and seriously than they do to male patients’ concerns (Gabbard-Alley, 1995). Health issues, such as menstruation, birthing, menopause, and some forms of cancers or other diseases found predominantly in women, lack sufficient research attention (E. Martin, 2001; Quintanilla et al., 2004). Even when women’s needs are the
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center of attention, health communication and examination techniques may not meet
the interests and voiced concerns of many women who desire high-quality caring rela-
tionships with their health-care providers and who want to participate fully in decisions
regarding their care (Brann & Mattson, 2004).

Moreover, interactions in health-care settings, such as those between providers and
patients, may maintain specific notions of gender rather than enlarge gender conceptual-
izations. Arrington (2000), for instance, found that masculinities may be tightly defined
or circumscribed insofar as physicians often try to de-emphasize or change the topic when
men discuss sexuality following prostate cancer treatment. Arrington found that phy-
sicians did not ask about sexual functioning, in general, or sexual problems, specifically,
during prostate cancer support group discussions because they feared embarrassing
elderly patients, but such omissions perpetuate embarrassment, often leading men to be
ashamed to initiate talk about sexuality. However, members did talk frequently about
sexuality when psychologists led the support groups. Thus, unless challenged, cultural
assumptions about gender identity, sexuality, and discourses appropriate for public or
private contexts may hinder development of effective and satisfying health care.

Taking a broader look at gender, health research and funding possibilities have been
gendered in ways that reflect sex inequity (Kreps, 2004; Parrott & Condit, 1996b) and
that neglect alternative ways of conceiving health communication. In many health com-
munication studies, a biomedical model that is associated with Western medical practices
and assumes expert knowledge of providers about patients’ bodies and relies on technol-
gy is privileged over low-technology, alternative medical approaches, and nonexpert or
presumably unreliable knowledge of patients (Ellingson, 2004; Sterk, Hay, Kehoe, Rat-
cliffe, & Vande Vusse, 2002; Vanderford, Jenks, & Sharf, 1997). Women, children, and
members of disenfranchised groups across the globe are underrepresented in studies that
position the male and Western culture as normative standards (Dutta-Bergman, 2004;
Wear, 1997).

Social-scientific studies that examine the effectiveness of message transmission between
health-care providers and actual or potential patients, whether at the dyadic, team, orga-
nizational, or public health levels, also traditionally have received greater attention than
narrative explorations of people’s understandings of treatment, wellness–illness, and life
changes (Ellingson, 2005; Geist-Martin, Ray, & Sharf, 2003; Harter, Japp, & Beck,
2005). In distinct contrast to traditional health communication studies, Ellingson (2005)
analyzed gender using a multimethodological approach and with varied gender lenses. These lenses included her positionality as a woman and former person with cancer within
gendered (masculine) spaces, the role of physician as vested with masculine power despite
physician sex, gendered communication patterns among oncology clinic members and
patients, gendered disciplinary hierarchies in multidisciplinary oncology teams, and the
medical establishment as a sexist institution. Ellingson found, for instance, that although
health-care teams usually intended to promote egalitarian interactions between them-
selves and patients, they maintained professional hierarchies more than they subverted
them. She concluded that hierarchy constrained backstage communication at an oncol-
ogy center to such an extent that informal information and impression sharing primarily
occurred among same-status team members and reinforced gendered meanings of team-
work; oncologists’ demands were privileged routinely over those of others; team informa-
tion was funneled through oncologists who felt no obligations to report their findings to
other team members in the clinic; and patterns of naming themselves, using titles, and
referring to other team members’ interventions as “assisting oncologists” reinforced phy-
sicians’ expertise and devalued the contributions of other team members.

In short, health communication research takes a feminist turn when it explores ways
in which members of each sex separately and together understand and gain access to information, treatment, relationships with health-care providers, and preventative measures that they consider to be appropriate, empowering, and of high quality. A feminist approach to health communication not only embraces females’ concerns and ways in which males and females treat and are treated differently by health-care providers but also examines the very nature of health communication research and policy. As such, there continues to be great need to advocate for communication discovery and engagement that incorporate feminist praxis and social justice interventions (e.g., Frey, 2006; see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume). Such research studies and practices combine health issues with gendered, cultural, economic, and public policy issues to create change in both everyday micropractices and macropractices, such as health program design and implementations that can benefit the Santalis in India (Dutta-Bergman, 2004), the construction of community hygiene features (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006), and health campaigns in remote areas of the world (Sypher, McKinley, Ventsam, & Valdeavellano., 2002).

PoliticiZing Gender

The logical conclusion of taking gender seriously in applied communication contexts is a concern for policy. Researchers need to transcend contextual boundaries, exploring common issues regarding gender and the well-being of diverse groups. Positioning gender in applied contexts takes a feminist turn to advocacy because of the commitment of feminism to praxis. Although applied gender communication research has failed to account fully for public policy implications on bodies, families, educational institutions, organizations, communities, and societies, in this section, we discuss important issues and consequences of the politics of gender in applied communication scholarship.

As relevant as communication is to public policy research, relatively little applied communication research directly responds to or is informed by public policy. One could ask, then, why communication researchers should be interested in public policy. Our response lies in the nature and functions of communication. Specifically, communication never exists in a vacuum; it becomes meaningful only when understood within a context. Public policy is part of the communicative context; it colors the communication of all those involved. Moreover, applied communication is important because public policy fails when it does not respond to a communicative accounting of its implications. Thus, a feminist applied communication lens provides insight and critique that not only are unique to public policy research but also are essential to the development and implementation of public policy programs that affect the everyday lives of the community members those public policies claim to help.

What follows are two cases of policy that display the interrelationships of the four applied contexts and gender. Although most of this research either originates in or investigates public policy issues in North America, and particularly that of the United States, a growing body of literature explores international public policy issues that originate from varied and diverse cultures that are outside the scope of this chapter. Here, we aim our gendered lens toward the feminization of (1) poverty and (2) workplace policy.

The feminization of poverty, and policies that stem from this construction, raise issues in family, health, organizational, and instructional contexts. Whether accurate or not, most people assume that the average poor person in the United States is the stereotypical urban “welfare queen” who has several children, each with a different father, an abusive boyfriend, a drug problem, and no job prospects (Zucchino, 1997). The gendered face of poverty is neither an insignificant detail nor an arbitrary construction. Indeed, the reaction to this image helps to shape and define poverty policy (Asen, 2002; Schram,
The strategic rhetorical construction of the welfare queen—the poor woman with children—as lazy, abusive, defiant, and dependent demands an equally rigid response in the form of policy that addresses her abuse, laziness, defiance, and dependence (Schram, 2000). Like the policies that are created to aid women and children, “the welfare queen is a textual spectacle and a spectral text” (Schram, 2000, p. 55), and when understood as a communicative and gendered text, the political implications and realities of welfare policies become more apparent. Preferred texts function to disadvantage less preferred texts, meaning that already marginalized texts and those who embody the real face of poverty are reduced to two-dimensional stereotypes with superficial needs, which enable policy makers to reduce assistance to surface-level responses that inadequately meet legitimate needs (Asen, 2002).

As evidence of the implications of applied research, a number of scholars have challenged the otherwise much-acclaimed success of the Clinton-era welfare reform: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Asen, 2002; Friedlander & Hamilton, 1996; Greenberg, 1999; Schram, 2000; Seccombe, Walters, & James, 1999). Motivated by decreasing welfare enrollment, many research firms and government agencies praised the welfare reform, but these scholars argued that “success” is not necessarily demonstrated by job employment or decreased welfare enrollment levels. Because the experience of life off welfare rarely is the datum used to determine success or failure of the social program, “successful” programs actually may position women in situations that are more dangerous than when they were on welfare. For example, some women, particularly women with children, may have to return to abusive home situations (an abusive partner, parent, or grandparent) because their allotted time of welfare support (2 years in most states) expired. With little or no government help, these women must rely on others, even if they are abusive, to meet their basic needs. Communicatively accounting for the applied implications of public policy reform is the one method for accurately determining policy value.

A second growing area of public policy in the United States and globally that touches on issues of health, family, and organizational life is work and family management with respect to family leave. In the United States, the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) guaranteed many workers 6 (now 12) weeks of unpaid leave to care for a newborn or adopted child, and for an ill child, partner, or parent, and was heralded as a landmark law that was going to radically change the way men and women work outside the home. However, many parents, especially fathers and women lacking the financial resources to afford unpaid leaves, do not use the FMLA (Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003; Kirby & Krone, 2002). Leave policy enactment is an instance where progressive policy exists but it neither adequately considers nor understands workers’ needs and U.S. work culture (Grant, Hatcher, & Patel, 2005). Although work–family management issues cannot be reduced to simple cause-and-effect equations, communicative approaches to work and family issues indicate that workers need more than guaranteed unpaid leave. People also need to work in organizational cultures that expect members to take family leave; that is, to prioritize family over work-related issues at particular times in their lives (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Kirby & Krone, 2002). Ideally, this prioritization means that organizations would make it possible for members to provide care by paying employees during the leave and that those members are encouraged, rather than discouraged, from using such policies. Leave discourse and its implications are examples of where applied communication scholarship comments directly on public policy and its appropriateness and effectiveness, and a feminist lens is particularly helpful in understanding the gendered expectations that shape, and are shaped by, such policy.

The communication research on welfare reform and the FMLA increases our
understanding of those affected by these policies. This research also has clear applications to future policy developments. As society changes, new problems and issues develop that require revisions of existing policy. Applied communication research can and, indeed, should inspire creative approaches to both theorizing and implementing policy creation and revision. The reform of existing federal immigration laws and the restriction of women’s reproductive and health rights are two emerging policy areas in which feminist applied communication research is highly relevant. At the time of this writing, no revised immigration laws have been passed. However, highly charged public debates over issues of terrorism, illegal workers, low-paying labor, and the welfare system increasingly are becoming galvanized (Campo-Flores, 2006). Set within the context of an economy dependent on both the work of illegal and migrant workers who work for far less than the federal minimum wage and are responsible for much of the agricultural and service work performed in the United States, and on social services, such as public education and health care, that are stretched beyond their budgetary allocations, the U.S. federal government must now respond to growing public concern for homeland safety, especially border security. As evidenced by the diverse reforms proposed by politicians, scholars, and activists from all sides, policy that adequately addresses these problems and meets the relevant needs is hard to come by (Lochhead, 2006). Feminist applied communication research—with its simultaneous focus on both the public and private spheres of society, the heard and unheard subgroups within U.S. culture, and the macro- and microlevels of communication—is uniquely qualified to interpret the current social–political situation and to analyze the lived experience of those affected by newly implemented policies.

Similarly, applied communication research, particularly when conducted with a feminist lens, is especially important for the study of recent advances and legal decisions in women’s reproductive rights and health care. In the United States and elsewhere, government policy affects women and their health in a number of ways: access to abortion and the “morning after pill” and other forms of contraception (Kaufman, 2006; Richwine, 2006); research funding for women’s diseases (e.g., cervical and uterine cancer; Society for Women’s Health Research, 2008); creating and monitoring sexual health education programs for youth (“Sex Education in America,” 2004); and establishing and enforcing sexual assault protocols for police, paramedics, and emergency room nurses and physicians.

It has proven challenging in the contemporary political climate to create comprehensive and effective laws, although applied communication research can and often does inform and help to develop legislative policy. Complicating the development of feminist legislation is the issue of needs interpretation—the struggle over who and how needs are defined for certain populations (Ferguson, 1984; Fraser, 1989). The U.S. Congress, entrusted with the responsibility to create laws that meet the needs of its citizens and constituents, can be rendered ineffective because of the highly politicized nature of needs interpretation. Bills targeting the very issues mentioned above often are defeated because of conflicting earmarks (e.g., a pro-life Congressional member who supports a bill to increase federal spending for female cancer research may vote against it because of a passage that supports guaranteed access to contraception).

Alternatively, some bills never are debated and voted on, and are left “dead” because the bill was not passed before a new Congress was called into session. In fact, bill introduction (and not necessarily passage), itself, has become politicized, with several members of Congress proposing identical bills, knowing that the bills never would be passed, just to have their names associated with the represented cause or issue (e.g., the bill, H.R. 819: The Prevention First Act, was introduced but never passed in the four previous Congresses and currently is listed under several different bills and names, including
The politicization of needs interpretation affects women, men, and children all over the world. Beyond U.S. borders, millions of women still suffer from rape and sexual assault as part of ongoing genocides and civil wars, genital mutilation, and forced participation in sex trafficking. Epidemic and ongoing poverty combined with dangerous social mores and sexual norms in Africa and parts of Asia that permit men to demand unprotected sex from their wife/wives and other women continue to place women and, consequently, children at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV and AIDS (Gupta, 2005).

In response to these tragedies, U.S. foreign policy directly affects women who suffer these and similar traumas. However, not all policies are enacted as they were intended. For example, the 2001 reinstatement of the Mexico City policy, also known as the Global Gag Rule (revoked in the opening days of the Obama administration), a U.S. policy that prohibited public health-care workers from discussing abortion options with patients, severally limited women’s access to health-care in very poor areas (Population Action International, 2004). Because women usually are the primary caregivers within family structures and often responsible for the gathering and cooking of meals, the health of the wife/mother has a large impact on the entire family and community (clearly demonstrated by the epidemic of children left orphaned by AIDS in Africa and Asia).

As these few cases demonstrate, political decisions directly affect the personal lives of both women and men. Given the gravity of these issues, applied communication research is needed to assess the fairness, utility, and changes in these policies. Thus, we urge applied communication scholars to further explore public policy issues from a feminist communication perspective. Being able to speak to these issues, frame and reframe political discussions, and assist with the concrete implementation of policy change must be part of our understanding of what it means to conduct applied communication research.

Conclusion

Positioning gender as fundamental in applied communication scholarship means not only that gender operates as a lens from which theory and research within and across particular applied communication contexts can be enriched productively and pragmatically but also that such scholarship takes as its raison d’être the challenge to put scholarship into practice. For feminist applied communication researchers, this charge insists on scholarship that influences public policy creation and implementation. At its most basic level, this charge requires that applied communication scholars must engage in “translation” of research for various audiences, so that it is usable in the everyday world, as translation “bridges knowledge production with knowledge utilization” (Petronio, 1999, p. 88; see also Frey & SunWolf, this volume).

Taking our cue from Petronio (1999), we urge applied communication researchers to (1) better incorporate solutions to everyday social problems that take into consideration the gendered, hierarchical culture in which people live and that influences each applied communication context; (2) reflect on ways in which scholarship translations can be brought to different audiences who, in turn, shape further scholarship; and (3) work with diverse communities to create accessible translations (e.g., through interventions, training, distribution, and instruction) and context-specific practical theory (see Barge & Craig, this volume). In short, we view applied communication scholars as active agents of change through the conduct of inquiry and the dissemination of results and advocacy plans. The important part of this chapter is not simply our report that gender has been researched in multiple ways but, rather, our call to reexamine the goals for feminist
applied communication researchers. We hope, therefore, to see an expansion of our field’s focus on practical problems embedded within taken-for-granted gendered power relations in diverse applied communication contexts.

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