

# Feminist Theory

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**T**he appearance of the first *Handbook* chapter on feminist theory is surely a sign of significant growth: the rise of feminism as an important intellectual force in the field, a thriving body of empirical research to review, the diffusion of feminist concerns across the field—or at least, faith that such trends are or should be so. This inaugural chapter answers the guiding question—How has feminist theorizing developed in the context of organizational communication studies?—by considering five perspectives: liberal, cultural, standpoint, radical–post-structuralist, and postmodern feminisms. My main argument is that feminist organizational communication theory has grown more prominent, impactful, and settled, as well as less contested and resourceful, over the past 25 years. I consider associated challenges and how we might meet them to revive the collective vitality of feminist theorizing in our field.

## Five Feminisms That Characterize Organizational Communication Studies

It is common for scholars to identify streams of feminist theory operating in a given field of

inquiry (e.g., Tong, 1989). Close to home, Calás & Smircich (1996, 2006) offer a comprehensive review of feminisms at work in organization and management studies; and in some ways, the landscape of feminist organizational communication theory looks similar. For example, Buzzanell's (1994) agenda-setting call for feminist work in our field proposed a parallel list of promising catalysts for future scholarship. It was not long after this oft-cited call that feminist theory became a recognized voice in our field, thanks in no small part to several leading organizational communication scholars who championed its rise (e.g., Mumby, 1993; Putnam, 1990; Putnam & Fairhurst, 1985). While feminist theorizing enjoyed a rapid ascent, it is also the case that we have witnessed the distillation rather than proliferation of perspectives along the way. Indeed, I argue that the feminist theoretical resources in play have shrunk and consolidated in recent years.

Before we begin, it is worth noting that most reviews of feminist scholarship in our field trace the evolution of gender as an organizational communication problematic (e.g., from gender *in* organization to gender *of* organization to the *cultural organization* of gender, difference, and work) instead of weighing the fate of particular feminist theories. Reflecting on my experience composing

such reviews (e.g., Ashcraft, 2004, 2005, 2006a), I suspect this is because the range and depth of feminist theorizing did not keep pace with the explosion of empirical studies. Explicit reflection on the status of feminist organizational communication *theory* is thus a timely endeavor that can reinvigorate stagnant theoretical energies.

In what follows, I utilize previous reviews by asking what we can learn about feminist theory *per se* from the evolution of gender as an organizational communication problematic. To be clear, I offer the five feminisms framework below as a heuristic device—a helpful way to reframe where we have been in order to make sense of where we want to go. I do *not* claim that this is how it is/was or that the scholars cited would understand their work in the ways proposed. Nor do I claim to provide a neatly chronological account, though I do flag developments over time, as appropriate. Since feminist theory arrived in our field fairly recently, multiple feminisms, which unfolded gradually and independently elsewhere, intermingled here all at once. This high-speed collision enabled feminist theorizing that was admittedly chaotic *and* distinctively nimble, and I seek to address both sides of that coin. As that suggests, I acknowledge that there has been considerable overlap among perspectives, though at times, I accentuate distinctions in order to capture subtleties we sometimes miss. Overall, I offer this framework as a useful way to both read and stimulate theorizing in the field. For each of the five feminisms, I discuss unifying assumptions (about gender, difference, communication, organization, and power), their specific manifestation in our field, and key critiques and future possibilities. To capture how these feminisms interact in our disciplinary ecology, I stress alliances and tensions among perspectives.

### **Liberal Feminism: Sameness and Standardization**

Liberal feminism is perhaps the most familiar stream of feminist theory, present in the early

waves of feminism and still on the popular tongue today, especially when it comes to work and organization. This perspective emphasizes equal opportunities based on shared humanity. This is not to say that we are all the same but that what *is* common about our condition supports universal rights and a logic of merit: Namely, we are all autonomous individuals with potential to self-actualize, who bear responsibility for personal success and failure. At a glance, it may seem strange to advocate individualism while fighting for collective rights. But from this view, collective action is imperative when certain groups—namely, women—are routinely denied human fulfillment.

Because our *core* sameness is what matters most, justice is best pursued through standardization. Not surprisingly, then, liberal feminism is comfortable with many bureaucratic principles, particularly the ideal of impartiality through uniform rules and the incentive of career through hierarchical advancement. The trick is to open equal access and remove unfair obstacles to success or, as it is often abridged, “Add women and stir.”<sup>1</sup> Liberal feminist politics are, in this sense, conservative: Change is required, but that means reformation, not rejection, of extant systems; tackle individual bias, and you will eventually correct the system distortions it creates.

In organizational communication studies, liberal feminism is most evident in early research attending to gender, especially research that focused on barriers to women’s advancement (e.g., the glass ceiling; see Buzzanell, 1995). Many studies examined how male and female managers are seen to communicate differently and how women are deemed deficient by comparison (for a review and current example, see Elsesser & Lever, 2011). Most of this research sought to expose and challenge biased perceptions that block women from climbing the hierarchy (Natalle, 1996)—for example, with “double standards,” which interpret similar behaviors differently depending on who does them, or with “double binds,” which enforce stereotypes of femininity on women in traditionally male roles. Here, the problem is not that women managers

are fundamentally different; it is that they are *treated* differently.

In terms of the evolution of gender as an organizational communication problematic, liberal feminism tends to highlight gender *in* organizations and regard communication as an expressive, not constitutive, mechanism. Gender, in this view, is a social identity that fixes nurture (i.e., norms of difference and inequality) upon nature (i.e., natal features that distinguish sex). Every person has a gender, and gender prejudice lies within as a consequence of repetitive messages. This individualistic, psychologized conception of gender relegates communication to a social practice already scarred by bias. Communication is how we learn gender, but it is an outcome or effect of the internalized prejudice of previous generations. Hence, communication is overdetermined for liberal feminism. It is a vehicle for the *transmission* of fully formed attitudes, not a way to explain their formation. Organizations, on the other hand, are settings and structures that bear little to no culpability for gender inequality. Instead, they are useful tools to administer fairness (e.g., bureaucratic standardization). Certainly, there are biases in workplace policy and practice that mark women as different; and these need to be removed. Yet prejudice is assumed to leak from individuals into systems, not the other way around.

Whereas a psychologized model of gender dominated liberal feminism in our field, liberal feminist theory in management and organization studies has a longer history that reflects a diverse array of disciplinary influences (Calás & Smircich, 1996). Management scholars have been slower to abandon liberal feminism, which lives on in the colossal and enduring literature on women-in-management (e.g., Fagenson, 1993). Quickly, however, organizational communication scholars rebuffed liberal feminism for its dull critical edge. Arguments for universality are inadequate for many reasons, elaborated below by other feminisms (see also Buzzanell, 1995; Calás & Smircich, 1996). In brief, matters of difference require far more

conceptual nuance and political complexity than liberal feminist theory affords. Liberal feminism treats women as a homogenous category of persons denied their essential humanity yet takes the situation of white, middle-class, heterosexual women (e.g., the plight of educated housewives) as a universal female condition (hooks, 1995). Precisely in its insistence on sameness, then, liberal feminism is complicit in perpetuating gender oppression. It has been used to advance comparatively privileged women on the backs of women who simultaneously bear class and race discrimination, among other disadvantages (Glenn, 1994). For good reason, liberal feminism rapidly fell out of favor in our field.

If it is deemed passé and if little contemporary organizational communication research claims it, why include liberal feminist theory as a major theoretical influence? Because it lives on—and, arguably, *should* live on—in important forms. First, it deserves credit for persuading many audiences (our field included) that gender inequality at work is a real problem in need of redress. Second, our feminist scholarship continues to draw on liberal feminism to formulate rationales, objectives, and measurements of progress (see Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, & Sullivan, 2012). Ubiquitous appeals based on the number of women in certain professions provide an example. Third, liberal feminism still serves as a starting point for exchange between feminist scholars and other audiences, particularly in a cultural milieu where individual achievement and impartial assessment are held as virtues. Finally, liberal feminism supplies an easy target that facilitates exchange among feminists in our field. It is the deficient, abject other whose rejection is a condition for dialogue, the Straw Woman against which we affirm our progressive sophistication.

Mindful of the many earned criticisms of liberal feminist theory, we might fruitfully consider a qualified revival that recognizes *both* the utility *and* shortfall of sameness and standardization, wielding them strategically while holding them critically, without full faith. Some postmodern feminists in our field already advocate “strategic

essentialism” (e.g., Edley, 2000), in which claims of difference are marshaled for political effect even as their authenticity is rejected. Can we not also do so with sameness and standardization? Might we exploit the coherent, autonomous subject that allegedly defines the human condition or the supposedly universal category *woman* as temporary strategies for meeting situational exigencies? What I mean to plant here is the possibility of a calculated, ironic liberal-post-structuralist fusion. In the wake of liberal feminism, difference became the fashion *du jour*, as the next four feminisms exhibit. I suspect we might do well to hold difference in check by keeping sameness in play.

### Cultural Feminisms: Difference With Value and Variation

In contrast with liberal feminism’s informal slogan, which might be summarized “equality for sameness,” cultural feminism advocates equity for difference. In this view, women are fundamentally different from men; hence, standardization begets discrimination. Programs such as equal opportunity, merit, and universal rules are inadequate, because their baseline is biased toward men. They privilege the “normal” figure around whom their mold is cast and render “deviant” or “special” those excluded by definition. Justice is best pursued, then, by documenting and reevaluating difference. Eventually, reassessment at individual and cultural levels will be reflected in our institutions. In short, equality necessitates being gender conscious, not gender blind.

Cultural feminist politics appear to be more radical in that they regard men and women as beings apart and harbor suspicions of systemic bias. As we shall see, however, cultural feminism can be quite conservative; and claims of difference, like those of sameness, are also problematic. In organizational communication studies, cultural feminist theory can be interpreted to provide two broad explanations of gender at work that reflect divergent politics, which I call

“gendered communication expertise” and “gendered organizational culture.”

*Gendered communication expertise.* The first explanation focuses on communication practices deemed relevant to work life, such as conflict, leadership, self-promotion, and so-called strong versus weak speech (e.g., Tannen, 1994). It entails such overlapping claims as

- professional and managerial communications are governed by masculine norms that are difficult, if not hostile, for many women;
- there are “women’s ways,” or feminine styles, of communicating;
- these alternative norms are of equal, if not greater, value for organizational purposes; and
- women and/or femininity are teeming with underutilized organizational expertise.

The latter two claims exhibit the *revalorist* strain of cultural feminism, which seeks to restore the validity of things denigrated by virtue of their association with women and femininity, as evident in arguments for the so-called feminine advantage (e.g., Helgesen, 1990).

The problem here is not that women are *treated* differently; it is that they *are* different, yet we continue to measure them by male-biased benchmarks not acknowledged as such. Double binds and standards remain vital concerns, but the diagnosis changes. To accentuate what may otherwise seem a subtle distinction, consider the claim that many women are not assertive enough to lead. Through a liberal lens, women need assertiveness training to overcome their socialization in deference, but we must simultaneously tackle the double standard that depicts assertive women as excessively aggressive. Through a cultural lens, the very notion that leadership necessitates self-assertion is partial to masculine communication. Thus training women to emulate masculinity is misguided; it is unlikely to be seen as authentic, because for many women, it is

*not*, in fact, authentic. When it comes to double binds, then, the issue is not only that women in managerial roles are squeezed into stereotypes; it is that management is defined around masculinity, such that women's differences—real and imagined—will always appear deficient.

This strand of cultural feminism thus seeks to identify and ease discursive dilemmas that ensue from masculine norms. Wood and Conrad (1983), for instance, identified key paradoxes, such as professional women's struggles for coherent definitions of self and suitable mentor relationships; they also considered specific communicative responses that perpetuate and transcend such paradoxes. Work in this vein also aims to appreciate feminine modes of organizing on their own terms, such as "women's ways" of career building and team building (e.g., Marshall, 1989; Nelson, 1988). Some authors say that actual women and men exhibit such communication differences, while others stress the symbolic division of masculine and feminine communication. Despite the significant distinction, there remains a tendency for slippage between women and femininity, men and masculinity (Ashcraft, 2009). Indeed, the revalorist strain of cultural feminism often conflates communication linked to women with *feminist* practice (e.g., Marshall, 1989)—a habit rectified in the second strand of cultural feminism.

Much like liberal feminism, the first strand of cultural feminism highlights gendered communication *in* organizations. In contrast with management and organization studies, where cultural feminism largely reflects psychoanalytic perspectives, organizational communication scholars acknowledge such influences yet theorize difference in more intercultural terms, wherein gender is a cultural membership that fosters opposing ways of interacting (e.g., Bate & Taylor, 1988). Lest this be taken for a robust view of communication, I hasten to add that, as in liberal feminism, communication here remains an overdetermined outcome of already internalized difference. Gender enculturation results in deep inculcation, which gets expressed and

maintained in communication (more of a social-psychological than psychoanalytic account; see Wood, 2011), but in any case, it is not one in which communication exerts much influence, save its apparent value for economic activity. Particularly in the revalorist strain, communication becomes a marketable skill set, a form of expertise to be commodified. As in liberal feminism, organizations are settings in which gendered knowledge assumes value. Granted, they exhibit systemic bias (i.e., the institutionalization of masculine communication), which must be adjusted to accommodate gender difference. But so too should feminine ways be accommodating (and how *feminized* is that?) in the service of organizational aims. Therein, the radical potential of cultural feminist theory is arrested.

Such potential is further stunted as gender difference remains binary, secluded from other social identities. As with liberal feminism, the question becomes "Which 'women's ways,' which femininities, does revalorist cultural feminism promote?" Again, norms ascribed to white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity are extrapolated to all women. Though devalued as weak in public life, this femininity is venerated as sacred and nurturing in the private realm. What this perspective does, then, is revalue an already privileged femininity in a new arena, while what constitutes *the* feminine remains restrictive (Calás & Smircich, 1993). "Gendered communication expertise" thereby appeases the current order of gender-race-class relations. Heteronormativity lurks in its celebration of conventional mothering images. Class and race bias become glaring if we ask why this perspective began by focusing on professional and managerial environments, when women of color and/or lesser means have long been concentrated in working-class settings (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993), where restrictions on sexism tend to be comparatively minimized. Whereas professional masculinities are reined in by demands for civility, for example, working-class masculinities often entail latitude for "primitive" display, such as aggressive sexuality (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). In other words, had

the first strand of cultural feminism embraced more radical criticism, it might have begun with environments more openly hostile to a diversity of women.

Finally, the conservative politics of “gendered communication expertise” are evident in its thin conception of power. If masculine communication entails doing dominance and feminine communication involves doing deference (Rogers & Henson, 1997), then revaluing difference as currently defined means celebrating inequality and endorsing the gendered division of labor (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Buzzanell, 1995; Calás & Smircich, 1993). After all, if women are in possession of unique skill sets, so are men, though the latter is rarely admitted in the literature. It is a small step to the conclusion that women are more suited for relational work—say, human resources or customer service—whereas men are better equipped for technical, financial, scientific, and other analytical jobs. That the latter are already coded as more knowledge-intensive, strategic, and valuable is a gendered phenomenon too, but cultural feminist theory in this form can say little about it.

*Gendered organizational culture.* A second strand of cultural feminism begins to explain such phenomena at the organization level, taking a far more radical departure from liberal feminism. This strand emerged at the confluence of two developments: the rise of organizational culture and the insight that organizations, not merely the people who populate them, are gendered. The idea that organization *is* culture, constituted through the negotiation of meaning—for example, in storytelling and narrative, vocabulary, metaphor, and ritual—began to catch fire in organizational communication in the early 1980s (e.g., Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). A decade later, sociologist Joan Acker (1990) published an influential essay (elaborated later in this essay under *radical feminism*), which recast gender as an organizing principle. Coalescing an idea on the tip of many tongues, her theory of gendered organizations launched a decisive move

away from gender as a cultural membership causing individual predispositions (as in “gendered communication expertise”) and toward the insight that organizations play a distinctive role in the gendering process. In our field, this insight fused with budding research on organizational culture to yield the following claims:

- Gender difference is a malleable relation formed through situated, collective negotiations of meaning.
- Gender at work must be explained in terms more grounded, relational, and holistic. We should examine organizations as local interpretive communities rather than diagnose communication practices such as leadership in abstract isolation.
- Such ethnographic epistemology enables us to understand gender in all its rich contextual variation, appreciate organizational culture as a political phenomenon, and develop a more constitutive account of organizational communication as it (en) genders difference *in situ*.
- For these reasons, we should be analyzing the gendering *of* organization, rather than merely gender *in* organization.

One of the first published feminist works on organization to appear in a communication journal, a *Communication Yearbook* chapter by Marshall (1993), exhibits the early relation between the first and second strands of cultural feminism. Her chapter begins with a discussion of “male and female values” (p. 124), which lays the groundwork for an assessment of “organizational cultures as high context, preprogrammed with male values” (p. 127). Although organizational culture is central to Marshall’s framework, her argument follows the logic of “gendered communication expertise”: Broad differences between men and women are salient to communication and power *in* the workplace, which is theorized as an *aggregate* culture. Such logic is reversed by scholars in the second strand, who theorize gender difference as a variable product of *specific*

organizational cultures, manufactured through communication. Gender is *not*, in this view, a ready-made cultural difference simply imported from outside of organizations into communication within them.

The work of a few critical management scholars, with whom organizational communication scholars were developing close ties, became influential in the rise of this second strand in our field. Mills (1988; Mills & Chiamonte, 1991), for example, treated organizational culture as meta-communication—a tailored script for gendering interaction and identity formation, which members constantly enact and improvise. Mills went on to become one of the leading communication-friendly theorists of “gendered organizational culture,” and his work is particularly distinctive for its historical lens (Mills, 2002). His extensive empirical work with airline cultures, for instance, documented the evolution of gendered jobs and hierarchies over time, tracking shifting relations among multiple masculinities and femininities (Mills, 2006). Alvesson and Billing (1992), though hesitant to grant communication a strong role, proposed a differentiated understanding of gender that called out the plural, contradictory character of organizational symbolism. This approach is well illustrated by Alvesson’s (1998) provocative analysis of the gendered culture of an advertising firm. Likewise, Gherardi’s (1995) book, the first extended treatise on gender and organizational culture, foregrounds gendered organizational symbolism as both site of struggle and spring of innovation.

Such efforts were met with an explosion of empirical research in organizational communication that documents the gendering of varied organizational cultures (e.g., Bell & Forbes, 1994; Edley, 2000; Gibson & Papa, 2000). Evident across these studies is growing awareness that women and men are not homogenous categories and that the gender binary unfolds *in situ* in myriad and surprising ways. In response, scholars of “gendered organizational culture” slowly began attending to the intermingling of social identities (known today as *intersectionality*)—especially

class, race, and sexuality—although gender tends to remain the primary lens even now.

For this strand of cultural feminism, politics remain a matter of debate. Interpretive scholars of “gendered organizational culture” emphasize *description* and *understanding* of how communication (en)genders realities received as facts (e.g., Alvesson & Billing, 2009), whereas critical scholars stress *critique*, *deconstruction*, and sometimes *reconstruction* of this process (e.g., Townsley & Geist, 2000). Both can regard communication as constitutive, but the former highlights how communication creates gender difference and the latter how communication is, in turn, distorted by that very creation. Critical research on “gendered organizational culture” wields a sharper feminist edge than interpretive projects, which expose relations of power yet stop short of confronting them. By showing how “women’s ways” of communicating contribute to gender oppression, for example, critical approaches temper the revalorist strain of cultural feminism, warning that the *feminine*, as we yet know it, is far from *feminist* (e.g., Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996).

Internal debate notwithstanding, the second strand of cultural feminism is more radical than the first with its deeper systemic explanation. It is also more nuanced in its commitment to gender multiplicity (particularly around intersections with other social identities) and contextual variation. Finally, the second strand abandons a psychologized view of communication as reducible to transmission and expression. Indeed, research on “gendered organizational culture” was the first feminist scholarship in our field to claim a generative role for communication; and this research tends to demonstrate the performativity of culture (i.e., its dynamic, evolving enactment, which brings “it” into being) more than other interpretive organizational communication studies (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

In sum, both strands designate culture as a vital companion to feminist theory, albeit in divergent ways. The first takes culture as a metaphor for *gender* (i.e., gender is a societal-level cultural category that demarcates difference),

whereas the second views culture as a metaphor for *organization* (i.e., organizations are interpretive communities). For the first, gender-as-cultural-difference is expressed *in* organizational communication; for the second, organization-as-culture constitutes gender difference *through* communication.

The question remains: How have cultural feminisms fared over time in organizational communication studies? “Gendered communication expertise” faded from prominence after criticism of its sweeping abstractions. Two feminisms considered below, standpoint and micro-postmodern, respond to such criticism by thoroughly reworking the notion of feminine knowledge. Although “gendered organizational culture” also redressed many critiques of “gendered communication expertise,” it is seldom acknowledged that the latter persists in the former. To the extent that all empirical variants are retained within a dualistic frame, a generic gender binary underlies claims of gender multiplicity. That is, when we speak of masculinities and femininities in the plural, we are still affirming two poles. An abstract cultural binary is summoned to identify gender, for in the face of situated plurality, how else are we to know one from another or to recognize deviation as such when we see it? In sum, a generic notion of binary difference remains essential equipment (i.e., compulsory *and* essentialist) for knowing gender in context. The binary is especially evident in critical studies of organizational culture where researchers claim gendered phenomena not seen as such by participants. However, interpretive studies that instead ground gender claims in participant understandings are, in effect, depending on participants to do the binary dirty work.

Over time, the construct of organizational culture has receded into the background of our field, a presumed phenomenon more than an object of investigation. In a related development, many feminist scholars have moved beyond the lingering container implied by “gendered organizational culture,” examining salient cultural phenomena beyond conventional organization

boundaries (Ashcraft, 2004). For example, while the second strand of cultural feminism can explain the gendering of certain airlines (Mills, 2006), it cannot explain how constructions external to the airline intermingled with that gendering process (see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). The attendant shift in emphasis from the gender *of* organization to the *cultural organization* of gender, difference, and work (see macro-postmodern feminism below) can thus be read as a new face of “gendered organizational culture,” though the earlier face has by no means disappeared. The next feminism also exceeds organizational boundaries, though in quite different ways.

### **Standpoint Feminism: Difference as Social Materialities**

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) shares with cultural feminism an emphatic rejection of sameness and dedication to difference, but the affiliation mostly stops there. Generally speaking, FST maintains the following claims:

- Women are indeed fundamentally different, but from one another as much as from men.
- Difference arises from *social location*—the nexus of symbolic and material realities from whence we form a sense of self, other, agency, and ethics. Difference does not stem from our internalization of generic masculine or feminine culture (as in “gendered communication expertise”) or from the co-construction of gender in particular organizations (as in “gendered organizational culture”). It emanates, rather, from the specific web of cultural, political, temporal, spatial, and economic relations in which we are embedded.
- Specifically, difference hinges around the historical intersections of class, race, and gender that we live on a daily basis. These trajectories of repetitive injury or privilege



cultivate habits of reading reality and our range of possibility within it. From this recurring experience, we develop expectations and tactics for maneuvering everyday life. We develop, in short, situated knowledge about how the world works.

- With much critical reflection, those who occupy marginalized social locations can hone their lived experience of oppression into a powerful standpoint—a critical exposé or commentary on relations of power.
- Fostering just organizations begins with hearing multiple standpoints, absorbing this knowledge as crucial corrections to dominant versions of reality, and redressing the systemic inequalities they surface.

Several important amendments to other feminisms are noteworthy here. First, FST sharpens cultural feminism's critique of liberal feminist sameness and standardization by extending it to relations *among* women. The autonomous subject of liberal feminism is refigured with a thoroughly socio-material understanding of the self; and cultural feminist claims to an essential or universal sisterhood are flatly rejected. Second, gender difference is no longer treated in isolation—either from other aspects of difference such as race and class or abstracted from the historical, political, cultural, physical, and economic circumstances that give rise to it. As that suggests, context is significantly expanded beyond its meaning in “gendered organizational culture” research, where it primarily refers to specific organizational sites. This enriched definition of context does not exclude the role that organizations play in social location. Indeed, several standpoint theorists examine how gender, race, and class divisions of labor breed distinctive ways of knowing the world (e.g., Aptheker, 1989). But by redefining context so rigorously and concentrating on gender's entanglement with class and race, FST further erodes the gender binary latent in cultural feminism.

Moreover, FST avoids a psychologized version of gendered identity and communication with its insistence on the influence of historical and material relations. For FST, most other feminisms settle for too narrow a scope. The focus on gender *in* organization is overly individual and/or interpersonal, but even those who highlight the gendering *of* organization are missing larger forces and downplaying the extent to which these forces foster multiple and competing organizational realities, some of which (i.e., those of the marginalized) are, frankly, more accurate than others. In a stratified society, objective knowledge of reality is achieved not through the impossible fantasy of a neutral science, which inexorably favors dominant perspectives, but through consciously prioritizing the knowledge endemic to oppressed standpoints (see Harding, 1991). In this way, FST casts difference epistemologically and as a mandate for moral politics.

There is a strong socialist feminist bent to FST, especially evident in its emphasis on the bigger picture (of which organizational life is only a part): public *and* private, production *and* reproduction, capitalism *and* patriarchy, and the ways in which these ideological and material spheres, once conceived as *dual systems*, are not simply interdependent but rather are sides of the same coin, or *unified systems* (Tong, 1989). Critical race research has also had a defining impact on FST, particularly in theorizing the formation of race consciousness in lived experience (Collins, 1991). Vestiges of Marxist feminism are evident in the claim that one's place in the economic order invariably imprints her identity and interests. Also apparent are strains of psychoanalytic feminism, particularly in FST's view of social location as a developmental process that becomes deeply embedded in the psyche and embodied in reflexes of thought and behavior and that can only be brought to consciousness (i.e., standpoint) with a great deal of work (Tong, 1989). Although FST earnestly qualifies the deterministic leanings that once typified some of these feminisms, it risks returning to a view of communication as outcome—this time, not of some

psychological predisposition, but of institutional and material forces said to exist outside of communication. In short, our communicative capacities are delimited by social location.

Organizational communication scholars cast FST more communicatively, as both the basis for making the material world meaningful (e.g., anatomical and phenotypical features, physical encounters with task and place) and the means for achieving conscious standpoints. Yet such modifications often stopped short of a constitutive view of communication, in part because our early efforts in FST sought to challenge (but were often difficult to distinguish from) the strain of cultural-revalorist feminism evident in “gendered communication expertise.” Dougherty (1999), for instance, invoked FST to analyze women’s and men’s standpoints on sexual harassment in organizations. As this work minimizes intersectionality in favor of a binary view and highlights gendered perceptions detached from situated socio-material histories, it exhibits a limited application of FST, in which *standpoint* appears synonymous with *perspective*. In contrast, an early attempt to enact FST’s commitment to intersectionality and situated experience occurred at a 1995 National Communication Association (then SCA [Speech Communication Association]) panel, later published as a forum in *Management Communication Quarterly* (see May 1998 issue). This collection of personal, critical tales of organizational life is exemplified in Spradlin’s (1998) poignant narrative of negotiating lesbian identity in the academy, from which she theorized discursive tactics of *passing*, an agonizing communicative performance in which members collaborate in the institutionalization of heteronormativity.

The panel and subsequent papers illustrate several typifying features of FST in organizational communication studies. First, it tends to emphasize gender and difference *in* organization. In this way, it reflects the residual container metaphor of communication in our field, thereby minimizing customary FST devotion to a broader systemic picture. But standpoint feminism in our

field also contests the container metaphor by treating one’s accumulation of repetitive experience not only *in* but also *across* organizations as an embodied thread indicative of a larger system. Here, FST’s dedication to historical relations becomes highly personal and self-reflexive: History is narrowed to one’s recurring experience over time, which yields living evidence of specific legacies of domination and subordination. Given this emphasis on self-reflexivity, it is not surprising that much FST in our field highlights difference in the academy.

With its proclivity for personal history, FST in our field also deviates from standpoint feminisms elsewhere by doing what Collins (1997) cautioned against: highlighting “individual experiences within socially constructed groups” over the “conditions that construct such groups” (p. 375). As Allen (2000) reminds us, however, attention to individual narrative need not be idiosyncratic; FST in our field entails comparison—a search for commonalities as well as openness to disjuncture—between one’s own narrative and those of others in similar social locations. In this way, standpoint feminism in organizational communication resists a common criticism of FST writ large: that it grants too much muscle to social location, rendering static and overdetermined depictions of difference that downplay nuance. By stressing the evolving character of communication and its mediating function, we have softened such unilateral tendencies and bolstered the symbolic, discursive, and relational dimensions of social location.

Allen’s (1998) work in FST provides a prominent example in our field. In her research, often focused on relations of difference in the academy, Allen places her own experience in varied institutional environments in conversation with a wealth of literature on the organizational experiences of people of color. She has particularly theorized how Black feminist standpoints challenge received models of organizational socialization (Allen, 1996, 2000). Parker’s (e.g., 2005) work on leadership offers another exemplar of sustained FST in our field. She directly confronts

masculine and feminine leadership, as theorized in the “gendered communication expertise” strain of cultural feminism, with a multicultural reconception. Parker analyzes the narratives of 15 African American women executives, using their life stories of social and material struggle to theorize how race and gender entwine to structure leadership communication. Other projects similarly employ FST to contest and revise current communication theory, for example, of organizational socialization (Bullis & Stout, 2000) and emotionality (Krone, Dougherty, & Sloan, 2001). Consistent with the larger interdisciplinary body of FST, most of these works look to historically marginalized standpoints as sources of corrective knowledge. Against this grain, yet also in its support, Mumby (1998) draws on standpoint logic to argue that privileged men, as “concentric (i.e., common, unmarked) subjects” (p. 167), can play a crucial role in deconstructing dominant standpoints through critical, self-reflexive investigation of hegemonic masculinity.

Arguably, in accentuating the role of communication, we relinquished a vital strength of FST: its quest to explain the social and material together. As in other areas of organizational communication theory, FST scholars let materiality—matters of place, body, economy, and so forth—take a back seat as they made the case for communication. Relative disregard for the material emphasis of FST is evident, for instance, when standpoint theorists position FST as readily compatible with postmodernism (Fletcher, 1994) or as a liberal-postmodern hybrid (Bullis & Stout, 2000). What such portrayals miss is that, for most adherents to FST, women’s multiple standpoints emanate from concrete and enduring, albeit socially mediated, circumstances. The socio-material origins of these standpoints are *not*, as postmodern feminism would have it, mere effects of discourses that “form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). In sum, FST grips the ontology of difference, whereas postmodern feminism releases such foundations (Gherardi, 1995). Both object to the

humanist self of liberal feminism, but FST less strenuously. For FST, the notion that we are all autonomous actors is a dominant epistemology enabled by repetitive privilege, a distortion integral to the maintenance of inequality. But the sovereign, knowing subject as a wellspring of knowledge—the very figure rejected by postmodern feminism—can be rehabilitated.

The recent turn toward materiality in our field reframes FST as a unique way to formulate a communicative explanation of how difference organizes social and material systems. Put another way, the case for communicative FST need not diminish the force of materiality. Rather, we can theorize communication as the dynamic site where ideational and material matters meet, commingle, crystallize, and transform (Ashcraft & Harris, 2014; Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Despite this opportunity, FST curiously seems to have withered on the vine of organizational communication theory. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it appeared to be one of our most popular, promising perspectives, but it quickly faded in the face of a growing collective preference for postmodern feminism. I suggest that this is a case of arrested development and that we would do well to revive and deepen our relation to FST in light of rising concern for materiality. However, we might adjust our original focus on “individual experiences within socially constructed groups” and stress instead the *communicative* “conditions that construct such groups” (Collins, 1997, p. 375). Like FST, the next feminism hails from socialist origins and interrogates difference as an organizing principle, but it gives short shrift to intersectionality for a return to more binary comforts.

### **Radical–Post-Structuralist Feminism: Bad Bureaucracy, Good Alternatives, and Acceptance of Ambiguity**

Radical feminist theory has many branches and applications. Speaking of those most pertinent to organization, we might encapsulate

radical feminism as a theoretical position that flies in the face of liberal feminism by maintaining that

- gender is a primary determinant of difference in patriarchal societies;
- masculine ways are irretrievably repressive (i.e., masculinist);
- dominant institutions are premised on masculinist principles;
- a just society requires uncompromising rejection of extant institutions, supplanted by alternatives founded on feminist values; and
- women who actively develop a feminist consciousness are best equipped to generate and enact such alternatives.

Steadfast faith in binary gender identities and relations is notable here, as is the tendency to idealize an essential sisterhood. Yet a critical edge absent from most forms of cultural feminism (save critical approaches to organizational culture) is also apparent. Hardly an endorsement of so-called women's ways, radical feminist theory bestows tough love on femininity, recovering its emancipatory potential by purging the scars of subordination. This critical care, however, is far from that which FST employs to transform social location into standpoint. Whereas FST renounces a mythic feminine essence, radical feminism seeks the restoration of feminine principles that lie beneath the wounds of oppression. Simply put, the goal is women and femininity unfettered through the twin tasks of individual consciousness raising and institutional overhaul.

Applied to organizational life, radical feminist theory can be interpreted to take two broad and related forms. Because these forms can also be found beyond our field and because their development there shaped their manifestation among us, I begin by describing their interdisciplinary evolution. The first form makes the case that *bureaucracy is fundamentally gendered*. Acker and Van Houten's (1974) classic rereading of the Hawthorne studies was among the first to argue

that organizations *produce* difference by using gender to divide and control labor. Motivated by a liberal feminist focus on sameness, Kanter (1975) also theorized gender difference as a product of structural relations—the *outcome of*, rather than *reason for*, the concentration of women in lowly roles. Ferguson's (1984) well-known book, *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*, advanced these critiques by contending that bureaucracy institutionalizes male domination by trussing managers, members, and clients alike in dependent relations that effectively feminize them. Acker's (1990) influential essay, mentioned earlier, synthesized these insights to theorize bureaucracy as gendered to its core:

To say that an organization . . . is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. (p. 146)

Together, these and related works are widely recognized as the ancestry of a radical feminist theory of gendered organization (Mills & Tancred, 1992; Savage & Witz, 1992).

Rarely do we comment on the wild theoretical mix in this lineage, but this is significant, because it helps to explain the continuing debate over whether bureaucracy is salvageable or irreparable. Kanter's (1975) model exhibits a rare moment when liberal and radical feminism become allies in an indictment of organization structure. Ferguson's (1984) book, on the other hand, is avowedly post-structuralist, though it also draws on existentialist feminist theory to treat "second sexing" as a metaphor for bureaucratic relations. In contrast, Acker's (1990) radical analysis employs a heavy structural vocabulary influenced by the shift from dual to unified systems in socialist feminism. Such pronounced theoretical differences yield conflicting evaluations of bureaucracy. For liberal feminists, the flaws of bureaucracy are containable if only organizations

would divide and control labor through means other than gender. For post-structuralist feminists, liberation comes not from replacing bureaucracy with a new totalizing form but, rather, from constantly subverting it through alternative feminist discourses. For socialist feminists, hierarchical organization is defective all the way down. Gender is neither a replaceable technology used by bureaucracy nor a mere metaphor for bureaucracy; gender is encoded in bureaucratic DNA, inseparable from the operation itself.

A second and related form of radical feminist theory can be found in research on *feminist organizations*. This work responds to the first form's indictment of bureaucracy with the pursuit of feminist alternatives. It is less related in terms of scholarly community, however. Historically, it has closer ties to feminist and women's studies than it does to organization studies; and it seemed to reach an apex with the publication of Ferree and Martin's (1995) book. Most of this work defines feminist organization as egalitarian, collectivist, participatory—in a word, *counter-bureaucratic* (Ianello, 1992). For those of a radical *separatist* bent, feminist organizations are necessarily by and for women and/or devoid of bureaucratic impurities. Others envision them as separatist only during incubation (e.g., Sealander & Smith, 1986) or capable of colliding with bureaucracy in hybrid forms (e.g., Eisenstein, 1995). Most take the *revalorist* position that feminist forms are morally superior to bureaucracy (the *feminist advantage*?). However, much of the empirical literature mourns the “unhappy marriage” of feminist theory and practice (Murray, 1988)—predictable pressures that erode pure radical feminist ideology in practice (e.g., Morgen, 1990). Research on radical feminist organization, in this light, might better be described as *thwarted revalorist*. Perhaps for that reason, it seems to be relatively dormant in recent years.

Turning to the specific case of our field, we can say that organizational communication theory creatively blends and transforms both forms. Some of our earliest feminist work weighed the

feminist critique of bureaucracy and affirmed the call for alternative forms (e.g., Buzzanell, 1994; Natale, Papa, & Graham, 1994). Also evident was sympathy with the radical feminist caution that resorting to “women's ways” as currently configured was an unsatisfactory answer (e.g., Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996). Moreover, feminist scholars in our field directly engaged with interdisciplinary feminist organization research as we launched our own empirical studies of feminist practice (e.g., Ashcraft, 2000).

A provocative theoretical fusion cropped up along the way. Even as we embraced radical claims about masculinist and feminist forms—including their robust moral-ethical overtones—and even as we justified our research on socialist grounds (e.g., Acker, 1990), we fused these influences with a post-structuralist understanding of gender and organizational form (Weedon, 1987). I use *post-structuralist* here in a specific way. Radical and socialist feminists often theorize structure in unilateral terms, as if structure yields difference, not the other way around. In contrast, several feminist organizational communication scholars quickly broached the issue with a bilateral view of structure (wherein structure and practice remain analytically separate but mutually constitutive) and, increasingly, with a performative model (which rejects the structure-practice duality and theorizes form as an ongoing accomplishment made real in its enactment). Almost from the beginning, then, communication scholars prioritized *feminist organizing* over *feminist organization*.

At least three distinctive twists emerged from this unlikely hybrid. First, we reworked the *separatist* bent of radical feminist organization studies, which judged practical deviations from feminist ideology as a compromise. In place of purity, we developed a tension-centered approach, in which irony and contradiction were not pathologized but, rather, theorized as productive empirical dilemmas to explore through a critical yet ever-curious lens (see Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). We also challenged radical separatism with a destabilized

view of gender, in which women are not presumed to be the sole experts on, or beneficiaries of, feminist forms. Although most of the communities studied were organized by and for women, we embraced an agenda of dissemination that couched feminist organizing as an important investment for all (e.g., Ashcraft, 2006b; Trethewey, 1999b).

Second, we tempered the *revalorist* claim of radical feminist organization studies with a contingent view of emancipation that allowed for moral ambiguities encountered in context (e.g., Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999). On the one hand, we argued that feminist organizational values, in the abstract, are loaded with empowering promise not (or less) present in bureaucratic tenets. Simultaneously, we recognized that feminist organizing teems with its own oppressive potential and that bureaucracy cannot be discarded, as it has infinite possibilities *in situ*. Emancipatory forms can only be known provisionally, in relation to the demands of specific and ever-changing contexts. Hence, we need not be flustered by impurities. Distortions of feminist ideology in practice are inevitable and productive, for they can yield possibilities not yet imagined in theory. Even when practice yields disempowering effects, it can be read to reveal where theories of feminist organization are inadequate to the tasks of organizing; it need *not* be hastily read as practice disappointing theory. In sum, acceptance of vulnerability supplants faith in utopia. If “forms have tendencies, not destinies,” then we would do best to follow their situated twists and turns (Ashcraft, 2006b, p. 78).

Third, as we focused on feminist organizing right away, we began to develop a genuinely communicative model of organizational form, in which mundane interaction is the site of interest, where form comes to life and evolves in the act of performing it. The difference made by this turn toward the verb is worth underscoring. Prior to our engagement with feminist organizing, most available research treated feminist organization as an ideal type of governance. As a noun, feminist structure exists apart from communication. It is imposed on and privileged over interaction,

and the latter is measured by its faithfulness to the former. Communication scholars strove to transcend this habit of dividing structure from interaction. We supplanted it with a conception of form as *discourse community* or *gendered rationality* (Maguire & Mohtar, 1994; Mumby, 1996).

Our field's fusion of radical and post-structuralist feminisms is novel indeed, as well as productively ironic in itself. Typically, these feminisms are configured as deeply opposed, for reasons explained further below. Calás & Smircich (1996, 2006) maintain their separation in management and organization studies, depicting radical feminism as thoroughly modernist—ontologically and morally overconfident—and, conversely, post-structuralist feminism as susceptible and amoral, at times to a fault. Our radical–post-structuralist hybrid tempers these tendencies in each.

Moreover, this hybrid overlaps in significant ways with critical versions of the second strand of cultural feminism, “gendered organizational culture.” Both harbor a suspicion that mainstream modes of organizing are oppressively gendered and feminist alternatives less so, though they suspend judgment for particular instances and then wield critique with a cautious, contingent spirit. “Gendered organizational culture” locates the problem in the performance of *culture*, which it renders accessible for critique, whereas radical post-structuralism locates the problem in the performance of *governance scripts*, which it seeks to rewrite. In this sense, they can be said to diagnose, respectively, informal and formal dimensions of gendered organizing. Unlike liberal and early cultural feminism, both emphatically stress the gendering of organization. Neither, however, can capture the broad array of social and material forces cited by FST. The final feminism endeavors to do so by a dramatically different route.

### **Postmodern Feminisms: Difference as Multileveled Drag**

*Postmodern feminism* is a catch-all term for what has become the dominant feminism in

organizational communication studies. Those who claim this family usually subscribe to a post-structuralist orientation and concur on several anti-foundationalist premises:

- Gender is an unstable notion, not a real thing with independent existence. Except as a social construction, gender does not exist. It has no final origin, no steady nature; it is a device, among an infinite range of possibilities, through which we continually carve up the world into two broad categories of people.
- The central question is not “How are we different?” but rather, “How did/do we come to appear different, as if this were the natural or normal order of things?” The answer is that gender, as with all social identities, is a product of the language, narratives, and embodied practices through which we know people and their essential similarities and differences. Gender is made in discourse, a thoroughly communicative achievement; and we are all performers in perpetual drag.
- Our task, then, is epistemological and genealogical: to trace how discourse generates knowledge about gender and enacts thereof, which activate subjectivities and relations of power among them. Knowledge does not spring from the subject, as in FST; rather, it constitutes the subject.
- Hence, we can never be free of the discourse-knowledge-power triad, for there is neither self nor other to enact without it, no real or authentic condition to be unleashed beneath it. But we can deconstruct the triad, and it is in this continual slackening of certainty that a qualified version of emancipation—localized forms of subversion—can be found. As Butler (1999) declared, “I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible” (p. xxiv).

- Of particular interest is the discursive production of difference in and around work and organization, and the performance of gender is inevitably entangled with that of other differences. FST is thus right in this respect: We must look to situated constructions of intersectionality.
- Finally, the notion of organizational boundaries is problematic, because *intertextuality* (i.e., the overlapping presence, fusion, and collision of social texts, such that interpretive communities cannot be regarded as discrete) is a defining condition (Taylor, 1999).

For organizational communication scholars, the arrival of postmodern feminism was a most(ly) welcome development. While many feminists elsewhere resisted the postmodern turn, fraught with understandable anxieties about the political and ethical consequences of ontological instability, organizational communication scholars were decidedly more enthusiastic (Mumby, 1996). For many of us, postmodern feminism was a way to finally make communication pivotal not only as object or site of study, but as a—make that *the*—constitutive force. By the early 2000s, feminist scholars in our field appeared to be making a collective turn toward postmodern theorizing.

In keeping with an ironic postmodern spirit, I invoke a structural vocabulary to characterize a feature of this work that seldom draws notice: Despite its *post*-structuralist bent, the literature reflects clear micro, meso, and macro levels of emphasis. Theoretically, postmodern feminist scholars would concur that these are not discrete levels of discursive activity and that structure-agency divisions and debates are misguided. Nonetheless, a lingering structural lens seems to organize our focus. I opted against a common distinction in organizational discourse studies—the d/D continuum<sup>2</sup>—because it does not hold up well when applied to our field. A more relevant way is to distinguish the object of a post-modern gaze: For what I call *micro-postmodern*

*feminism*, the everyday production of gender/difference in organization is the typical object. For *meso-postmodern feminism*, it is organizational form and culture (i.e., gender/difference of organization). For *macro-postmodern feminism*, it is the organization-culture relationship in the wake of intertextuality (i.e., the *cultural organization* of gender/difference and work/production).

*Micro-postmodern Feminism.* A first strand of postmodern feminism is occupied with gender in organization. But whereas “gendered communication expertise” emphasizes personal predispositions (i.e., “Do men and women communicate differently at work?”), and FST stresses individual narratives across organizations (i.e., “What standpoints form from cumulative experience in the workplace?”), micro-postmodern feminism highlights mundane interaction or performance (i.e., “How do we enact gender at work, making a fragile binary look fixed or occasionally disrupting it?”). Especially influential in our field is West and Zimmerman’s (1987) sociological model, in which they theorize “doing gender” as an ongoing activity we accomplish together—the management of everyday interaction in response to situated expectations for gender difference. To account for intersectionality, the model was later expanded as “doing difference” (Fenstermaker & West, 2002). The revised model holds that gender, race, and class are indivisible because we enact them at once and in light of one another, *not* in addition to one another, as if they are interlocked yet still separable strands. In the varied contexts of everyday life, we craft changing configurations of difference, using resources afforded by our surroundings (e.g., divisions of labor and space, physicality).

West and Zimmerman’s (1987) original model pointed to work as a key site of gender negotiation, but it was critical management theorist Gherardi (1994) who first elaborated how we do gender in the context of organization. She theorized the discursive labor whereby we both celebrate sacred gender divisions and repair their transgression. Her account transcended an earlier dispute

between liberal and cultural feminism. Namely, women’s alleged lack of assertiveness becomes a context-specific tactic. Neither biased perception nor universal trait, it is a way of responding to workplace expectations for femininity that admits its violation of a masculine space without rescinding the violation. Gherardi’s work significantly expanded the theoretical resources employed by West and colleagues, whose formulation was ethnomethodological. Gherardi (1995, 2002) integrated works from literary and cultural studies, such as Butler, Irigaray, and other post-structuralist and psychoanalytic influences.

In management and organization studies, social scientific and humanistic influences often remain cloistered. For example, sociological debates over “undoing” and “redoing” gender (e.g., Connell, 2010; Deutsch, 2007) transpire apart from the sort of agency debates surrounding Butler (e.g., Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, & Fraser, 1995). Despite divergent lineage, these theories share meaningful commonalities and differences. West and colleagues, for instance, explain the durability of the normative order with the construct of accountability (i.e., the constant risk of assessment that holds us responsible to expectations). Butler prefers the construct of performativity (in the dual sense of speech acts and dramaturgy), explicitly theorizes subjectivity (ignored by West and colleagues), and leans toward historicity to explain durability. Organizational communication scholars uniquely combine such theoretical resources instead of retaining their separation (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Nadesan, 1996; Trethewey, 1999a).

*Meso-postmodern Feminism.* A second strand of postmodern feminism shifts attention from the production of gender in organization to that by organization (i.e., consistent with a focus on the gender of organization or gendered organizing). Gender is not displaced as a primary interest; rather, the role of organization in its production now takes center stage. Organization is said to condition gender subjectivities. Specifically, the enactment of organizational forms and cultures



is a pivotal way we come to know gendered selves and relations. In this sense, meso-postmodern feminism is more a reversal of emphasis than a departure from micro.

With the notion of meso-postmodern feminist theory, I mean to mark an emerging overlap that we might otherwise miss between two literatures reviewed earlier. The first is radical-post-structuralist theory of organizational form. As detailed above, feminist scholars in our field have developed postmodern conceptions of form that underscore its communicative character: form as text, script, and discourse community or formation (see D'Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2011, for a contemporary example). We have also theorized the relation between postmodern and feminist forms of organizing. Postmodern forms are generally theorized as a *post*-bureaucratic response to the decline of modernist principles such as hierarchy, centralization, standardization, and formalization. Though born of radical feminism's *counter*-bureaucratic impulse, feminist forms often look similar to postmodern forms. Both tend to minimize fixed hierarchy in favor of participative decision making and flexible rules. In other words, feminist organizing has long grappled with, and is thus equipped to illuminate, dilemmas endemic to postmodern organizing (Ashcraft, 2006b).

The second literature stems from "gendered organizational culture." While most early studies in this vein did not reflect a postmodern orientation, increasingly, most now do (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Signs of a postmodern bent include attention to the performativity of culture, to the ways that local co-constructions of meaning summon broader societal discourses, to situated histories of contestation and fragmentation, and/or to the vulnerability of authorial voices. Although focus remains on local realities, cultural boundaries are considered more permeable than in conventional studies of organizational culture (e.g., Bell & Forbes, 1994; Nadesan, 1997).

*Macro-postmodern Feminism.* A final strand riffs on permeable boundaries to thoroughly

reconfigure the relation between organization and culture. While meso-postmodern feminism highlights local formations, the macro approach contends explicitly with the wake of intertextuality. If interpretive communities are increasingly unbounded, we must develop forms of cultural analysis that transcend customary notions of *site*. Here, the narrow scope of *organizational culture* morphs into the *cultural organization* of difference and work (see Carlone & Taylor, 1998). This wider lens enables multiple refractions of the organization-culture relationship and reflects a critical cultural turn from *studies of organizational culture* to *cultural studies of organization*.

Accordingly, macro-postmodern feminist theory takes up with the cultural discourses thought to mutually constitute (gender) difference and organization. Popular and trade cultures as well as organization theory itself attract particular attention (e.g., Dempsey, 2009; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Medved & Kirby, 2005). Noteworthy across these works is a growing historical sensibility—a genealogical approach to the evolution of discourse, which challenges our field's tendency to theorize the co-construction of organizational culture in a temporal vacuum (e.g., Ashcraft & Flores, 2003).

Macro scholarship is commonly criticized for treating discourse as a grand, powerful, free-floating symbolic agent, detached from the vested interests of individual and institutional actors and removed from its material consequences in everyday life (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Feminist scholars in our field moved swiftly to address this criticism. Early in the development of macro-postmodern feminism, we began to traverse the d/D continuum, tracing shifts in societal discourses while respecting their local manifestations (e.g., Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). In such ways, we demonstrated that discursive formations are highly consequential *and* hardly monolithic.

Yet even as macro-postmodern feminism became micro-conscious, the larger discourses under scrutiny seemed to hover in a neverland

devoid of actors pulling the discursive strings to pursue their interests amid lived exigencies. That is, we were quick to ask how people *respond* to discursive formations, but the formations themselves seemed to arise from nebulous texts floating above the fray of political economy. With our feminist communicology of organization, Mumby and I (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) endeavor to redress this problem. We merge postmodernist and modernist feminist theorizing in order to situate genealogies of discourse in the social, political, institutional, physical, and economic trajectories in which they intervene and to reveal how the struggle over meaning is an embodied, interactive tussle among agents vying to secure their material interests. A communicative explanation of organizing need not entail text positivism; it can incorporate materiality rather than oppose it.

Evoking a satirical postmodern sensibility, I suggest that postmodern feminism on the whole has achieved the kind of hegemonic status in our field of which postmodern perspectives themselves demand suspicion. In terms more consistent with its vocabulary, postmodern feminism exercises evident disciplinary power. *Disciplinary* assumes a double meaning here: a dispersed regulatory (i.e., *disciplining*) practice that defines our collective enterprise (i.e., the *discipline*). Arguably, postmodern feminism has become *the* feminism of organizational communication theory, the utmost in sophistication by which “others” are measured and found naïve. If this is the case, we would do well to honor postmodern feminism by undermining it—an irony it can readily embrace, if not require.

Destabilizing postmodern feminism is further warranted, I believe, because it is suppressing the multiplicity of perspectives that remain in our midst. As others have shown (Fournier & Smith, 2006), postmodern feminist theory is claimed by authors who proceed to reinscribe the gender binary or otherwise violate anti-foundationalist premises. While such habits are typically framed as a function of the theorist’s inconsistency, I suggest that they are also a disciplinary problem in

our field—the result of pressure to conform, at least nominally, to a collectively preferred feminism. In a self-reflexive application of meso-postmodern feminism, we might put it this way: Our own organizational text conditions the theorist to identify and converse in a postmodern discourse of vulnerability (Mumby, 1997) that has lost *its own* vulnerability. We can lift this discursive closure by resuscitating theoretical “others” in our midst (e.g., traces of liberal feminism as well as FST) and exploring new conceptual inspirations that push against and enrich postmodern feminisms.

## Toward Feminist Communication Theories of Organizing

What might we observe about the place and character of feminist theory in our field from this account of its evolution over the past 25 years? We can say, first, that feminist theory has moved from peripheral critic to vital voice whose contributions are established and valued. In itself, this nearly mainstream status distinguishes feminist theory in organizational communication from that in management and organization studies. No longer confined to a silo, feminist theory now circulates within the field, invoked as a productive way to explain organizational phenomena that exceed gender (e.g., Dempsey, Parker, & Krone, 2011). Even this *Handbook* attests to the diffusion of feminist theory across the field, to the extent that gender issues and feminist perspectives appear across the volume and are not relegated to a single chapter. The same cannot be said of parallel anthologies in management and organization studies,<sup>3</sup> though individual (critical) management scholars certainly apply feminist theory to shared concerns (e.g., Thomas & Davies, 2005).

Second, we can observe a steady but sluggish turn toward intersectionality. We seem to now embrace the premise that gender is not fruitfully theorized in isolation from other relations

of difference, but we have been painfully slow to make good on this premise as a collective. This crucial work must accelerate if we hope to better grasp and resist the complex ways that differences are wielded in relation to one another (see Ashcraft, 2011).

I would venture a third observation, which I intend *alongside* earlier observations of our creativity: Our feminist theorizing exhibits signs of stagnation. It is not as resourceful (i.e., inventive and resource rich) as it was in earlier moments. Generally speaking, our energy for philosophical, political, and moral debates among diverse feminisms has flagged in recent years. With exceptions, of course, we seldom specify precisely which feminism(s) are at play in our research beyond nodding to broadly postmodern conceptions. In sum, the vibrant plurality of feminist theory in our field shows some wear, and our diversity and depth of resources for engagement seem to be dwindling.

In an effort to rekindle robust deliberation among feminisms, I conclude by marking three major dilemmas apparent in this chapter and suggesting some resources for grappling with them. One dilemma concerns sameness, difference, and the binary. Arguably, feminist organization theory faces a gender paradox akin to the racial paradox debated among critical race scholars (Flores & Moon, 2002): an apparent choice between reproducing difference, ironically in order to deconstruct it, or denying difference and thereby ignoring its pressing reality. Applied here, is justice best pursued by stressing sameness or difference, and how can we move beyond a binary model of gender plurality? Earlier, I suggested a liberal–post-structuralist hybrid that includes, self-consciously, shifting claims of difference *and* sameness. Rather than seeing the dilemma as an ontological question with an either/or answer, we can reframe it as a situational quandary that demands agile tactics, none of which correspond with some “real” condition.

However, as I also argued above, we do well to expand our repertoire of responses beyond such postmodern reflexes. Three diverse ways to

upend the binary by enhancing intersectionality in our theorizing seem especially fruitful. With its rich capacity to confuse the binary with a dazzling array of sex-gender-sexuality possibilities, queer theory is one of the most likely sources of productive interventions (e.g., Harding, Lee, Ford, & Learmonth, 2011). Additionally, post/neo-colonial and transnational feminisms are sorely needed in our field (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Dempsey, 2011). For those who might read this primarily as a call for theorizing difference beyond Western contexts, I hasten to stress the importance of interrogating the ways in which colonial relations constitute domestic fronts as well. Finally, there is ample reason to suspect that dis/ability serves as a unifying metaphor of deficiency/wholeness through which all relations of difference are managed (Allen, 2003). Engaging with dis/ability studies thus has the potential to surface the normalization of able bodies and other oppressive dynamics lurking in theories of gender resistance.

A second dilemma concerns the development of feminist communication theory that accounts for materiality, especially embodied experience in space and time, without reducing it to discursive effect. This calls for a more pronounced turn from feminist perspectives *on* organizational communication to feminist *communication* theories of organizing. The feminist communicology approach reviewed above takes steps in this direction, but much remains to be done (e.g., see the final dilemma below). Earlier, I proposed that we resuscitate FST as another promising path toward communicative explanations of materiality, especially as a counterpoint to postmodern theorizing. Divergent theoretical influences might assist in this effort, including the ethnography of communication, phenomenology of the body, feminist psychoanalytic theory, and recent developments in organizational approaches to embodied sociology, practice theory, and socio-materiality.

A third and final dilemma concerns accounting for the multisited character of organizing. Our feminist theories of organizational form and

culture remain largely site bound, with the exception of macro-postmodern feminism, and all of these reflect disconcerting degrees of imprecision. For example, radical-post-structuralist feminism often merges competing influences (such as structuration theory, post-structuralist theory, and the Montréal School of thought on the communicative constitution of organization) without acknowledging, much less tackling, tensions among them. Macro-postmodern feminist theory is similarly imprecise about the mechanisms that organize difference across time and place. I suspect that the larger family of theoretical perspectives loosely known as actor-network theory and post-human theories of agency may prove quite helpful here.

Even in this sizeable chapter, however, we have barely scratched the surface of such dilemmas. They are big, and the theoretical resources mentioned here are philosophically diverse and not readily compatible, either—with one another or with the development of communication theory. But these challenges also make the work exciting. My hope is that our conscious commingling and engagement with resources old and new can infuse new energy into feminist organizational communication theorizing. That, after all, is the aim of this chapter: to honor and reinvigorate a collective conversation that contributes to a better world.

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## Notes

1. Calás & Smircich (1996) make a similar point in their depiction of liberal feminist organization studies as “thirty years of researching that women are people too” (p. 223).
2. Lowercase d typically refers to highly localized discursive activity, or language in use, while capital D refers to broad societal discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).
3. See, for example, the 2009 *Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Issues of gender and diversity are concentrated in a single chapter and barely mentioned elsewhere—in a massive volume dedicated to relations of power, no less.