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# Doing Feminist Interpersonal Communication Studies: A Call for Action, Two Methodological Approaches, and Theoretical Potentials

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Doing Feminist Interpersonal Communication Research:  
A Call for Action, Two Methodological  
Approaches, and Theoretical Potentials

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What does it mean to “do” feminist interpersonal communication research? Interpersonal communication studies hold great potential for practical insights into how relationships are (en)gendered, informed (and even constituted) by patriarchal histories, and subject to cultural and institutional inequalities based on the identities of those in (or not in) a given relationship. Unfortunately, little research has embraced feminist approaches to interpersonal communication studies. In this essay, we seek to remedy this shortcoming by exploring some of the ways that interpersonal communication scholars can continue to integrate feminist approaches and perspectives into their work. We specifically examine two possibilities: feminist-informed participatory action research and integrating feminist critique into empirical interpersonal communication studies. As our arguments in this essay reflect, we believe that these particular approaches, similar to other feminist methodological possibilities, have the potential to impact interpersonal communication axiology and praxeology. To set the scene for these methodologies, we first overview feminist approaches to research and theorizing in the communication discipline as a whole as well as in interpersonal communication studies.

## **Feminist Approaches to Communication Research**

As Craig and Muller (2007) note, “Feminist thought has become an important influence across several traditions of communication theory” even though “no consensus has yet crystallized on a distinct feminist way of conceptualizing communication problems” (p. 497). This lack of a singular approach is actually one of the key strengths of feminist scholarship: it welcomes a “plurality of perspectives” (Kramarae, 1989, p. 157) that advocate on behalf of gender equality even as they might diverge from each other in specific goals and measures. Feminist research also tends to focus on women’s experiences (Kramarae, 1989), especially as they are impacted by patriarchal behaviors and assumptions (Wood, 2015); frequently gains inspiration from and sometimes maintains links to or even advances gender-oriented activism (Chevrette,

2013); examines and critiques gendered language (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 1999) and/or performance expectations (Butler, 1990); is often enacted with goals of positive structural creation or change (Ashcraft, 2005); strives to acknowledge intersectional perspectives (Calafell, 2014); and, ideally, seeks to form productive coalitions with other people who are marginalized (Griffin, 2014).

As Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) so effectively summarize, feminist communication studies often incorporate three central themes: voice, difference, and representation. Wood (2015) echoes these three themes, although using different vernacular, in her overview of using critical feminist theories for interpersonal communication studies. Specifically, she points to two concepts, gender and patriarchy, that are key to feminist theorizing. She also—and rightly, in our opinion, given that many research studies conflate the two—separates feminist approaches to interpersonal communication studies from critical approaches. As she explains, “By studying how dominant and marginal groups enact and resist power, critical theorists aim to identify how cultures work and to challenge, disrupt, and remake cultural life so that it better reflects and represents the interests and perspectives of all who comprise it” (Wood, 2015, p. 206). The combining of feminist approaches—e.g., voice, difference, and representation—with critical approaches—e.g., power and emancipation—has led to fruitful theorizing for interpersonal communication studies.<sup>1</sup> In her review, Wood points to such beneficial theories as muted group theory, co-cultural theory, and standpoint theories as having emerged at the intersection of feminist and critical theory.

## **A Lack of Feminist Interpersonal Communication Research**

The trouble begins, from our viewpoint, in examining the overview of research and practical application that has been allowed by such theorizing. Although Wood (2015) points to important research topics including sexual harassment, date rape and marital rape, conversational maintenance work, and the second shift, it is apparent from her overview that few of the studies cited were produced in the last ten years. Nor does this lack of recent research appear to be an oversight by Wood. In a search of the database Communication and Mass Media Complete for research publications explicitly containing the terms *feminist* and *interpersonal communication* or *interpersonal relationships* from the last ten years, we were only able to identify 37 studies. Many of these studies were not examining interpersonal communication directly, but rather had discussion that explained how findings might be of importance to the future studies of interpersonal scholars. Seeking to examine other literature that might not appear in that database, we turned to the most recent edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (Knapp & Daly, 2011) and *The SAGE Handbook of Family Communication* (Turner & West, 2015) and found that only one page explicitly involving feminism was listed in either index—and it led to a brief mention of feminist issues in television sitcoms (see Tyus, 2015, within the *Family Communication* volume).

Taking another approach, we looked to the content of what are arguably the two most visible general (i.e., not specific to a contextual area of the field or a particular research

approach) feminist research journals in the communication discipline, *Women's Studies in Communication* and *Women & Language*. Across the two journals, only 9 studies could be identified from the past decade that involve interpersonal or family communication. These studies examined important topics including the collective communication practices of black women (Davis, 2015), women's relationships in the workplace (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007), compassionate support (Hoover, Hastings, & Musambria, 2009), the social control of young women through purity pledges (Manning, 2015), and mentoring (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2008). It was also evident that innovative methods were often being used, including an intriguing autoethnographic study where a relationship was analyzed using found poetry (Faulkner & Ruby, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Still, this was precious little feminist interpersonal or family communication research.

It is surprising, and also disheartening, that across all of the searches many of the hallmark areas of interpersonal communication studies—including personality, expression of emotions, interpersonal conflict, romantic relationships, and health—were absent or barely represented in the literature. Indeed, while many studies were *interpersonalish*—i.e., studying topics that might involve relationships or personal interaction such as work-life balance, remaining childfree, or coalition building—research about these topics tended to develop theories or concepts associated with other contextual areas of the discipline such as organizational, mediated, or health communication. Interpersonal communication appeared to be tangential to the primary goals of the research. Also rare or completely absent were interpersonal communication research studies that involved people of color, ableism, nonheterosexual identities, aging, or non-United States perspectives or experiences; and studies also eluded exploring how masculinity is part of a cultural fabric that is constitutive of interpersonal relationships. In short, it is evident that there are many areas where feminist studies of interpersonal communication could be of benefit.

This review raises questions as to why feminist perspectives are not being employed in interpersonal communication studies. First, it is evident that even if feminist approaches are not being used, studies of sex differences are often being explored in interpersonal communication studies (see Wood, 2006, for an overview). That begs further questions of why scholars are not extending these studies into explorations of how such sexed interactions can be informed or explained by gendered notions—including patriarchal relational expectations and gendered representations. Further, it is evident from looking to allied contextual areas within the communication discipline (e.g., health communication, organizational communication) as well as allied academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, public health) that feminist perspectives frequently inform their work. It is curious that interpersonal communication studies have not explored similar terrain. Could it be that interpersonal communication researchers are mimicking the tendencies of psychologists (see Greenwood, 2004) to appear as scientific as possible to court respect? Is it a lack of mentors in the discipline who advocate feminist interpersonal research? Or might it be that the sociopsychological and cybernetic traditions that dominate interpersonal communication research (see

Manning, 2014) create a scholarly space where interpretivist-leaning feminist methods are difficult to integrate into a larger scholarly conversation?

Although we believe it would be valuable to examine the results of an empirical study of interpersonal communication scholars to help determine why there is so little feminist interpersonal communication research, we instead use the remainder of our space here to review two methodological approaches that we believe will prove to be especially good fits for feminist interpersonal communication studies. After presenting each of the methodologies, we offer discussion about how they might impact interpersonal communication theory.

## **Engaging Feminist Interpersonal Communication Research: Two Methods**

Here we present brief overviews of two methodologies that we believe could be especially beneficial to feminist interpersonal communication research: feminist participatory action research (FPAR) and feminist critique of interpretive data. For each we explain its connection to feminist interpersonal communication research, articulate the primary tenets of the methodology, and point to sources where a better sense of application can be obtained.

### **Feminist Participatory Action Research**

As noted at the beginning of this essay, feminist research often has strong links to activism and coalition building and frequently seeks to reduce or eliminate gendered oppression via structural change. Given these goals of feminist scholarship, Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) was developed to both allow increased, in-depth participation from those involved with a research project and to empower both researchers and the communities they are working with—often who are considered to be co-researchers—with practical knowledge and the empowerment to use it (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). As the name implies, FPAR centers gender and/or the lived experiences of women both practically and theoretically (Reid & Gillberg, 2014). It is helpful to think of FPAR as both a conceptual and research framework. Conceptually, FPAR involves designing research in a way that encourages participants to share their multiple perspectives and that seeks to use those perspectives to both foster a sense of inclusion and to encourage productive social change. As that suggests, researchers who use FPAR must be ready to expose their own faulty assumptions and to adjust their research processes based on participation input and feedback (Reid & Gillberg, 2014). It also involves reflexively considering existing and emerging theories—in the case of the research we are exploring here, both feminist and interpersonal communication theories—as part of the process.

Because of the demand for flexibility and reflexivity, interpretive qualitative research methods (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014) are often ideal, although mixed-method

quantitative-qualitative approaches (e.g., Cresswell, 2013) can be beneficial as well. Also key to this methodological approach is understanding the basic principles of participatory action research (PAR). Koshy (2005) points to four common elements. First, PAR demands action from participants, evaluation of those actions, and critical reflection that leads to change. Second, those actions should be enacted with the goal of solving problems and improving practice. To that end, a third tenet is that those involved with the research should have a common purpose and common goals to ensure ethical participation and heartfelt collaboration. Finally, because many problems are situation-based and/or context specific, research findings are not considered to be absolute or finalizable, but rather can be used to sensitize both participants and those who review the research findings to possibilities in a given situation.

It is not hard to imagine that FPAR could be valuable in a variety of situations and contexts already studied in interpersonal communication through a feminist lens. These include dealing with gender hostile workplaces, managing work-life balance, and both giving and receiving support from others. FPAR could also be helpful for studying problems related to interpersonal communication in romantic relationships as couples work together to move past problematic gendered expectations of relationships; or as health providers try to understand differences across gender, race, class and other intersectional identities in their interactions with patients or clients; and tactics for decreasing gendered or sexuality based bullying in computer-mediated forums. As these possible areas of exploration illustrate, ethics should be carefully considered—especially in the case of particularly vulnerable participants or communities who might suffer from the intervention required as part of FPAR (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Those interested in pursuing this method should read Koshy's (2005) excellent primer that clearly involves the considerations involved with PAR; and then supplement that with Gatenby and Humphries's (2000) exploration of ethics in FPAR and the sources found in Reid and Gillberg's (2014) comprehensive encyclopedia entry about FPAR.

### Feminist Critique of Interpretive Data

As researchers who frequently use qualitative research methods to study interpersonal communication, we have often found ourselves in the conundrum articulated by Putnam (1982) over 30 years ago: that incorporating feminism into our studies often means foregrounding one type of theory (e.g., either feminist-oriented or interpersonal) while underemphasizing another, even if they both seem to be of equal or similar import or relevance. As constitutive perspectives of communication continued to gain prominence in the field, especially the notion that communication is constitutive of organizations (CCO; see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), we continued to both gain hope that such perspectives would take hold in interpersonal communication studies (i.e., a CCR or communication as constitutive of relationships perspective); and that they would, similar to organizational communication studies, allow a greater sense of how feminist theory plays into the constitutive nature of relationships.<sup>3</sup>



Little did we suspect that our inspiration for developing a possible answer to the gender/interpersonal conundrum would come from different disciplines, namely scholars in Leadership and Education Studies who make arguments about “viewing data across multiple perspectives” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii). Specifically, Jackson & Mazzei (2012) advocate that multiple theoretical ideas applied to the same chunks of data yield different vantage points that redirect focus while simultaneously leading to deeper understandings based on those multiple foci. They offer three “maneuvers” that involve “plugging in” theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 5). First, using multiple theories involves “putting philosophical concepts to work via disrupting the theory/practice binary by decentering each and instead showing how they *constitute or make one another*” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 5; emphasis in original). Second, making a deliberate and transparent assessment about what questions or observations are made possible by applying a particular theory. Stated differently, it creates questions and answers about what applying a particular theoretical lens illuminates in a corpus of data as well as what that theory ignores. Finally, after looking across the different theories applied, a researcher will have an array of possibilities that make contextualized sense of the data. Ideally, new knowledges will be formed from the different applications, but especially the “suppleness of each [theory] when plugged in” should help the researcher to come to complex conclusions about what the data mean (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 5).

In other words, the approach could allow for constitutive findings regarding both interpersonal communication and feminist theory. Such findings could also allow for deeper understandings of the mundane elements of gendered communication, especially sexist language practices or assumptions based on gender or sexuality. It also has the potential to unpack and/or critique interpersonal communication theories in action as the gendered or even sexist elements are uncovered through the use of feminist theories. This form of analysis also offers an alternative to the coding that is often used in interpretive qualitative studies. Whereas most qualitative studies depend on unitizing and identifying meaning in data, this form of analysis is more akin to rhetorical criticism given that the researcher uses data as a text for argument and observation. Those interested in pursuing this novel approach to data analysis should read Jackson and Mazzei (2012) who offer in-depth insights regarding codeless qualitative data analysis and plugging in different theories. Their text even features sample analysis of data using the feminist theories of Karen Barad (2007).

### **Some Final (Beginning?) Thoughts: Considering Axiology and Praxeology**

Here we have reviewed just two of the many possibilities for incorporating feminism into interpersonal communication research. Each of the approaches presented here are quite different in their goals and assumptions. Whereas FPAR is more about making change and embracing practical aspects of interpersonal communication and feminist theorizing, plugging in theory as an analytical exercise involves a concentrated emphasis



on the development and possible convergence of pre-existing theories. Although both involve empirical observation, the former involves grounded development based on extended interaction and intervention, whereas the latter relies much more on innate forms of reasoning and the development of ideas. Despite their epistemological differences, both are similar praxeologically and axiologically in that they defy current expectations for interpersonal communication scholarship.

On a praxeological level, both approaches would require metatheoretical vocabularies and, relatedly, different writing styles that would defy the dominant traditional norms. In the case of FPAR, the focus on practical aspects and the use of a direct, probably jargonless style might raise concerns regarding methodological complexity. As Levine (2011) notes, methodolary currently runs rampant in interpersonal communication research, and so methods that deceptively appear simple—combined with findings that focus more on outcome than theoretical contribution—might be dismissed. Such scrutiny is unfortunate, as the value of practical application of theory that helps people have harmonious or productive interactions and satisfying relationships should be a goal for every interpersonal communication scholar. On the flip side, codeless (i.e., non-normative) approaches to qualitative data analysis might be seen as too heady or theoretical and, given the critique elements of the work, as not empirical. As codeless methods of analysis begin to take hold, it will probably be especially important to point to how findings can develop or inform other forms of interpersonal communication studies.

Another possible answer for moving both FPAR and feminist critique of qualitative data forward is their shared axiological assumptions. Both approaches seek to eradicate the silencing of unprivileged gendered voices, to stop discrimination or intimidation based on gendered differences, and to ensure fair and equitable representation for people of all genders within cultural and social institutions. Perhaps the greatest strength in making people understand the importance of feminist interpersonal communication research is to show them the worth in the work—the *why* the study is happening as well as the *what* it tells us. Approaching feminist interpersonal communication studies with these axiological motives in mind will almost certainly allow for the generation, refinement, and extension of both good theory and good practice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is imperative to note that just as feminist approaches do not always follow critical research paradigms, not all feminist studies are interpretive in nature. Quantitative post-positivist research often offers compelling documentation of reified patriarchy and calls for change (e.g., LeClere, Rogers, & Peters, 1998; Sprague, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> We also believe it is important to point out that most of the interpersonal communication studies found in the journals came under the direction of the most recent editors. That could be a promising sign for the future.

<sup>3</sup> We also acknowledge inspiration here from Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) framing of feminist studies in organizational communication via a discursive turn.

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