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Recommended Citation

Ram, A. (2005). Review of the book Gender in applied communication contexts. *Sex Roles*, 52, 713-714.

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Book Review

Gender in Applied Communications Contexts.

Edited by Patrice M. Buzzanell, Helen Sterk, and Lynn H. Turner, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage; 2004, 373 pp., \$39.95 (paperback), \$79.95 (hardcover).

The best scholarship on gender is one that translates readily into advocacy, action, and intervention without blunting its theoretical teeth. The repertoire of 14 articles and four commentaries included in the book "Gender in Applied Communication Contexts," edited by Patrice M. Buzzanell, Helen Sterk, and Lynn H. Turner, clearly demonstrate a commitment to feminist praxis, while retaining a focus on theoretical engagement. Topics range from sexual harassment and breast cancer to telecommuting, mothering, and feminist pedagogy, as the authors in this collection attempt to address directly how gender is constructed and implicated in varied communication contexts.

From the powerful and resonant statement "ain't I a woman" by Sojourner Truth to more recent and forceful arguments put forward by poststructuralist feminist and transnational feminist theorists, gender as essentialized has been vigorously questioned and debated. However, our public discourse about gender continues to promote biologically derived and determined polarizations. Accounts that present gender as genetically codified are promoted in our culture because research that confirms such gender differences is easy to report about, converts easily into media sound bites, and provides political catch phrases. In contrast, "Gender in Applied Communications Contexts" is a welcome contribution that counters such reductionist typologizations of gender. Each of the authors builds upon the idea that gender is socially constructed and discursively produced. Often, terms such "social construction" and "discourse" are employed loosely. However, the editors of this book articulate their organizing framework clearly in their introduction, and this clarity is reflected in each of the articles. Drawing on previous theoretical work, the editors argue that communication contexts act as "gendered discourse communities that suggest gendered scripts for members to enact and/or context"

(p. xiv). Further they emphasize that contexts direct but do not determine member practice. Following a performance approach, their attention is directed to "doing gender" and "gendering," which imply that gendered identities are produced, reproduced, and inevitably imbricated in a constellation of power relations (p. xv).

Given the aim of the book to examine gender in applied communication contexts, separate sections are devoted to organizational, health, pedagogical, and family contexts. A chapter on sexual harassment in the section on organizational contexts is hardly a surprise. However, Buzzanell's essay is both broad and deep, as she moves from a personal story to a meta-analysis of sexual harassment theories, and then to practical implications, giving us a uniquely constructed communication perspective on this very emotional and contentious issue. Hymlo's article on telecommuting brings the section nicely up to date. The shifting boundaries of work and home life in the context of telework are explored, and the author attempts to answer crucial questions about such reorganizing of work and its implications for gender. Meyer and O'Hara's essay on women's music festivals uses concepts such as "subaltern counterpublics" and "counterdiscourses" along with standpoint theory to illuminate how diversity is embraced and how resisted and how identities are discursively negotiated.

Each of the articles in the section on health lays bare the deficiencies, discrimination, and dangers inherent in relying exclusively on the biomedical model to provide explanations for women's health issues. A mix of empirical studies and critical essays make this section the most compelling in the collection. As she comments on issues ranging from breast-feeding to breast cancer, Sotrin uses irony and ambivalence to expose the "consuming/commodified breast of popular imagery and cultural socialization" (p. 145). In addition, the experiences of women cancer survivors and the everyday experience of the gynecological exam and the menopause are explored empirically by authors in this section. Each piece questions the status quo, and then advocates powerfully and univocally for

a reframing of the physician/patient interaction as patient-centered.

The third section was intended to use the classroom as context to explore gendered constructions. However, the articles in this section lack the coherence and unity that define the other sections. Although each of the articles in itself is insightful, useful, and thought provoking, the articles span a range that goes beyond the classroom contexts. For instance, Russ's piece on "body shape discourse" (p. 215) is a deftly argued essay on interaction, friendship, and the body, but clearly the topic does not limit itself to the classroom context.

Edley's essay on how entrepreneurial mothers balance work and family starts the section on the family context. Her vision of entrepreneurial mothers as "cyborgs traversing permeable boundaries between work and home/family both temporally and spatially by utilizing the master's tools—the computer, modem . . ." (p. 272) elucidates the overall "doing gender" theme of the book in a perceptive and emphatic manner. Perhaps it is fitting that the topic of domestic violence, somber as it is, anchors the conclusion of this collection. Fink and Tucker's article takes the form of an interview with the second author who describes himself as a male feminist. Both authors advocate and work for *Safe Passage*, a domestic violence agency. This article is a powerful reminder that, although we can theorize gender as being socially constructed and discursively produced, the material conditions that such gendered constructions and discourse create are very real and enact discrimination, exploitation, and oppression in the lives of women. By confining the theorizing to endnotes, the authors are able to weave together narratives about male abusers. These stories speak for themselves and leave the reader in no doubt that scholarship on gender should directly resonate with the daily struggles of people's lives. In addition, the interview transcript and the commentary that accompany the

stories provide tools for intervention and advocacy and further our knowledge about the social, cultural, and political contexts that give shape and meaning to the gendered discourse.

As a teacher, I am always looking for books that provide exemplars that demonstrate the practice and products of doing solid communication research that are accessible to a range of students. Buzzanell, Sterk, and Turner have successfully accomplished the formidable task of carefully selecting pieces that both demonstrate the wide scope of gender research and the potential for such research to provide interventionist strategies. Each section ends with an essay by a notable scholar in the field who provides a meta-commentary that points to the significance of the issues. From a pedagogical perspective, this is a book that will be immensely useful.

The most glaring omission in this book is the lack of any significant space devoted to engaging gender in relation to diverse cultural and/or global contexts. Apart from a chapter on aggression in inter-ethnic encounters by Jaasma, and a comparative account of African-American and European-American mother-daughter dyads by Pennigton and Turner, race, ethnicity, and culture remain marginalized discourses. Given that during the last 10 years feminist theorizing has benefited from the astute analyses marshaled by transnational feminist and postcolonial scholars, particularly in understanding gender as discursively produced, such a lack seems curious, at best. Despite this oversight, Buzzanell et al.'s edited volume is a carefully produced selection of interesting, instructive, and engaging writings that will do much to advance our understanding of the specific ways in which gender, discourse, and context are organized.

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