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ABSTRACT

Many educators in speech communication support the elimination of academic sexism, but relatively few have participated in the necessary curricula revisions. The primary purpose of women's studies is the eventual elimination of sexism in both academia and society. Most women's studies have occurred in rhetoric and public address courses, but current changes promise to broaden the areas. The communication strategies of the women's liberation movement reject standard rhetorical traditions of formal addresses by experts and an elected leadership. The movement instead favors leaderless structure and "consciousness raising" small group discussions. The women's liberation movement in speech communication courses should, however, involve more male participation because courses taught by women, about women, and for women cannot reverse sexist trends in the educational system. (RN)

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### WOMEN'S STUDIES: The Role of the Communication Professor

Now that there are over 2000 courses<sup>1</sup>, 78 university pro-  
grams, four minors, one associate, nine bachelor's and four  
master's degree programs in women's studies in the United States,<sup>2</sup>  
skeptics are beginning to tolerate the presence of women's mate-  
rials in the curriculum. Some individuals, however, do not seem  
to recognize the significance of eliminating sexism in academia.  
Questions have been raised concerning the academic legitimacy  
of the programs and courses<sup>3</sup> and fears have been voiced about  
women proselytizing the classroom.<sup>4</sup> Academia, like society,  
is dominated by men.<sup>5</sup> As might be anticipated, more males than  
females seem to have difficulty accepting women's studies.

For some male professors, material about women  
represents a weakness of scholarship, the frag-  
mentation of the curriculum, or worse, the en-  
largement of their specialty to include new and  
unfamiliar material.

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Reservations about women's studies are not unique to any disci-  
pline.

While many within the field of speech have given lip ser-  
vice supporting the principle of reducing sexism, the number of  
those who have actively participated in the curriculum revi-  
sion and research is not impressive. It is possible that some  
reluctance to change the system may be due to uncertainty about  
the nature and purpose of women's studies and about the potential

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role of both female and male communication professors in the process. The purpose of this presentation is to examine the origin and nature of women's studies, with special focus on the implications relevant to speech communication, in order to make recommendations for participation of communication professors. References will be made to representative contributions already made by communication scholars.

The impetus for women's studies came from the feminists.<sup>7</sup> In 1966 the National Organization of Women listed education as one of its primary goals.<sup>8</sup> Since the late 60's the emerging courses and programs in women's studies tended to mirror the actions taking place nationally in women's liberation. New images of women and sources of information and materials virtually ignored by the educational system were explored. The extensive educational activities of women's liberation have contributed to the characterization of feminism as a "teaching movement."<sup>9</sup>

The primary purpose of women's studies is to participate in the reduction and ultimately the elimination of sexism in academia and society. Some specific advantages associated with women's studies are: compensatory consciousness raising education which treats the distorted view of women,<sup>10</sup> reversal of the influence of socialization,<sup>11</sup> addition of new information that counteracts the absence of materials in the curriculum,<sup>12</sup> and self-actualization of women.<sup>13</sup> A more significant

justification for some is the observation that integration of women into the curriculum is consistent with the principles of the Education and Equal Opportunity Acts of 1972.<sup>14</sup>

Rationales for response to sexist curricula in the field of speech communication have been consistent with those of other disciplines. There is evidence that individuals in speech either entered women's studies later than other disciplines or failed to publicize earlier efforts. A course entitled "Rhetoric of Women" was cited as a new course as recently as 1972.<sup>15</sup> Today, however, speech educators are involved in women's studies on a national scale. Samples of course titles currently offered include: Communication Study of Women's Organizations, Communication Between Men and Women and the Rhetoric of: Women, Feminists and Activists.<sup>16</sup> Others have been involved in less visible ways participating in interdisciplinary courses, and by integrating women's materials into existing course structures.

Many of the current curriculum changes in speech communication have developed in response to the communication strategies utilized by the women's liberation movement. It is significant to note that new courses and revisions have related to virtually all interest areas in the field of speech communication.

More women's studies courses and curriculum adaptations have been generated in rhetoric and public address than in any other area of speech communication. The majority of these courses have focused on rhetorical actions of feminists and backlash aimed

at the women's liberation movement. The rhetoric of women's liberation presents an interesting challenge to rhetoricians. The challenge results in attempts to comfortably categorize the rhetorical actions. According to Campbell,<sup>17</sup> who has not as yet regarded women's liberation as a cohesive historical-political movement, the rhetoric violates rhetorical traditions. Campbell concluded that women's liberation is, <sup>perhaps</sup> "... the only genuinely radical rhetoric on the contemporary American scene."<sup>19</sup>

Many have observed actions of women's liberationists that have negated masculine rhetorical characteristics. For example, Hancock<sup>20</sup> observed that,

The channels chosen for the emerging rhetoric of women's liberation were well suited to the need for purity of ideology and the avoidance of hierarchical power relationships associated with masculine politics.

There are implications that perhaps the rhetorical traditions and philosophical heritage our discipline embraces reflect only a tradition and heritage of masculine rhetoric.

In philosophy, one studies the ideas of man's nature advanced by Aristotle, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, but one rarely notes that these men excluded 51 percent of the world from full humanity. Clearly the fact that few philosophers have had an adequate notion of femininity has not been considered any flaw in their philosophical systems.

The organization of the liberation movement, like the rhetoric, represents divergence from masculine models. The first branch of the movement, associated with Betty Friedan and other NOW advocates, tended to conform to the "system."<sup>22</sup> They followed

established rhetorical traditions, featuring formal communication by experts adapting to audiences, top-down management, and elected leadership. In contrast to masculine models of organization and communication, the younger, more militant liberationists favored a leaderless structure. The so-called "star system", communication of one to many, was discouraged.<sup>23</sup> Communication tended to proliferate horizontally.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps as a result of distrust of the "system", younger feminists scorned traditional media and instead favored underground channels.<sup>25</sup> They tended to show a preference for small group communication in the form of consciousness raising groups. The consciousness raising small group was used for both educational and persuasive communications. Chesebro et al., after examining communication in consciousness raising groups, suggested that, "... an explication of consciousness raising may partially explain rhetorical confrontations themselves."<sup>26</sup>

Significant efforts in the small groups were made to encourage equal opportunity for participation by all group members. Rosenwasser<sup>27</sup> describes a method used by some groups to control monopolization of communication by some group members. The method involves equal allocation of tokens to all group members which are individually surrendered for each communication made.

Despite the considerable participation communicating in small groups, liberationists have relied heavily on print rather than on oral channels of communication.<sup>28</sup> Special difficulties

have been noted concerning speaking in public about women's liberation. According to Wood,<sup>29</sup> "Learning to speak in public is one thing; learning to speak about women's liberation is quite another ..." She gives advice to prevent other women from being, in her words, "devastated" by intense personal responses from the audience.

One of the most frequent observations made by participants in women's studies related to the development of speech characteristics. Questions have been raised about the extent socialization influences speech characteristics of males and females. While discussing sexual brainwashing with students, Benson<sup>30</sup> observed that they,

... had never considered that their very gestures and speech mannerisms were possibly not 'natural' or innate but learned behavior.

After reviewing research examining differences between the ways men and women communicate, Kramer<sup>31</sup> was concerned about the paucity of research testing sexual differences of English speaking populations. She noted that most research examining sexual differences in speech and language characteristics has concerned other cultures.<sup>32</sup> Most of these crosscultural speech and language studies were performed by individuals who were involved in fields other than communication. Judging by the rapidly increasing number of individuals involved in intercultural communication research, however, more individuals from the field of speech communication may become interested in compar-

isons of crosscultural sexual differences in speech and language.

Regardless of advances in intercultural research, investigations of sexual differences in the speech and language of American men and women should be made. Kramer<sup>33</sup> urged that research consider sexual differences in areas such as: linguistic competence, grammar, phonation, semantics, verbal skills, instrumental use of language and the relationship of non-verbal cues to verbal behavior.

Classes discussing women's studies frequently examine sexual stereotyping in interpersonal communication encounters between men and women. Sheehy<sup>34</sup> reported that his perceptions concerning certain types of non-verbal and verbal communication occurring between the sexes in our society had changed as a result of his experiences in a women's studies course. In an amusing review, he reported different exercises that were utilized in the classroom to explore sexist dimensions of typical interpersonal interactions. Unfortunately with few exceptions, interpersonal courses do not include sufficient analysis of sexist communication rituals.

Many other examples of important ideas contributed by the women's movement which are relevant to speech education could be cited. Aspects of the movement have also had a certain degree of impact on the educational system in addition to curriculum revision. Alternative teaching styles have increased in part as a response to the changing rhetorical styles of women's liberation.

For example, team and group teaching have increased eliminating the one "star" in the classroom. Many individuals have encouraged increased student participation in educational decision-making. Oral history approaches have been used to study feminist rhetoric by bringing participants of the movement into the classroom to share their personal experiences. For example, Florence Luscomb, the 86 year old suffragist, feminist and leftist, has participated in many university and high school classrooms in New England in the past few years.

The women's movement has also influenced educational research. Research techniques not often associated with or sanctioned by the scientific community have been suggested in reference to special research problems in analyzing actions and communications of individuals in the women's movement. Chesebro et al., encouraged the rebirth of the participant observation method to study communication in consciousness raising groups. Freeman<sup>36</sup> stressed the need for legitimation of personal feelings as a form of inquiry. Many generalizations about communication rarely challenged are currently being tested by speech scholars.

Women's liberation is an educational movement. In the field of speech communication women's materials have and will hopefully continue to have significant impact on the curriculum, the classroom and research. The speech profession has already taken important steps to reduce sexism. In 1970 Graham proposed

that professional conventions in different fields sponsor sessions that consider women's issues.<sup>37</sup> Several programs have been presented at Speech conventions. Communication journals have responded by publishing articles dealing with women's materials. The theme of the 1973 fall issue of Today's Speech is women. Communication organizations have established women's caucuses to investigate sexism. In the future more efforts must be directed to curriculum change.

Prior to consideration of curriculum changes, however, serious questions should be answered for skeptical members of our profession. Many have asked if male students should be allowed to participate in courses related to women's studies. There are divergent views in response to this question. For example, Rosenfelt<sup>38</sup> reports that Robin Morgan, feminist and member of WITCH, envisions,

... completely autonomous women's studies programs taught, run and attended solely by women. She had frightened men out of her own classes, she said, by promising to give the women an automatic pass; the men a grade on merit (an ironic smile) or an automatic F; she required no work from the women; from the men, a sixty-page paper and the establishment of a childcare center.

While Morgan's proposal may have merit for the Womens International ~~Conspiracy~~ *Ferronist* from Hell, it is inconsistent with some of the goals of women's studies and encourages reverse sexism. It is important for males as well as females to be exposed to nonsexist curricula. Courses taught by women, for women, about

women can not reverse sexist trends in the educational system. •

Male colleagues have been curious about their role in the women's studies classroom. Although some disagree strongly, it is possible for men to teach courses based in part or entirely on women and women's issues. A few males in the speech profession are already successfully teaching women's studies courses.<sup>39</sup> Benson<sup>40</sup> points out, however, that men teaching about women should be aware of their limited perspective. The reservations are comparable to those made about whites teaching the Black experience.

For many males, and some females, reeducation may be necessary. Short courses relating to women's studies can be offered at future SCA conventions to cope with this need.

A most important question concerns how we can adapt communication curricula to control sexism. Individuals have advocated participation in women's studies programs. There are inherent dangers in completely autonomous women's studies programs. The first autonomous programs in women's studies resulted in the isolation of women in academia.<sup>41</sup> The programs referred to are those in Home Economics. It is easier for the administration and others to manipulate the program and force women into an academic ghetto if the program is not integrated in some fashion with the rest of the curriculum. Networks have been suggested consisting of faculty members working half-time in women's studies and half-time in their respective

fields. Women in such integrated networks are able to participate actively in women's studies without severing direct professional affiliation with their disciplines. Affiliation is essential because women's studies is only a temporary expedient for the future.<sup>42</sup> Unless there is ultimately some form of integration in the rest of the curriculum, sexism will still exist in academia.

As long as boys "decipher and discover, earn, train or foil people," and girls still, "overcome difficulties, feel lost, help solve and help someone out" in educational literature,<sup>43</sup> significant efforts should be made to reduce sexism in academia. In the future when elementary and secondary speech education eliminates sexist orientations, university professors will be forced to make consistent curriculum changes. Until that time voluntary participation must be encouraged within the field. To borrow a phrase from Barbara Harrison, the time has come to begin "unlearning the lie."<sup>44</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

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43 Florence Howe, "Sexual Stereotyping Starts Early," Saturday Review, 54(1971), pp. 76-82, 92-94.

44 Barbara Harrison, "Unlearning the Lie: Sexism in School," Ms, 2(1973), pp. 80-83, 110.