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Overcoming the Dichotomy: Cultivating Standpoints in Organizations through Research

Debbie S. Dougherty and Kathleen J. Krone

Abstract

Feminist standpoint theories are seldom used by researchers. One possible reason is the ongoing debate between postmodern theorists and feminine standpoint theorists. The debate has been constructed in bipolar terms such that the issues are perceived as mutually exclusive. However, bipolar assumptions are damaging to women, both in general and in organizations. We contend that feminist standpoint theories should theorize similarities, material reality, and communal agency while being sensitive to differences, multiple realities, and individual agency. A study of academic women is used to illustrate how standpoints can develop around similarities while respecting differences. Using a creative narrative, participants' organizational standpoints were developed around the common experiences of invisibility, overvisibility, isolation, energy dissipation, and a desire for community. Cultural differences, idiosyncratic differences, and differences in the evolution of a consciousness of oppression are discussed.

Recently, several researchers in organizational communication have called for research using feminist theories in general (Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993), and feminist standpoint theories more specifically. For example, researchers have argued that feminist standpoint theories could be used to understand and to change the nature of conflict in organizations (Putnam, 1990), to better understand the organizational experiences of women of color (Allen, 1998), to rethink organizational socialization (Bullis, 1993), to explore alternative organizational themes (Buzzanell, 1994), and to provide a better understanding of sexual harassment in organizations (Wood, 1994).

With so many prominent researchers calling for the use of feminist standpoint theories to guide organizational research, it is disappointing and perplexing to find few research projects utilizing feminist standpoint theories. Allen's (1998) article analyzing her own ex-

perience as an African American woman in a primarily European American academic institution and Burrell, Buzzanell, and McMillan's (1992) article on feminine tensions in conflict situations provide two notable exceptions. The emerging question then is why do researchers tend to bypass feminist standpoint theories when conducting research? For some researchers it may be that feminist standpoint theories are not the best perspective to illuminate the organizational processes being examined. Other researchers, however, may forgo the use of feminist standpoint theories because of the intense debate generated around the theories and because of a lack of research to help guide in the selection of appropriate methods (Hirschmann 1997). The first author's experience with feminist standpoint theories provides an epitomizing illustration.

Recently I wrote an article with feminist standpoint theories as a guiding perspective. After reading multiple articles critiquing feminist standpoint theories (Flax, 1990; Hekman, 1997; Hirschmann, 1997; O'Leary, 1997; Welton, 1997), I became somewhat overwhelmed. Each article either attempted to recreate the feminist standpoint perspective (Hekman, 1997; Hirschmann, 1997; O'Leary, 1997; Welton, 1997) or attempted to discard the perspective altogether (Flax, 1990). Amidst all the controversy, it was difficult to maintain my commitment to using the theory to create a better understanding of gendered experiences in organizations.

It is our position that feminist standpoint theories are being overtheorized to the point where their potential to create positive change is being lost. In this paper, we argue that the postmodern versus feminist standpoint theories debate illustrates the tendency to overtheorize feminist standpoint theories. We will discuss how the controversy can be transcended by rejecting bipolar assumptions guiding the debate. We will then provide a study illustrating how feminist standpoint theories can be used to create organizational change while remaining sensitive to postmodern concerns.

Before we proceed with this discussion, it is important to place ourselves within the research community and within the ongoing theoretical discussion of feminist standpoint theories. We do this to avoid hidden agendas and assumptions commonly found in traditional (patriarchal) research. We do not identify ourselves as feminist theorists or philosophers. Instead, we position ourselves as feminist researchers in the area of organizational communication. As such, we attempt to conduct research that will help women in organizations loosen the bonds of oppression. We study and read feminist theory in an attempt to further our research on gender relations within organizations. Our perspective on feminist standpoint theories is practical: We want to use it. Consequently, we engage in the current discussion to advance a specific agenda. We are attempting to move feminist standpoint theories into the realm of practice. To accomplish this we will simultaneously attempt to provide a sophisticated yet direct approach to a feminist standpoint controversy. We will then use research conducted with organizational women to support our arguments.

Postmodern vs. Feminist Standpoint Theories

As we understand it, the central focus of the postmodern/feminist standpoint theories controversy is based on three assumptions reflecting seemingly insurmountable differences

about the nature of people and the world within which we exist. These differences can be framed as oppositional pairs: "true" reality versus socially constructed reality, commonalities versus differences, and communal agency versus individual agency. We will briefly discuss each of these assumptions in terms of their relationship to the conflicting theories.

The first assumption guiding this debate pertains to the nature of reality.¹ In its purest form, postmodernism assumes that reality is fully constructed through discourse (Hirschmann, 1997). Postmodernists argue that reality only appears absolute because of the privileging of the dominant discourse: "Only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole will reality appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations" (Flax, 1990, p. 49). Although not a postmodern feminist, Wood (1992) provides an illustration of the importance of discourse in the construction of language. She contends that before the term "sexual harassment" was coined, sexually harassing behavior in organizations was initially naturalized. She argues that "because unrecognized phenomena are neither noticed nor studied, sexual harassment was neglected for a long time" (p. 350). Organizational members were able to problematize sexual harassment only after language was created that reflected the harmful nature of sexually coercive behavior in organizations. Postmodernists conclude that because there are multiple truths constructed through multiple interactions, and because what constitutes truth constantly evolves through discourse, there can be no single standpoint from which an absolute truth can be claimed (Hekman, 1997). Postmodernist feminists argue that by privileging women's truth over men's truth, feminist-standpoint theorists are using the same patriarchal reasoning that they attempt to critique (Bar On, 1993).

Feminist standpoint theorists would concur that much of how we perceive reality is socially constructed and situational (Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997a). However, this does not make behavior any less real. Simply because we could not talk about sexual harassment prior to its naming, does not mean that the behavior did not exist. Harding (1997) provides a compelling illustration of the interchange between perception and reality. "Recollect that ancient lesson from elementary school science classes: 'Is that stick in the pond that appears to be bent really bent? Walk around to a different location and see that now it appears straight—as it really is'" (p. 384). While each perception of reality is socially situated, "not all such social situations are equally good ones from which to be able to see how the social order works" (Harding, 1997, p. 384). An exclusive focus on language as reality obscures behaviors of domination that have a real and pervasive influence on women's lives (Hirschmann, 1997).

The second pair of assumptions guiding the postmodern/feminist standpoint debate deals with the individual versus universal nature of women's experience. Charges of universalism are among the most common and potentially justifiable charges against feminist standpoint theorists (Hirschmann, 1997). Postmodern theorists argue that by focusing on similarities, feminist standpoint theorists are simply replacing one set of universal claims with another (Hirschmann, 1997). By emphasizing commonalities, differences must necessarily be minimized. Consequently, a new privileged or ideal "woman" emerges, obscuring the experiences of more marginalized women (O'Leary, 1997, p. 55). Instead of focusing

on universal experiences of women, postmodern feminists advocate a "politics of difference . . . in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community" (Young 1990, p. 303).

Feminist standpoint theorists have taken multiple positions against universalist charges. For example, Hekman (1997) attempts to address universalist charges by suggesting an "ideal type" which she defines as a yardstick to which reality can be compared (p. 360). While we find the ideal type argument to be interesting, we do not believe that it is particularly useful or (usable) from a researcher's perspective. Questions such as "Ideal for whom?" and "How do we know when we have isolated the ideal type?" confuse feminist standpoint theories rather than create clarification. Other theorists attempt to respond to charges of universalism through the recognition of multiple standpoints. As Hirschmann (1997) explains, the conception of multiple standpoints "suggests that standpoint indeed is 'always already' a postmodern strategy" (p. 79). Welton (1997) also attempts to answer charges of universalism by rejecting commonalities among standpoints and by focusing instead on "the interplay between different perspectives" (p. 8).

Some scholars, however, maintain the importance of similarities in feminist standpoints. Hartsock (1997b) contends that the focus on individual differences "erodes the importance of the epistemological collectivity in the production of standpoint analysis" (p. 94). Scholars from different oppressed groupings also claim similarities among women in general (Collins, 1986). While Collins argues that there are differences between black feminist standpoints and white feminist standpoints, there are also points of intersection that can serve as the basis for mutual understanding and action. Feminist standpoint theorists agree that recognizing differences is important. However, feminist standpoints are dependent on shared experiences (Hartsock, 1997b). Creating positive social change for women would be difficult if we denied the shared oppression faced by women as a whole. Contrary to charges of universalism, feminist standpoint theorists do not contend that similarities among women are the result of natural or biological forces. Instead, they argue that similarities and differences are created through materialistic forces (Hartsock, 1987). Tavis (1992) concurs, arguing that divisions between men and women are typically created by an external resource imbalance, such as differences in power and money.

The final pair of assumptions, communal agency versus individual agency, is closely related to the previous two debates. This debate is not as clearly defined in the feminist literature as the previous two assumptions, in part because the purists' postmodern version of the debate threatens postmodern feminists' political agendas. Consequently, much of the debate occurs between branches of postmodernism and is less prominent in the literature between branches of feminism. Many nonfeminist postmodern scholars frame agency as an act of futility. If feminist postmodernists accept the notion that agency is futile, then feminist political agendas would be equally futile because these agendas depend on the agency of both the author of a deconstructed text and those whose behavior/discourse is being examined. Some nonfeminist postmodern theorists have argued that agency is futile for two reasons. First, influential postmodern theorists argue that agency in the form of political activism is futile because it recreates systems of oppression by imposing the author's belief systems and realities on others (Benhabib, 1990). Second, because postmod-

ernists orient toward individual differences while denying similarities, agency is necessarily an act of individuals acting toward individual needs and goals. As such, attempts at social change are not possible or even desirable. Feminist postmodern theorists have not embraced the futility of agency, arguing that taken at its extreme, this position could possibly lead to a new conservatism (Benhabib, 1990) or to relativism (Nicholson, 1990). Before outlining the agency debate between feminist standpoint theorists and postmodern feminists, we will briefly discuss the agency debate between postmodern feminists and postmodern purists.

Postmodern purists pose arguments based on issues of morality when they contend that political action by the author of a deconstructed text leads to a reification of the power systems being deconstructed by imposing the authors beliefs and realities on others (Benhabib, 1990). However, postmodern feminists argue that multiple sets of moral standards exist to judge political action. For example, Benhabib indicates a choice between "instrumental and critical reason" and between "performativity and emancipation" that is not made clear in postmodern theory (p. 113). She argues that failing to act is a moral option that can, in and of itself, be a choice between life and death. Further, the failure to engage in political activity is a form of new conservatism reminiscent of the Reagan era in United States politics. In other words, failure to act is a political agenda with potentially disastrous consequences. Postmodern feminists also reject an extreme form of individualized agency, arguing that it leads to relativism. A relativist position makes social change impossible due to the multiple realities and independent goals of the individual agents. Ironically, similar positions have been used by modernists to prevent the political enhancement of traditionally disadvantaged groups (Nicholson, 1990). Consequently, postmodern feminists argue that researchers must view individual agency in terms of its connections to democratic goals and ethics (Yeatman, 1990).

Although postmodern feminists do not agree that agency is futile, neither do they agree with the standpoint position that agency must be a communal act. Instead, they contend that agency is an act of individuals. However, individualized agency is conceptualized within a unifying construct of "the plurality of individualized agency within a democratic ethic" (Yeatman, 1990, p. 290). While she accepts the unifying quality of agency, Yeatman polarizes nonpostmodern feminists as "monovocal" and "monologic," arguing for an end to this trained, modernist orientation (p. 290). Postmodern feminists contend that focusing on the relationship of differences among women would have the advantage of recognizing the differing needs of women on common issues such as child care (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990).

Feminist standpoint theorists argue that agency must be collective. It is not possible to have an effective political agenda without an understanding of the social and unifying features of its constituency. Indeed some argue that an acceptance of postmodern assumptions of agency would make feminist political agendas impossible: "It is as if postmodernism has returned us to the falsely innocent indifference of the very humanism to which it stands opposed; a rerun in updated garb, of the modernist case of the incredibly shrinking woman" (Di Stefano, 1990, p. 77). Instead of privileging the individual, feminist standpoint theories focus on shared experiences, a concept that can be viewed as antithetical to traditional United States values of individualism (Hartsock, 1997b).

While by no means providing a comprehensive representation of the postmodern feminist standpoint debate, the preceding summary indicates that both positions provide compelling arguments. How then do we resolve the debate so that researchers can feel free to use feminist standpoint theories to create positive organizational change? We argue that researchers can transcend the debate using basic feminist reasoning against polarized assumptions.

Bipolar Assumptions

The feminist argument that strikes us as particularly compelling is the position that western cultures tend to polarize their versions of the world. This polarization process is both created by and reflected in the duality of the English language. Words are paired in opposition to one another, with one term given a privileged position over its pair. Because women tend to be associated with the negative term, dominant forces are able to justify keeping women in a discursively created lower class (Cixous, 1981; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). For example, male is privileged over female, mind over body, and rationality over emotionality (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992).

According to Cirksena and Cuklanz (1992), "the general project of feminist theory, so far as one can be identified, has been concerned with explicating areas of oppression arising from the Western philosophical focus on dualistic thought" (p. 19). Similarly, much feminist work in organizations has focused on exposing dualisms that serve to keep women subordinate to men (e.g., Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). With the pervasive nature of dualistic reasoning in western cultures, it is disappointing but not surprising to find feminist theorists reasoning from the same dualisms that they criticize as oppressive. We contend that this is precisely what has happened to the debate between postmodern feminist theorists and feminist standpoint theorists.

The tendency to polarize postmodern and feminist standpoint assumptions seems to be done primarily by postmodern feminists. For example, the nature of reality has been dualistically framed by postmodernists either as socially constructed or as absolute truth. Flax (1990) illustrates this point when she argues that "we cannot simultaneously claim (1) that the mind, the self, and knowledge are socially constituted and that what we can know depends upon our social practices and contexts and (2) that feminist theory can uncover the truth of the whole once and for all" (p. 48). In the process of framing the debate in bipolar terms, Flax effectively sets up a straw argument and then uses the flawed reasoning to privilege social construction over "the truth of the whole once and for all." Similarly, many postmodern theorists frame the community versus/individuality debate as a choice between polar opposites. For example, Young (1990) claims that "the ideal of community, I suggest in this chapter, privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understanding of others from their point of view" (p. 300). Young reverses this privileging so that difference is placed as superior to community. Young's position is consistent with the postmodern focus on difference and suspicion of universalism (Nicholson, 1990).

Interestingly, both Hartsock (1987) and Collins (1986) posit that a key component of their feminist standpoint theories is the recognition of western dualisms. They contend

that differing positions within society have created a system of dualisms that privilege the dominant group while devaluing other groups. Despite the recognition of the negative impact of dualistic reasoning on women, feminist standpoint theorists have not displayed a broad recognition of the dualism framing the present debate. While feminist standpoint theorists do not frame the debate in bipolar terms, many accept the privileging of postmodern assumptions (e.g., Hekman, 1997; O'Leary, 1997). Others argue that the contested assumptions are not important to feminist standpoint theories. For example, Hartsock (1997a) and Harding (1997) both claim that it is the relationship between power and knowledge that is important to feminist standpoint theorists, not the nature of reality. At one point Hartsock (1997a) transcends the dualism by contending that we come to understand ourselves as individuals only in relation to our community. She further contends that feminists need continually to redefine "truth" or standpoints. Interestingly, a similar argument was made by Railsback (1983) in response to the oppositional framing of reality by opposing sides of the "rhetoric is epistemic" debate (p. 351). She argues that material reality and the socially constructed reality constantly shape and reshape each other. Despite the astute nature of their responses, neither postmodern feminists or feminist standpoint theorists have been largely critical of the use of dualisms to frame the present debate.

The tendency to polarize feminist issues is potentially damaging to women, undermining their ability to create social change. Being understood as fully developed human beings is not possible if researchers continue to isolate and privilege one term over the other. For example, privileging individuality in organizations may cause some women to view their sense of community as a social flaw, ultimately creating a greater sense of isolation. Conversely, privileging similarity in organizations over individuality may cause some women to view their individuality as a social flaw, decreasing their sense of independence. Clearly, researchers must have balance in their representations of women or we run the risk of creating a world consistent with our theories instead of creating theories consistent with our world.

At the same time, it is not possible to have perfect theories in an imperfect world. No single theory can be complex enough or thorough enough to provide an accurate reflection or explanation of human existence (Harding, 1986). Attempting to do so makes theories essentially unusable. We contend that theorists' attempts to make feminist standpoint theories perfectly reflect human existence have made the theories exceedingly difficult to translate into research and consequently of little value to women outside academe. Instead of creating theories that are comprehensive, we need multiple theories that will create a holistic picture when connected. Hence feminist standpoint theories should focus on similarities, without denying the importance of differences. Postmodern theorists should focus on differences, without denying the importance of similarities. Both sets of theories should recognize that the world is both socially constructed and materially situated. Similarly, feminist theorists should recognize that agency is simultaneously an act of futility and possibility, that there is a role for both individual and social agency within feminist political agendas. The act of articulating one construct does not require denial of another construct. The following study is an attempt to illustrate how feminist standpoint theories can be used in a manner sensitive to the mutual nature of the "opposing" constructs.

Feminist Standpoint Methods

When beginning a study using feminist standpoint theories, it is difficult to choose an appropriate method. Without an extensive tradition of published studies it is difficult to learn from the past. Of the two studies we identified using feminist standpoint theories, one used a critical self-analysis (Allen, 1998) while the other used quantitative methods (Burrell, Buzzanell, & MacMillan, 1992). Consequently, we find ourselves in the exciting, yet daunting, position of clarifying feminist standpoint methods. After carefully reading the feminist standpoint literature, we have reached the conclusion that there is no single feminist standpoint method. In fact, one strength of feminist standpoint theories is the acceptance of multiple methods to help obtain feminist standpoints: "It [standpoint theories] eschews blind allegiance to scientific method, concluding that no method, at least in the sciences' sense of this term, is powerful enough to eliminate social biases that are as widely held as the scientific community itself" (Harding, 1990). Any method can be appropriate for examining feminist standpoints if the authors account for two key issues.

First, researchers must recognize that feminist standpoints are about improving the quality, not the quantity of knowledge (Hartsock, 1997b). By starting from women's experiences, feminist standpoints represent a different type and quality of knowledge than has previously been accepted. Consequently, articulating feminist standpoints does not centralize women. Rather, it changes the way we understand the margins (Hartsock, 1997b). Because of the necessity of enhancing the quality of knowledge, merely recounting women's experiences is not an articulation of a feminist standpoint. A feminist standpoint is achieved through a struggle to understand the relationship of women's experiences to political, social, and material contexts.

Second, the purpose of research using feminist standpoints is to create positive social change (Hartsock, 1987). It is inadequate simply to articulate women's experiences and relate those experiences to a situated context. The type of acceptable change will vary, depending on the setting and the study. For example, it is possible to turn experiences of pain into a developmental force. Women can learn from their collective pain and use it to reinforce their resistance to dominant groups. In organizations, the change may be for women to learn how to get through the organizing process with their spirits and hearts intact. The change may also be more concrete, such as a specific plan for collective action.

Method

Using a conversational style of interviewing appropriate for interviewing women (Minister, 1991), we interviewed four women from a department in an academic institution. The participants were selected based on their demographic differences: two of the women were graduate students while the other two women were professors in various stages of tenure and promotion. The individuals represented three different ethnic groups and were of various ages. Their geographic origins ranged from the east coast to the western portions of the United States. We deliberately selected a diverse group of women to answer the call for a greater emphasis on diverse perspectives in feminist research and to see if similarities would emerge between the diverse participants.

We chose to use oral interviews because of the recognition that they are a particularly viable means of understanding women's unique experiences (Anderson & Jack, 1991). A conversational approach to interviewing and a careful reading of the transcripts can help researchers understand how women frame their experiences using dominant patriarchal language while also revealing the muted voice that is a reflection of women's unique experience (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Not only do interviews help researchers better understand women's experiences but having the opportunity to tell their stories may help individuals in the transformation process (Varallo, Ray, & Ellis, 1998).

The first author transcribed the interviews, eliminating any identifying information. Themes were then discovered and placed into a creative narrative that blends the dialogue from the participants' stories to create a composite understanding of their experiences (Brown & Kreps, 1993). When constructing a creative narrative, the authors make no pretense of being separate from the results. We are indelibly intertwined with both the data and the results of the study, making us as much a part of the research as the participants. However, we do attempt to bracket our preconceptions. Consequently, dialogue is altered or added only to set the context of the interaction, to smooth transitions between speakers, and to protect the identity of the study participants. After reading Brown's (1993) compelling analysis of women's experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, we decided that creative narratives provide an excellent means of articulating standpoints that emphasize commonalities while respecting differences. Creative narratives "employ the techniques of fiction writing including setting, plot, and character development-to present factual content obtained through interviews" (Brown, 1993, p. 120). Creative narratives provide a means to understand women's standpoints while simultaneously creating the psychological safety necessary for change to occur (Schein, 1987). Consequently, creative narratives provide an effective means of stimulating organizational development (Brown & Kreps, 1993). We asked the participants to comment on the narrative in terms of their connection with the experiences of the narrative characters. Finally, with the participants' assistance, areas of productive change were identified and plans for action created.

Analysis

A number of themes emerged from the data. Because each participant expressed concern about the sensitivity of the interview, we selected five themes based on our ability to clarify the issues without revealing the identity of the participants:² feelings of isolation, desire for community, feelings of invisibility, feelings of overvisibility, and energy dissipation. Important differences in the women's experiences were also identified. We chose to focus on the differences in the women's evolution of consciousness, race-related differences in marginality, and idiosyncratic differences as displayed through language. We demonstrate the third difference by using the language of the participants in the following narrative. The differences in language provide a sense of the personalities of the women.

Creative Narrative

"Hold the elevator," Joyce called as loudly as she thought she politely could in a large sky-rise office complex in a large university. Although she would prefer to take the stairs because of the physical exercise it provided, she had a hot cup of chocolate she had just purchased for fifty cents from the vending machine in the lobby. As lousy as machine-produced beverages tended to be, she felt she needed every drop if she were to stay awake in the upcoming meeting. Two women graduate students from her department were holding the elevator for her.

"Thanks." Joyce gave what she considered a polite smile, then turned toward the doors, as good elevator etiquette dictated. The other women, obeying the same social norm, also looked forward. As the doors started to close, a brown hand with jingling gold bangles inserted itself between the panels.

"Hi Alma" Joyce teased, "that's a good way to get your arm broken. You must really want to miss this meeting."

"Anyone in their right mind would rather have a simple broken arm than sit through the agony of another faculty meeting." All four of the women laugh.

Silence. The elevator rises. The women all look straight ahead.

"Oh my God, did you hear that grinding noise?" Young Hui, an outspoken graduate student of Korean ancestry grabbed the wall as if attempting to steady the now swaying elevator.

"We've stopped." Alma began pushing all of the buttons. "Oh shit. Pardon my language but I think we're stuck. I hope ya'll used deodorant today. Who knows how long we'll be here."

A long awkward silence falls. It is interrupted by Lauren screaming and pounding on the elevator doors.

"Hey, get us the hell out of here, we're stuck in this elevator!"

"Lauren." Young Hui raised her volume, "Lauren." "Lauren."

"What!"

"They can't hear you."

"I know that. They never do."

Long deadly silence.

"It feels funny being together in such a small space." Joyce finally broke the silence by stating what she knew to be obvious.

"We're usually not together in any space."

"Yeah. It seems like we're usually just racing off to class or meetings . . ."

"Or bunkered down in our offices."

"Like we're under siege!"

Everyone laughs.

"You know the last time we were all together was the department Christmas party."

"I've been going to those things for years and have yet to have a meaningful conversation with anyone." Joyce sipped her now cool chocolate.

"The graduate students feel somewhat . . . tense at those. You really feel the difference in status." Suddenly aware of her audience, Young Hui once again turns toward the front of the elevator. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"Girl, you better go ahead on with it. Some of the graduate students tell me they feel harassed into going." Alma rolled her eyes toward the ceilings. Her hand movements caused her bangles to jingle loudly.

Another not quite so deadly silence.

"Maybe if the party were held in a neutral space it would be more fun." Young Hui laughs. "I am really into socializing anyway. Like that one party. Everybody was there, everyone's socializing in different groups than you normally would of. With different people. We could interact without constantly fearing."

"Yeah, it's like everybody's in their own camps and they just venture out long enough to say 'Hey, how ya doin'?' Then they venture back. I say do ya wanna come over to my campsite for a while?" Alma motions the campers over. "And I'm like, maybe we should just have a campfire in our meeting room . . ."

Everyone laughs.

"Yeah, and maybe it would burn the thing down."

Still laughing.

"I've kinda wanted to do that ever since the gutting of the department."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought there should have been more of a fight to keep four woman faculty from leaving all at once."

"Why do you think there should've been more of a fight?"

"Well," Young Hui pauses and then shakes her head, "I don't think we have many gender role models and you know, I mean it wasn't like some mass conspiracy, but it was just very weird to see that happen." She plops down on the floor. "I have a bad feeling we're going to be here for a while."

No one responds to Young Hui's comment. The minutes tick by as each reflects on the loss of friends and connections.

"I don't know." Young Hui shifts her feet into a more comfortable position. "I know we meet and all that. But I guess I would like a gathering where we don't have to be afraid. Where it's not I'm the student, you're the professor . . ."

"Or I'm a woman and you're not!"

The laughter is a bit bitter.

"I feel like there's gender stuff goin' on, but I can't quite put my finger on it." Lauren sits next to the control panel, knitting her eyebrows together in thought. "Well maybe here's an example. I mean I haven't been in class for a while but I noticed like in heated discussions, uh instances where male grad students will interrupt a lot more often. Like they'll be allowed to finish what they're saying. And I've noticed in a lot of female graduate students when they are interrupted, they will stop. It might just be my perception but I think women are socialized that way."

"Like we believe what they say is *sooo* much more insightful."

"I know."

"I used to literally cry after class when I was trying to read the articles. It seemed like everyone else understood the material and I didn't." Turning to Joyce: "Do you remember telling me that first semester when I felt stupid, you said 'when all the other graduate students are speaking that gobbledygook, just ask them what they mean. They won't know."

They're just where you are except they know the words to use.' That made me feel okay. I'm not so bad."

"It's true," Joyce insisted. "I go into my seminar full of students and you sit around the table, and the first it seems like two or three sessions are full of the guy thing, if there's any guys in the room. I mean they're doing their little one-upmanship games. First of all they've got to establish a hierarchy with the women. And they do that in very subtle ways. And once they get the hierarchy established over the women, they've got to go into the hierarchy among the guys. I just get sick of the crap. You know, I just want to talk about the idea, and here you're dealing with all of this crap."

"I know what you mean about the crap." Alma gestured in the direction of the classroom building. "They only understand one kind of authority—white, male, patriarchal. I try to teach in ways that are different than the authoritarian stance. And they don't know quite what to do with it. They kind of like it, but then they also take advantage of it if the teacher doesn't have this authoritarian stance in front of the class."

"You mean undergraduates?"

"Mmhm. So there are times when students tend to forget that even though I don't necessarily want to be standing on top of their necks and creating the standard that has them competing with each other, etc., they sometimes forget that that doesn't mean that all of your behavior with your friends is how you interact with your professor. You know that old saying of taking your kindness for weakness. OK, this stays just between us, right?"

"Of course."

"Last summer I was teaching this class and this student was, um, she was teaching second grade or she was in teaching school or at teaching college, but she was working with elementary school kids. And she became competitive with me. She came to me one day and said, 'Well you know, I'm doing my practicum teaching at such and such elementary and I really have experience. There's ways you could have taught the class so that people could do more this and that and the other and etc.' And I thought, you know, it's only my professionalism that keeps me from tearing into your tail."

"It's like we're invisible until we step out of the norm."

"Or make a mistake." Alma slides down next to Young Hui on the floor.

"I live in fear of making a mistake."

"They don't even ask you for your side of the story." Alma nods at Young Hui's comment. "I don't like how students can be upset with you about one particular thing, run into the department chair, and the department chair is using their language to describe to you what it is that you have done to them. With never having asked a question about what is your perspective."

"Sometimes we're invisible even when we make mistakes. Pardon me. When *they* think we make mistakes." Joyce laughs at her own sarcasm. She slides to a sitting position with her back to the elevator doors. "The worst situation I had was with a previous chair who changed grades in one of my classes without my knowledge."

"For your students?"

"Mmhm."

"That's almost shocking."

A long reflective pause.

"God, we've been in this elevator for over an hour!"

"At least we missed that faculty meeting."

Laughter lightens the mood.

"Wow, we've been really negative."

"I know. There are things that I really like. Like when I connect with a student."

"I love to see their faces light up. I love to see them get stuff. I love to see when they're, when they take this information and they're actually applying it to their lives and they're working through it with each other. My students keep me here." Alma laughs, "I know that sounds strange after what I said before."

"Not at all." Joyce nods at the others "I know what you mean about the connection, but sometimes it feels like it happens less and less often."

"For me, I think it's because I don't have as much time or energy to focus on my students." Lauren idly pokes at the elevator buttons. "Sometimes I get so angry that I have to literally go and calm down and then come back. Then when I'm really angry I can't sit and focus on my work. I have to go and calm down and cool down and then come back to it. I want to be able to bracket that, but it takes energy to do it. Damn this elevator. Don't they know we're here?"

"That's true though." Joyce shifts positions "I feel like I am under stress and constantly doing the kinds of things that reduce that stress to a manageable level so I'm not screaming at people, biting people's heads off, saying things that I regret. I vacillate between being aggressive and, you know, going after somebody and being too passive and letting them walk all over me. My emotional energy goes into trying to keep an even keel. It just gets to the point where it is too hard. Where I can hardly face going into the office, where I can hardly face going into the classroom." Joyce pauses and nods at Alma, "It is probably even more intense for a person who is not white."

"I don't know if it is more intense. But, and I don't really like the word race, but gender and race comes into it specifically for me—*specifically* for me."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes in class I am asked to be the spokesperson for all Asians. Of course, it's different because I sometimes forget that I am Korean. I doubt you're ever allowed to forget that you're African American."

"I guess because I am European American I think of myself as raceless, but I've often wondered how you could cope with all the racism in this town and maintain so much energy."

"Racism and sexism."

"All this gender stuff is just . . ." Young Hui pauses, rolls her eyes toward the ceiling, "I don't know, it's just weird."

"You know, I always wondered if the problems I was having were because of my gender." Lauren shakes her head. "I never realized other people felt like this."

Everyone says "Umhm."

"I wish I could say it will get better." Joyce's smile looks tired, "but it won't. I have been here for a long time, and the more I struggle the more I notice the sexism inherent in the structure of this academic institution."

"Do female graduate students ever talk to each other about these things?"

"I've never . . . not that I can think of offhand. Maybe we're all thinking we're the only ones thinking it."

"It's ludicrous that we had no idea that we felt this way."

"Maybe we should meet in the elevator once a month and stop it between floors so we can talk."

Everyone laughs.

"No really, we really should meet once a month and just talk."

"Great idea. I really think I put so much energy into dealing with this crap, that I have less time to do what I enjoy most about this work." Joyce drained the last of her now cold cup of chocolate.

"I know we're all real busy and it would take time, but in the long run it might give us more energy . . ."

"First, we've gotta figure out how to get outta this elevator," Alma laughed.

"Maybe if we all yelled together, somebody'd hear us. What was that you yelled earlier Lauren?"

"I don't remember."

"I think it was get us the hell out of here."

Everyone yells "Get us the hell out of here!"

Long pause with no movement.

"I guess they still didn't hear us."

Pause, the elevator lurches and starts inching up.

"Well, then again—maybe they did."

Discussion and Conclusions

This study attempted to begin the process of articulating a standpoint for four women in an academic department. Since standpoints are never fixed but are instead constantly developing, this study represents a beginning and not an end. By reading the creative narrative and discussing its implications, the participants felt that they developed a more sophisticated understanding of their experiences. If we were to begin this project again, the new awareness of their standpoints would undoubtedly lead to a different creative narrative. Furthermore, because the researchers are inseparable from the results of a study, a creative narrative created by other researchers would undoubtedly be entirely different.

The women in this study clearly have similarities and differences. One strong theme shared by all the participants was the sense of isolation they felt in the department. Interestingly, it is the perception of differences that, in part, created a sense of isolation for the participants. We repeatedly heard variations of the phrase "it's probably just me, but . . ." Ironically, when considering the dualistic framing of the issue in the standpoint/postmodern debate, a feeling of isolation created through a focus on difference becomes an important similarity for the four women. Contrary to the oppositional framing of the debate, differences and similarities create and recreate each other, becoming so intertwined that they are difficult to separate. By focusing on the unique qualities of their experiences, the women contributed to their own feelings of isolation.

A second similarity that serves as a basis for a feminist standpoint is the strong desire for community. All of the women expressed a desire for more social and professional interaction with others in the department. The campfire was a powerful metaphor used by one participant. Sitting around the campfire and talking informally seemed to capture the essence of all the participants' desires for a less hierarchical sense of community. During discussions after reading the creative narrative, the women reinforced this desire. For example, one individual indicated that instead of changing the departmental power structure, the faculty needs to "gut" the department power structure. The narrative concludes with the hope that by creating a sense of community among the women in the department, they will finally gain a voice.

A third commonality among the women was the feeling of invisibility, that they were not seen or heard beyond the stereotypes. The stories about the male graduate students dominating class discussion as well as the story about the chair changing students grades without discussing it with the woman professor are epitomizing illustrations. There were a number of other examples, each of which is a compelling illustration. The participants expressed this concern to varying degrees. Given the marginal positions of the women, it is not surprising that they were not "seen" by the dominant group. A related similarity between the participants is overvisibility. The participants indicated that they became visible only when they were perceived to have made a "mistake" or when they stepped out of the expected norm. Interestingly, the normative standard for behavior was inconsistent across situations. Sometimes the standard was what the participants considered white and male. For example, two of the women became overly visible when they attempted to use nontraditional teaching styles. At other times the standard of behavior was considered to be female. Although not discussed in the narrative because of the revealing nature of the examples, women who attempted to gain control of an overwhelming workload by saying "no" to still more assignments were observed through a highly critical eye because they had violated the female standard of cheerful assistance. The participants expressed a great deal of uncertainty as to which standard was being used to judge their behavior. Ultimately, both invisibility and overvisibility were frustrating and humiliating. As indicated in the narrative, the women were constantly expending energy in an attempt to establish a balanced visibility and to maintain their emotional and intellectual equilibrium within the department. It is the dissipation of energy that comprises the final similarity between the participants. The women spent so much energy managing uncomfortable relationships and what one woman called a "hostile environment" that they were less able to enjoy the teaching and research aspects of their jobs.

Not only were there similarities among the participants, but there were also important differences. Differences in the evolution of the participants' consciousness of their oppression emerged. As indicated in the narrative, one woman termed gender issues as "weird" and was unable to be more specific in her characterization. Her label suggests the beginning of a consciousness, but it was not yet well developed. As she explained after reading the narrative, "I tried to pretend it [gender and race] doesn't exist, but it keeps bubbling up." She was more aware of her Asian ancestry as a means of marginalization but claimed that she grew up considering herself white and still forgets from time to time that she is Korean. As portrayed in the narrative, a second woman claimed that she knew that there

were gender issues, but it was more of a generalized feeling. A third woman had, over time, developed a highly evolved awareness of gender differences and sexism within both the department and the university structure. The fourth woman could clearly articulate her marginality as a combination of her gender and race. The women also differed in race- and age-related experiences and in their unique personalities. The women in the narrative addressed these issues in a conversational and sensitive manner. Instead of trying to ignore differences, they used those differences to strengthen their relationship. When one participant was asked about this component of the narrative she explained that respecting difference "is not easy, but it is doable." A second woman explained that "community is about being civil. It involves a dedication to continued interaction." We could look to feminist theorists for guidance on how to practice dialogue within community (see Foss & Griffin, 1995).

In keeping with the requirements of feminist standpoint theories, one change and two plans for action were discussed after the women read the creative narrative. The primary change indicated by each participant, to varying degrees, was an increase in the women's understanding of their experiences. As one participant explained, "it [the narrative] gives women's experiences a context that make it make sense." A second woman claimed that "it took four years for me to notice this stuff." This is a necessary step in the development of a standpoint.

The first plan of action agreed to by the research participants was a series of seasonal social gatherings for the women in the department. This would move the benefits of the project beyond those immediately involved. It is likely that other women from the department feel isolated. Having a social gathering would create a setting where a sense of community would become possible. The gatherings would be based on the seasons because of its grounding in the cycles of the earth. Like all bureaucratic organizations, much of what is mysterious and mystical has been removed from the academic environment (Fox, 1994). Focusing on the season may help return some mystique to the professional and social experiences of the women in the department. One woman thought that the gatherings should be more frequent in order for the group to evolve into the use of nonpatriarchal rules. Increased frequency of gatherings may evolve from the initial seasonal gatherings.

A second plan of action involves a collaborative research project. In order to continue developing our standpoints as academic women, we all agreed to participate in a collaborative research project. There are several benefits to this project. First, the participants take a more active role in the development of their own standpoints. While the present study helped us all think about our standpoints as academic women, we need to participate in that process actively. As such, the authors of this paper will be interviewed by the participants, and then we will all meet weekly to work on the development of a new article. The process of constructing community through clarifying standpoints can create space in which academic women could practice behavior consistent with their values. Research clearly and consistently demonstrates that doing so is an antidote to organizational stress and burnout, ultimately restoring energy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Organizational communication researchers need to make more extensive use of feminist standpoint theories. These theories have the ability to reveal the underlying oppressive and marginalizing nature of traditional patriarchal organizations through the examination

of communal experiences of marginalized groups, without privileging commonalities over individualities. Even more important, feminist standpoint theories have the potential to create change and action that would benefit women and other marginalized groups in organizations. Finally, if bipolar assumptions are rejected, feminist standpoint theories have the ability to reveal the interconnection between the socially constructed and materially situated nature of reality. While the debates between feminist postmodern theorists and feminist standpoint theorists have been important to enhancing our understanding of both postmodernism and feminist standpoint theories, it is time to take what we have learned and turn it into action. Feminist theories should not be used to negate each other as has happened between postmodern feminist theories and feminist standpoint theories. Doing so fragments political agendas and decreases the value of feminism to women both in and out of academe. Human interaction is far more complex than any single theory can reasonably capture.

As feminist scholars, we should recognize the limitations of our preferred theories as well as the strengths of other theories. In this way, researchers can gain a more complex understanding of gender and change within a historically situated context. Future research on the standpoints of academic women could use a collaborative approach like the one suggested previously. Another possibility for future research would examine the development of feminist standpoints over time. Researchers could create a "storybook" of women's standpoints at different points in time. In this way observing the developmental process of feminist standpoints would be possible. It would also generate a better understanding of how to create productive personal and organizational change. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct separate analysis of the same set of data using postmodern and feminist standpoint theories. In this way a more complex understanding of women's experiences can be generated.

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Notes

1. A similar debate over the nature of reality has also been conducted in the rhetoric literature. Brummett (1976) takes a postmodern perspective when he argues that reality is fully socially constructed. Cherwitz and Hikins (1983), however, propose a rhetorical perspectivism in which reality is independent of lived reality. Railsback (1983) attempts to bridge the gap by arguing that socially constructed truth and objective reality are intertwined components of our reality that cannot be viewed in oppositional terms. While there are parallels between the debate between rhetoricians and the debate between feminists, there is one key difference. Rhetoricians do not, as a whole, argue against the oppressive nature of dualistic assumptions. Railsback does provide an exception when she attempts to reconnect the dueling pair. However, her arguments appear to be somewhat unique within the rhetoric debate. Consequently there does not appear to be a strong philosophical contradiction when nonfeminist rhetoricians frame a debate in bipolar terms.

2. The names of the characters in the narrative are fictional and were selected by the study participants.

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