

The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication

Bonnie J. Dow and Celeste M. Condit

Citation:

Dow, B. J. and Condit, C. M. (2005), The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 448–478.

In “The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication,” Bonnie J. Dow and Celeste M. Condit present an overview of feminist scholarship in the field of communication. They divide the field into five distinct areas of feminist scholarship and provide an explanation and example(s) for each area.

I. Introduction

Dow and Condit begin by introducing their study of feminist scholarship and limiting their overview to research that “studies communication theories and practices from a perspective that ultimately is oriented toward the achievement of ‘gender justice’” published in select communication journals between 1998 and 2003 (2005, p. 449).

They explain that their paper is divided into five major categories which attempt to “collapse” the traditional distinctions between conventional communication research fields. Instead, their categories are meant to reflect the purpose of the research they review therein.

II. Analysis of the Public Communication of Women and Feminists

Dow and Condit begin their overview by discussing studies of women as public communicators. They claim that this is one of the most visible fields of research in feminist communication because of the legacy of rhetorical and public address studies in the field as a whole.

Scholars of feminist communication have tried to correct the historical focus on male speakers by doing rhetorical/public address studies of female speakers and feminine discourse. These researchers have had to account for inherent male bias in traditional rhetorical methods, which privilege male speaking conventions, and for the ways women communicators have compensated for their preclusion from public life.

These kinds of feminist rhetorical/public discourse studies have focused on issues like the development of feminist consciousness, rhetorical leadership styles, and the unique challenges faced by feminist rhetors.

The scope and volume of works that fall into this category reflects the “growth and dissemination of feminist work in the field of communication and in the academy at large” (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 451). In addition, these feminist rhetorical studies are “generally more theoretically informed in specifically feminist ways than they have been perviously” (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 451).

Research case study:

Zaeske, S. (2003). *Signatures of citizenship: Petitioning, anti-slavery, and women's political identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Zaeske examines how 1830s women's abolition petitions changed the "political subjectivity" of women abolitionists and how these petitions illuminate complex relationships of power in gender, class, race, and citizenship.

III. Analysis of Sex/Gender as a Variable in Communication Practices

Dow and Condit's next category deals with qualitative and quantitative research that treats gender/sex as a variable. While this is "the largest group of studies in the discipline broaching issues related to gender and sex," Dow and Condit are careful to acknowledge that not all such studies are "feminist" according to their criteria (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 453).

Different kinds of feminists approach sex/gender differently; some are skeptical of research that makes large distinctions between the sexes while others acknowledge a fundamental difference between women and men. These differences in feminist ideology are significant for studies that test for sex/gender-based differences in communication, which are informed by the feminist theoretical debate.

Research in this area has examined lots of different topics, including how gender works in interpersonal communication, the role of gender in political campaigns, and culturally different ways of understanding femininity and masculinity.

Research Case Study:

Kunkel, A. W., & Burleson, B. R. (1999). Assessing explanations for sex differences in emotional support: A test of the different cultures and skill specialization accounts. *Human Communication Research*, 25, 207–340.

Kunkel and Burleson studied the way men and women provide comfort to others according to either a "skill specialization account" (women are trained to be emotionally supportive and men are not) and a "different cultures account" (men and women are socialized into different emotional cultures and hence learn different skills and values). They found support for the skill specialization account.

IV. Analysis of the Role of Communication Practices in the Dissemination of Gender Ideology

- A. According to Dow and Condit, this area of feminist communication scholarship has grown more in the last three decades than any other area, due in part to the development of cultural studies and the growth of critical media studies within the field of communication.

Researchers in this area are concerned with how cultural messages communicate gender ideology and have examined everything from television and magazines to health discourse. Their studies usually take one of three forms: "(a) quantitative analysis of

mediated discourse and its effects, (b) audience reception analysis, often using a combination of critical, qualitative, and sometimes quantitative methods, and (c) critical textual analysis of mediated discourse" (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 456).

Research Case Study:

Acosta-Alzuru, C. (2003). "I'm not a feminist, I only defend women as human beings": The production, representation, and consumption of feminism in a *telenovela*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20, 269–294.

Acosta-Alzuru analyzed the text of a Venezuelan telenovela and interviewed its writers, actors, and viewers to understand the "profound contradictions embedded in the text, its creators' motives, and its audience's evaluation of it" (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 458). Although the telenovela depicted women who resist Venezuela's "patriarchal norms," Acosta-Alzuru found that the program's writers and viewers didn't want to label themselves or the program as "feminist." Acosta-Alzuru concluded that feminist messages "co-opted" by the program demonstrate the "paradox faced by feminism worldwide" (As cited in Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 458).

- B. According to Dow and Condit, "critical textual analyses of mediated discourse" are the largest body of research in this category (2005, p. 459). This kind of research examines how media propagates hegemonic beliefs about gender. For example, researchers might study media depictions of female politicians, film depictions of gays, or depictions of "masculinity" in television rape narratives.

Research Case Study:

Vavrus, M. (1998). Working the Senate from the outside in: The mediated construction of a feminist political campaign. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 15, 213–235.

Vavrus studied how the media talked about women politicians in 1992, the so-called "Year of the Woman." She found that media coverage depicted women as "Washington outsiders," despite their political experience and suggested that the mere election of women politicians would solve women's problems without describing specific policy reforms.

V. Analysis of Communication Practices That Function to Combat Gender Injustice and Provide Models for Progressive Communication Practices

Dow and Condit place research that attends to a "means of overthrowing oppressive communication practices and institutions" and attempts to "generate new models for better communication" in this category (2005, p. 461). Researchers in this area describe ways that women can resist and dismantle "patriarchal communication practices and structures" (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 461). For example, researchers might explore ways that children can resist stereotypes on television or ways to avoid oppressive masculinity on the internet.

Research Case Study:

Davis, O. I. (1999). In the kitchen: Transforming the academy through safe spaces of resistance. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63, 364–381.

Davis describes the “unique dynamics of the plantation kitchen during slavery” (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 462). She claims that although the kitchen was a locus of oppression (duh, slavery), it was also a place where female slaves engaged in the “rhetorical act of nurturance and care, creative genius and survival” (Davis as cited in Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 462). Davis uses this conclusion to encourage female academics to use the academy as a “plantation space that needs transformation” and to create spaces of resistance within it.

Interestingly, Dow and Condit note later that this paper is written in language that would be accessible to any high school graduate—which has feminist significance.

VI. Construction of Feminist Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, Dow and Condit discuss some of the challenges to developing feminist theoretical frameworks. They begin by describing how feminist theory is fundamentally problematic as it is accessible only to a small subset of educated women, in a group heavily dominated by men. However, theoretical developments have also helped feminism advance. Today, feminist theory is influenced by postcolonialism, globalism, womanist theory, and critical race theory.

Dow and Condit go on to use a trite quilt metaphor *sigh* to introduce “multiple standpoint theory,” which is a combination of feminist ethics studies and political, womanist, and critical race theories. Standpoint theory has been applied to all kinds of research, from organizational to rhetorical studies.

Research Case Study:

Rowe, A. C. (2000). Locating feminism’s subject: The paradox of white femininity and the struggle to forge feminist alliances. *Communication Theory*, 10, 64–80.

Rowe argues that white women’s feminism is “compromised by their failure to examine their own racial privilege” (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 465). She suggests that white women feminists should “examine their loyalties” and try to build alliances with women of color (instead of expecting them to adapt to white feminist norms). Row analyzed a “popular women’s studies book” and concluded that women of color depend more on identity politics and standpoint theory, while white feminists use deconstructive positions (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 465).

VII. Conclusions

Dow and Condit conclude by acknowledging the limits of their sample. They explain that there are plenty of feminist health and organizational studies that are not mentioned in their paper. In addition, they also identify some areas where more feminist study is needed (like the internet).