J. HOLMES, GENDERED TALK AT WORK: CONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH WORKPLACE DISCOURSE (MALDEN, MA: BLACKWELL PUBLISHING. 2006. PP. XI, 251)

‘Gendered talk at work’ examines how women and men negotiate their gender identities as well as their professional roles in everyday workplace communication. This is a welcome and highly readable contribution to the Language and Social Change series and a useful addition to the language and gender literature in which Janet Holmes questions existing claims and challenges stereotypes of gendered workplace talk substantiated by empirical research. ‘Exposing sexist assumptions and challenging covert patterns of male domination is important, and the workplace is a significant location for such taken-for-granted assumptions’ (p.26). This book demonstrates a high level of scholarship reflecting the progress of the field since the 1970s, as you would expect from one of the foremost researchers who has been engaged in extensive research in this field.

Janet Holmes’ book is based on the Wellington Language in the Workplace project (LWP) and incorporates a wealth of new material. The workplace data, collected over 7 years, forms the basis for analysis – a database of approximately 2500 interactions from a range of workplaces – both white and blue collar, with the former as the main analytic focus. Well-documented themes are revisited, yet the author succeeds in approaching them with a refreshing vibrancy, mainly due to the wealth of rich empirical data. Data capture the day-to-day ‘normality’ of interactions while simultaneously addressing the complexities of everyday communications. She investigates workplace talk with a characteristic vitality, not least assisted in her apt use of humour and cartoons that effectively succeed in widening the prospective readership. While this is indeed a scholarly work, Janet Holmes manages to retain a fresh approach, helped also by her inclusion of highly accessible data; the scenarios represented will be familiar to many.

The book is organised into seven chapters, the titles of which clearly signal a feminist authorial stance. For readers familiar with the research field, in terms of argument development, the titles of each chapter show visible links to past seminal studies whilst drawing attention to the need for ongoing dialogue. Each chapter is approximately 30 pages, indicating a balanced approach. The outline is easy to follow, presenting clear summaries of each chapter. A comprehensive index and generous references are valuable for readers with specific areas of interest to follow up. Links (chapter endnotes) to influential works within the field of language and gender are prolific. This practice does assume
a level of familiarity with a range of theoretical frameworks. While the author refers to a highly respectable theoretical base and a comprehensive bibliography of 26 pages, to appeal to a diverse readership, a brief synopsis of the key theoretical positions would be helpful for the general reader. Readers with less background in the field of language and gender would be encouraged to access a reader covering the key texts first, e.g., Coates (1998) *Language and Gender: A Reader*.

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of scholarship of the past 30 years of language and gender research as a starting point for analysing this workplace data (p. 7). Importantly, Janet Holmes reports that it is generally the male model of interacting that is more highly valued, to the detriment of women’s communicative behaviour, described as deviant, while the male ways of interacting (in management literature) are associated with effective workplace communication (p. 11). While these perceptions persist, it is essential that books such as this continue to examine these misleading conceptions – so much better when the dissent is voiced loud and clear by one so well respected.

The rich empirical data enables an insightful qualitative analysis of workplace discourse. Though the data is drawn from NZ workplaces, examples demonstrate generalisability to other industrialised workplaces. The methodology offers research possibilities for similar smaller projects to investigate specific aspects of workplace interaction employing alternative analytic methodologies, e.g., Conversational Analysis, to determine more micro-level gendered actions in workplace discourse. Examples of case studies provide insights and details in such a way that readers can immediately identify with them (p. 55), making it a satisfying and rewarding read which enriches understanding.

Chapter 2 focuses on leadership and gender and the traditional association of leadership with masculinity analysed through particular actions, ‘how they give directives’ and ‘managing the openings of meetings’ (p. 23). A particular strength lies in Janet Holmes’ critique of management literature that treats ‘patterns as established behaviour’. She differentiates her position by referring to them as ‘ideologically produced norms... useful for exploring the complexities of workplace interaction’ (p. 4), thus offering more dynamic possibilities for change. This is an impressive and well-argued chapter, advancing a clear sociolinguistic perspective and drawing on a wealth of current research from organisational communications (Morand 2000) and feminist critical discourse (Martin and Esteban 2005) that results in an invaluable, if not vital, resource that could be integrated into Management Communications courses. With specific focus on key areas such as leadership, decision-making, and meeting procedures, this chapter is highly relevant and provocative. A very readable introduction to these areas offers alternative ways of speaking to accelerate change, achieved through a wealth of examples, which, for example,
students whose first language is not English, may find very useful. They would also benefit from Holmes’ accessible style.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the concept of relational practice as gendered practice, the behind-the-scenes, often collaborative, work that goes on unrecognised and undervalued in the workplace. Like Fletcher, Janet Holmes sets out to ‘explore and challenge the masculine bias in organizations from a feminist perspective’ (Fletcher 1999: 3). Fletcher’s relational practice framework (p.23) is extended, using recorded data of both men and women in everyday workplace talk, where Holmes argues that relational practice is not just the preserve of women. Instead, talk is characterised by ‘skilful meshing of transactional and relational discourse features’ (p.67) in an attempt to de-gender those behaviours associated with men and women. Relational practice is the core theoretical construct that drives the next 3 chapters.

The following 3 chapters explore a variety of ways in which relational practice is manifested in workplace interaction. Humour, conflict management and the use of narratives are the respective foci of chapters 4, 5, and 6 as contributing to the gendered discourse of the workplace. Chapter 4 explores the use of humour as a subtly gendered resource, and raises interesting issues about humour as a highly valued and flexible interactional strategy that is exploited and negotiated by men and women. Chapter 5 examines managing conflict, and demonstrates that problem solving and conflict resolution typically involve both transactional and relational work, again emphasising the complementary nature of both gendered discourse norms. In Chapter 6 narratives are explored as important ways negotiating identities and constructing workplace relationships.

The concluding chapter echoes the feminist stance articulated in the stated aims of the book ‘to advance the interests of those, especially women, who run up against barriers... as a result of prejudice or stereotyping’ (p.1). ‘...to erode traditional associations between femininity and ineffectiveness... and masculinity and seniority’ (p.26) and reaffirms the author’s commitment to women playing active roles in accelerating change, to erode negative stereotypes which disempower women in some workplace contexts’ (p.209).

This book succeeds in offering optimistic visions of future interactive experiences for women – and indeed men – as a natural consequence. However, Janet Holmes does not suggest that this goal will be easily or quickly achieved, but in ‘...expos[ing] and contest[ing] the systemic ways in which sexism and discrimination filter in to workplace discourse’ (p.209) she offers ways in which we as participants in the workplace can help to transform the gender dynamics to contribute to more effective interactive workplace practices. Rather than accepting current dominance/subordinate relations, Holmes suggests
courses of action such as blending the strengths of each paradigm and encouraging more flexible repertoires of interactional skills for those caught in the ‘double bind’ (p.34). This book explores issues of interest to many. Familiar problems such as the classic workplace ‘double bind’ (p.211), problems of stereotypical models of leadership and femininity, provide a stimulating read for anyone who wishes to get to grips with contemporary workplace communication; a valuable resource for anyone interested in organisational change, the sociology of work and useful for social psychologists. It challenges popular conceptions of male leadership illustrated through empirical data (p.39; p.340) and facile generalisations about gender-based styles. The complex realities of talk at work identified in this book provide a clear message that workplace communication is anything but simple, and for it to be successful, negotiated efforts towards the ‘sophisticated integration of features from both feminine and masculine interactional styles’ (p.25) could prove an effective option in moving towards de-gendered talk at work. Whilst such conceptions are alive and well, it is imperative that such voices are heard. Gendered workplace talk is presented as a stimulating and dynamic arena with plenty of scope for further research that is likely to attract scholars from diverse disciplines of study and offer lively classroom discussion.

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REFERENCES