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## Gender and communication at work: an introduction

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### Abstract

The last three to four decades have seen a rapid increase in numbers of women in the workplace worldwide, with more women also entering managerial ranks. However, despite legislation in many countries aimed at furthering women's capacities to move to the top of their organizations, the phenomenon of the 'glass ceiling' persists (Davidson and Burke, 2004; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Public policy documents, academic research and popular books advocating government, industry and organization-level policy initiatives to facilitate women's advancement continue to be published. So-called 'business case' arguments, that is, arguments to the effect that organizations that fail to acknowledge and use the skills of all members of their workforce will find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, seem to have had much less effect than similar arguments for other kinds of business and organizational change.

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## About the Editors

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## Chapter 1

# Gender and Communication at Work: An Introduction

Mary Barrett and Marilyn J. Davidson

### Introduction

The last three to four decades have seen a rapid increase in numbers of women in the workplace worldwide, with more women also entering managerial ranks. However, despite legislation in many countries aimed at furthering women's capacities to move to the top of their organizations, the phenomenon of the 'glass ceiling' persists (Davidson and Burke, 2004; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Public policy documents, academic research and popular books advocating government, industry and organization-level policy initiatives to facilitate women's advancement continue to be published. So-called 'business case' arguments, that is, arguments to the effect that organizations that fail to acknowledge and use the skills of all members of their workforce will find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, seem to have had much less effect than similar arguments for other kinds of business and organizational change. Nevertheless, over the past decade or so, there has been a shift from equal opportunities (EO) initiatives aimed at reducing discrimination in organizations to the phenomenon of managing diversity in the workplace (Cassell, 1997; Liff and Wajcman, 1996). Failure of 1980s policies and practices was often linked to degrees of 'backlash' and resistance from majority groups (often white males) who felt excluded and the unrealistic expectations placed on employees of different gender and backgrounds (Davidson and Burke, 2000). Conversely, the concept of managing diversity both values and harnesses the talents of individual differences. These differences, in turn, transform the varying sets of skills that every employee possesses into a business advantage. According to Davidson and Fielden (2003: xxii):

Through the fostering of difference, team creativity, innovation and problem-solving can often be enhanced. The focus is, therefore, much more on the individual rather than the group. Having a diverse workforce not only enables organizations to understand and meet customer demand better, but also helps attract investors and clients, as well as reduce the costs associated with discrimination.

Evidence from a variety of fields suggests that communication issues contribute to the creation of barriers to women's advancement in organizations or, at least, to a variety of misunderstandings between women and men at work. Differences between men's and women's communication have been part of the academic literature in linguistics for more than two decades. Some of the findings have also entered the popular 'battle of the sexes' management literature, especially through books such as Deborah Tannen's (1990) *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* and (1994) *Talking from 9 to 5*, Marian Woodall's (1990) *How to Talk so Men Will Listen*, and John Gray's (1992) *Women are from Venus, Men are from Mars*.

The popularity of these books and many others like them suggests their findings are intuitively attractive to many women worldwide. Many are based on excellent research. Deborah Tannen, for example, is a linguistics scholar and researcher of international repute, as well as an author of a number of bestsellers in the popular 'gender wars at work' arena. However, much of the original research on which the 'communication advice' literature is based was done in the United States. Accordingly, such work typically recommends directness, forcefulness and simplicity to produce effective communication, and this has been criticized as being based on implicit models of communication that are male and American (for example Woodall, 1990). Moreover, since the research data was gathered more than a decade ago, it is important to consider how much resonance these ideas have with women and workplaces now. Certainly, they were very much based on the EO model of assimilation rather than the diversity model, whereby communication differences were to be valued and incorporated as part of a diverse organizational culture. As well, findings and advice based on – and addressed to – the experience and interests of white, 'corporate' women in conventional office settings, will not necessarily address the gender-related aspects of 'new' workplaces, such as teleworking, various forms of e-business and computer-mediated communication, non-managerial work, or special work environments such as emergency call centres.

Globalization and the rise of the service sector, with its emphasis on people skills, have both been touted as factors creating the work environments of the future. Both phenomena have been argued to create work situations requiring a high level of communication skills and, indeed, the empathetic styles of communication that have been popularly thought to be more 'natural' for women. As a result, it is often held (for example, Wajzman, 1999) that women's ways of working and women's leadership styles, especially as these relate to communication, ought to further women's advancement at work and even persuade men to adopt more 'female' approaches to communication, management and leadership. This would follow as part of a more general reliance on participative management that, in turn, has been seen as characteristic of 'female' approaches to leadership, as described by authors such as Rosener (1990). On the other side, however, more critical views point to the emotional labour demands of some 'remote' and service sector work, and the risks of renewed stereotyping and undervaluing of women at work through the focus on 'naturally female' skills (for example, Brody and Hall, 2000; Hess et al., 2000).

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The complexity and range of gender issues in workplace communication is reflected in the paucity of serious and comprehensive 'handbook' material directed at people such as human resource managers who have a professional interest in communication and gender issues at work. Many major 'gender and work' texts deal only minimally with communication issues and, conversely, texts on organizational communication usually deal only minimally with gender. For example, Powell's (1999) *Handbook of Gender and Work* is comprehensive in its treatment of a range of work problems for women and men, but includes little discussion of communication issues. Jablin and Putnam's (2001) *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods* deals with gender issues on only about 30 pages out of a hefty 911 pages in the volume as a whole.

This book brings together current debates and findings around these issues, and is divided into five parts:

- gender and communication situations in the employment lifespan;
- gender, communication and organizational boundaries: linkages and violations;
- gender and communication channels in special workplace environments;
- communicating to get things done; and
- the future: gender and computer-mediated communication at work.

## Gender and Communication Situations in the Employment Lifespan

The chapters in the first part of the book review current research concerning the communication experience of men and women in relation to three different situations or events during the employment lifespan: the employment interview; employment training, especially training in communication and leadership skills; and promotion. These three situations, it would be agreed, are critical phases or events in employment and crucial both to securing basic job security and achieving advancement at work. Gender issues as they relate to the employment relationship are, of course, not new research concerns. The academic and professional literature surrounding equal employment opportunity and affirmative action, and the more recent diversity movement have long focused on the potential for systemic and non-systemic bias in recruitment and selection processes, development opportunities including training for organizational leadership, and promotion processes (for example, Smith, 2003). Ways in which these situations and opportunities are presented and framed at individual, organizational and societal levels can all mitigate against women's opportunities for getting ahead at work. The focus in terms of remedial action has typically been on organizational policies and strategies that aim to ensure that selection processes and later work opportunities are based on merit. In more complex discussions, the nature of merit has been problematized, leading to its redefinition to take account of organizational and societal constraints on women and individuals from diverse

groups. In Part II, we broaden the discussion to include the minutiae of gender differences in communication strategies and how they are differentially valued.

Patricia Buzzanell and Rebecca Meisenbach begin the process in Chapter 2 by reviewing existing and potential research approaches to the employment interview. They view employment interview research through four different lenses, as explored by Ashcraft (2004) in her work on the interlinkages of gender, organization and discourse. Ashcraft's four lenses, briefly put, are firstly, the *outcome or effect* lens, in which discourse is seen as an outcome of gender. Research from this viewpoint (which is also the viewpoint adopted by most existing research into the employment interview) focuses on how gender shapes individual linguistic choices, interactional strategies and style. The second lens, *performance*, presents the reciprocal viewpoint to the first, focusing on how individual talk shapes the performance of gendered identity. The two remaining frames move beyond perceptions by and of the individual to encompass *organizational* and *social* levels of discourse, which both enable and constrain gender in ways likely not to be perceived by participants in the employment interview, just as they remain largely hidden in other areas of organizational and social life. The four lenses taken together provide tools for uncovering different assumptions underlying existing and potential research into the employment interview and other similar workplace situations. The authors also discuss how the four lenses suggest ways of achieving more equitable outcomes for women and diverse individuals in employment interviews.

Kathryn O'Neill, Carol Hansen and Gary May pursue a similar agenda in Chapter 3 in their review of research into problems associated with the transfer of organizational training, especially training aimed at producing better interpersonal communication and leadership at work. They first consider how societal culture shapes gender schemas and prescribed social roles, and then how gender-related theories are linked to organizational culture. Organizational culture, in turn, is linked to the issue of training transfer in the workplace, since the cultural environment of the organization affects individuals' capacity and motivation to transfer to the workplace the skills of communication and leadership they have learned in training situations. Problems often arise because the behaviours taught in typical interpersonal skills workshops are frequently seen as feminine and therefore tend to be resisted by learners. Often, the learned behaviours are extinguished by a masculine-oriented organizational culture before they can be put into effect in the workplace. The authors conclude that training interventions aimed at changing approaches to interpersonal communication need to be considered as interventions at the level of organizational culture, rather than as simple workplace training. Like other culture changes, and as emphasized in the organizational culture literature, such interventions will fail in the absence of strong modelling and support by senior management.

In Chapter 4, Jennifer Peck undertakes a more micro-level analysis of communication factors affecting formal promotion and other processes underlying women's advancement at work. In her discussion of workplace promotion and linguistic interactions, she discusses the problems created by different sex-role expectations of men and women at work. According to traditional sex-role norms as

they translate to the workplace, women are expected to be dependable, cooperative, intuitively perceptive and to exhibit the 'soft' skills of management. Men, on the other hand, are required to be intelligent, analytical, 'dynamic' and to excel at 'hard' skills in the management arena. However, following traditional female sex-role patterns frequently does not result in women reaching executive positions, since the skills required for executive positions seem to be associated with the managerial views of men that both genders hold. A double bind for women is created both by the fact that skills of organizational success are associated with men, and also because for women to exhibit skills regarded simply as 'natural' for them means that they are less likely to receive acknowledgement of these skills in formal evaluation or promotional processes. This is despite the fact that the 'new' management skills for the twenty-first century are often seen as 'soft' or 'women's' skills.

### Gender, Communication and Organizational Boundaries: Linkages and Violations

In Part II of the book, the emphasis shifts from communication within specific and crucial employment events to more routine instances of workplace communication and the gender issues associated with them. In addition, rather than focusing on people's attempts to move vertically through the organizational hierarchy via the processes of entry, training and promotion, the chapters in this part focus on lateral relationships. These include general workplace groups, as well as lateral relationships external to the organization, such as advising customers or clients in a professional setting and managing organizational relationships in the international arena. Part II focuses on gender issues in how organizational boundaries are both maintained and crossed, including (as in the last chapter in the part) when the crossing of boundaries represents violation.

Linda Carli, in Chapter 5, provides a detailed summary of empirical academic research on gender differences in communication, particularly in work groups. She pays particular attention to research that either reinforces or questions stereotypical views of women as communal, collaborative communicators and of men as agentic, forceful communicators. She argues that most research does indeed reveal women to be warmer and more communal in their communication styles, but that various situational factors in workplaces have been found to moderate this. For example, both men and women communicate more warmly towards women, and features associated with typical 'male' and 'female' differences in communication styles are more marked in same-sex than in mixed-sex groups. In addition, factors related to people's expectations of their own and other people's behaviour, their relative power in the situation, and their perceptions about what type of behaviour will increase their influence in a situation all play a role in determining communication styles. While this is consistent with the general finding that men tend to communicate in a more mitigated and less dominant manner to men and to exhibit more dominance towards women, there are factors that can alter the situation for women. These



include women being seen in a leadership role, or the topic of the communication being one on which the particular woman – or women in general – are perceived to know a good deal about. As Peck and other authors in the book point out, however, this still leaves a double bind for women. Appearing competent can actually reduce a woman's influence because it makes her less likeable, since behaviour seen as competent often asserts status and uses fewer qualities of communality. Women need to combine competence with communality to overcome resistance to their influence, while still acting in accordance with traditional expectations of their role. The way through the double bind seems to be for women to exercise transformational leadership and to do this more than men do. Transformational leadership combines communal qualities and leadership effectiveness, in ways that allow women to excel as leaders and still maintain their traditional communal styles of communication. This is discussed in more depth in Chapters 13 and 14.

Joan Mulholland, in Chapter 6, expands on the reservations presented by Carli about when and whether gender determines communication style, and suggests how other factors in a workplace situation may reduce or even nullify its influence. Mulholland's discussion of professional communications with clients highlights that while gender problems in communication have been thought to occur because of profound differences in men's and women's preferred ways of knowing and understanding and in their preferences for different social relations between the participants, different problems occur in communications between advisor and client simply because of the nature of 'advice' itself, as well as the nature of 'advisorhood' and 'clienthood'. The nature of advice giving may make at least as much difference as gender to what participants consider an appropriate response in a particular situation. Clients signal, by the language they adopt, what role they feel themselves to be in. These roles can range from one of complete ignorance and helplessness, to one where clients believe themselves to have a great deal of knowledge, or one where they are generally knowledgeable but lack one element of required information, and so on. In addition, general trends towards the casualization of language signal affiliation in ways that are beginning to even out gender differences. In summary, rather than asking what gender the participants are in a advisor–client exchange, researchers of advisor–client communications are discerning a continuum of affiliative-instrumental communicative styles that, increasingly, transcend gender issues.

Beverly Metcalfe, in Chapter 7, continues and develops Mulholland's more complex view of gender differences in language with her insights drawn from the realm of international business. Like many authors in the book, Metcalfe takes issue with both the 'difference' paradigm ('men and women speak differently because of early socialization') and the 'dominance' paradigm ('gender-based language differences reveal the economic dominance that men still typically exercise over women'). Both, she argues, present an overly simple view of a phenomenon that is better understood as multi-layered and fluid. She uses three different approaches to elucidate this view. First, in a way similar to Mulholland, she takes Butler's (1990, 1993) notions of gender as a performative social construct to examine how individuals employ a wide range of linguistic repertoires. Second, she draws on

the idea of 'communities of practice' (Coff), or the ways individuals' attachments to a wide range of different communities with different norms and practices allow them to adopt different identity positions within specific groups. Finally, she uses critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the ways language creates and sustains gendered power relations. All of them are used in her discussion of gender and communication issues as seen in the light of insights from international business. She draws on two rapidly changing environments: the Middle East and Eastern Europe, which present different communication approaches as 'typically' male or female, to argue along with Holmes et al. (2003) that masculinity and femininity are not opposites, but mutually overlapping constructs giving rise to multiple masculinities and femininities.

While the developments put forward in Part II present some potential ways to understand and manage the practical difficulties of workplace communication for women, Jeff Hearn and Wendy Parkinson in Chapter 8, writing in the critical theory tradition, end this part on a warning note. They examine the connections between communication and violation at work, including gender relations. In their view, communication can never be gender neutral. The ways male power is structured into the very fabric of organizational processes means the potential for communication violations range from the silence and noise ('din') of exclusions and unresolved tensions, through to harassment, bullying and even physical violence. They review the processes and practices of a broad range of organizational violations and finally consider contemporary social changes in communication, gender and violation, with special attention to globalization, multinational corporations (MNCs) and information and communication technologies (ICTs). They urge the development of policies on communication and practices of communication that reduce and abolish forms of violation.

## Gender and Communication Channels in Special Workplace Environments

Part III of the book, which includes two case study chapters, examines the special constraints and possibilities of communication carried out in some particular workplace situations and environments, such as virtual environments, management board meetings, call centres and emergency rooms. It shows how these constraints may heighten, but also potentially reduce, the gender issues around workplace communication.

Catherine Ng and Laura Byra in Chapter 9 discuss a range of gender issues in face-to-face situations and compare them with non-face-to-face communications. They briefly examine the literature on traditional views of gender differences in communication, arguing, in a similar way to Mulholland's work in Chapter 6 on the advisor–client relationship, that the relationship between communication and gender is mediated by situational specifics rather than by gender alone. This is also true for choice of communication channel, whether face-to-face or virtual. For example, task characteristics and equivocality of the message have been shown to have the greatest

impact on the choice of communication medium, with individual preferences only coming into play when equivocality is low, such as when a manager simply wants to inform their staff of the time and venue for a meeting. Thus, gender differences may be only one of the factors that influence communication channel choice. Nevertheless, traditional debates and concerns about women's experience of the workplace still come into play. For instance, women may be perceived as less adept with the technologies needed for virtual workplaces, or training in their use may be less available to women. Alternatively, women may be seen as 'naturally' advantaged through their (by now) traditional advantage in keyboarding skills. All this suggests the need for more research, for example, into effects of choice of communication channel in more traditionally gender-based societies, the effects of other diversity factors such as race, and how changes to communication channels may affect – or be affected by – existing social and power structures in organizations.

Communication constraints derived from the environment itself are also the concern of Margaret Franken and Catherine Wallace, in Chapter 10, who consider gender and language use in call centres. While both men and women can work in call centres, this work environment is overwhelmingly the preserve of women. Issues around communication as a commodity arise from conflicting demands on front-line staff to be customer oriented, but also to 'do the business', that is, get through making or receiving a large number of calls. The chapter discusses the ways in which women are seen as particularly suited to call centre practices that require them to act as 'aesthetic labour'. The authors explore situation-specific issues of the call centre environment, including the difficulties they create for research, and then analyse various aspects of call centre language, including language prescriptions, typical talk patterns and the nature of communication as a commodity. The chapter concludes with some implications for researchers and call centre managers, including the issues of aesthetic labour and women's work (for which previous research on women and emotional labour ought to be illuminating) and how call centre training could draw on the experiences of call centre operators themselves both to alleviate some of the less satisfying aspects of call centre work and to reduce turnover problems.

Judith Baxter, in Chapter 11, presents a case study of part of a management board meeting. This setting constitutes a special environment in that management boards in most business organizations worldwide still typically have fewer female than male members. This chapter uses a post-structuralist research perspective to challenge essentialist views of gender differences, including essentialist views of women's speech patterns, for example, the notion that women prefer a more cooperative, supportive speech style. She thus argues against the presumption that 'discourses of gender will necessarily override the impact of other discourses in constructing mixed-sex spoken interactions'. Rather, speakers' identities, including that of the sole female participant in the board meeting, 'Sarah', are shown to be negotiated within meetings and to be governed by a mix of competing and interwoven discourses. The author's analysis shows that while Sarah, the only woman member of the board, has a degree of dominance constructed through the power discourses particular to that organization's management, there are still gendered undercurrents associated

with her colleagues' reactions to her. Sarah, and by extrapolation, women at work in general, need to be considered as multi-faceted individuals constituted by different sets of power relationships. Nevertheless, women who occupy minority positions as women within a 'boysy' culture may have a more limited range of identities to which they have access in management meetings.

Isabella Paoletti, in Chapter 12, also uses a case study, this time of a phone call to the emergency number in an Italian city, to study what is involved in 'doing gender' at work. The work environment of the ambulance control centre is supported by complex information technology systems, an issue that is taken up again in the final part of the book. Here, however, the technology is less the issue than the analysis of gender stereotypes and their effects during control room interactions. The issues of emotional labour considered by Franken and Wallace in Chapter 10 reappear here, as control and regulation of emotional expression is a regular feature of emergency control room interactions. But more important for this context is the issue of 'framing'. As Paoletti says, problems often arise in emergency centre control rooms because callers tend to treat requesting an ambulance as similar to ordering a pizza or a taxi, and this conflicts with the requirement on the person taking the call to elicit specific information in order to know what kind of help to send. All this is complicated further by the ways gender is embedded into the status hierarchy of the control room. By examining an emergency phone call that went wrong as a result of framing problems, Paoletti illustrates how the analysis of the interactions between a male doctor and a female control room operator turn out to be source of empowerment for the operator. This is not because of the operator's recognition of sexism in the conversation (although this was clearly apparent to the analyst) but through the operator having the opportunity to revisit, investigate and learn from her own constructions of what had happened in the conversation. The case presents possibilities for empowering control room personnel and also for countering sexism.

### Communicating to Get Things Done

Part IV groups together discussions of gender issues surrounding leadership, negotiation and the expression of emotion at work. Leadership is sometimes defined as getting people to do things they would not otherwise do and negotiation refers to particular bargaining behaviours to achieve specific goals. Expressing emotion at work has links both to the capacity to express power overtly and the need at times to conceal power sources. Both of these issues have been linked to gender. In addition, the concept of emotional labour has extended the discussion of the expression or suppression of emotions at work to the use of emotion for achieving organizational goals.

Leonie Still, in Chapter 13, presents an overview of the very slow progress in organizational leadership attainments of women at work in Australia and elsewhere. She reviews the explanations for this in terms of sex-role stereotypes, women's

supposed lack of ambition, their preference for support rather than line roles, difficulties in accommodating work and family responsibilities, and so on. Using a managerial rather than a social or psycho-social perspective, Still surveys the research into traditional, male, 'heroic' models of leadership in management and research into gender differences in management styles, and links the two issues to gender-related communication styles. It appears that women fall short not only in terms of the old, 'heroic' leadership models (despite women being rated as having the skills, women are not seen culturally as leaders), but also, ironically, in terms of the traits associated with the 'new' leadership models of empathy: capacity for listening, relationship ability, and so on. The problem is that these 'feminine' characteristics have already been incorporated into mainstream discourse according to the rules of the old leadership paradigm. The same has happened with women's leadership styles and female speech patterns: both are assessed in terms of contrast with male norms, which means they are linked with subordinate roles rather than leadership. Still points to the need to recognize the different languages of men and women created through varying gender cultures, and the need for women to learn 'leadership speak' and the language of 'salesmanship' as well as the languages of their other roles.

A potential remedy for the problems identified in Still's chapter is suggested by Su Olsson in Chapter 14. Olsson discusses the content of organizational stories about the (male) senior manager as a heroic and transformational leader, stories that are fed by myths such as Theseus killing the Minotaur and Mercury the winged messenger. Like Still in the previous chapter, Olsson identifies the marginalization of women that stems from these internal and public images of the male executive as hero. Olsson proposes a way to break through the masculinist appropriation of leadership models: the propagation of organizational stories about a female archetype of workplace leadership, 'Xena'. Xena, both through the connotations of her name, the 'stranger', and by virtue of the fact that she is a modern invention rather than an 'original' mythical figure, invokes the dynamic and evolving nature of women's leadership. Xena stories, which are the stories that women executives tell to each other, embody women's competence as a 'given', and use humour to parody and thereby subvert traditional views of women, and assert women's rightful place as organizational leaders.

Alice Stuhlmacher and Rebecca Winkler, in Chapter 15, review research findings about the differences in outcomes, behaviours and perceptions that occur when women and men negotiate, as well as the theoretical explanations for these differences and their implications. In experimental tests of negotiation outcomes, men appear to earn higher profits or other forms of better outcomes than do women and to make more use of formal dispute resolution procedures compared to women. It appears that women are more likely to try to resolve the situation themselves, or simply to leave the situation. While the reasons for this may lie in differences in negotiating behaviours, the fact that outcome differences appear even when male and female negotiation behaviours are identical suggests that differences in perceptions are important. For example, men may be perceived as tough negotiators and to

possess negotiation skills, whereas for women to be seen as tough negotiators is not congruent with perceptions of sex-typical roles. This is complicated further by the phenomenon of stereotype threat (where the fear of confirming a stereotype actually leads to lower outcomes), and other non-gendered factors in the situation, including differential power of the participants to the negotiation, the role of organizational norms and culture, levels of rank and experience, information differences, and even the mode of exchange. The authors' suggestions for further research include widening the definitions of negotiation success and paying more attention to the design of negotiation experiments to include, for example, the need to consider long-term relationships, which are a regular feature of real negotiations. Women should be trained in negotiation techniques to strengthen their self-efficacy, and to increase the attention they pay to achieving specific negotiation goals. Organization members need to recognize sources of power differences, provide ways of resolving conflicts and pay attention to equity issues.

Theresa Domagalski, in Chapter 16, considers issues of emotional expression at work. She first reviews prevailing gender stereotypes around emotions, then explores how gender relates to organizational norms about expressing emotions and, finally, discusses links between emotions, gender and status relationships at work. Domagalski points out how gender stereotypes along the lines of 'women are more emotional than men' can obscure how individual and situational differences affect the expression of emotion. She also reminds us that men and women have been found, at least in physiologically based experiments, to experience emotions to a very similar degree. The work context makes the task of understanding emotional expression more difficult, since the 'rules' about expressing emotion at work are not necessarily congruent with the expectations of society at large. As a result, it is not clear whether organizational demands that employees express or suppress particular emotions in the interests of achieving organizational goals (both are forms of emotional labour) are damaging, and, if so, whether this is also gender related. However, since expressing emotions such as anger can be a way of affirming and maintaining one's place in the organizational hierarchy, but anger is stereotypically a male emotion, dilemmas arise for women in the extent to which they are 'permitted' to exercise this indicator of status. As Domagalski concludes, there is much that remains unknown about emotional expression in work organizations along gendered lines, but it is likely that women's situation concerning the expression of emotion is more precarious than that of men.

### The Future: Gender and Computer-mediated Communication at Work

Part V, the final part of the book, explores the gender issues of 'new' work environments, particularly virtual environments, or those relying heavily on email and other electronic forms of communication. Information technology-supported work has been touched on in some other chapters, such as that by Franken and



Wallace, but here the gender issues around electronic communication come in for specific attention.

Rob Thomson, in Chapter 17, explores whether men and women speak, use and interpret language differently in the arena of electronic discourse. He first addresses the features of electronic discourse that link it to, or distinguish it from, ordinary written or face-to-face discourse. For example, computer-mediated communication (CMC) often has features of informal, interpersonal speech, such as informal greetings and sign-offs and, as in electronic discussion groups, conversations may be carried out synchronously. However email use is typically asynchronous. It is also possible in CMC discussions, especially in non-work environments, to conceal one's gender. The question then arises as to what extent gender-predictive features of spoken language are likely to be found in CMC environments. On the one hand, and as predicted by communication accommodation theory, gender-linked language differences have been observed to be more salient in same-gender electronic discussions than in mixed-gender discussions. Similarly, in mixed-gender discussions, or in discussions on typically male or female topics, researchers have found that both males and females tend to adopt the speech styles they perceive as appropriate to the gender of the other speaker or the topic, reducing gender-predictive language differences. On the other hand, in some CMC environments, especially anonymous ones, or ones where other social cues are reduced, males still appear to dominate discussions. Thomson concludes that although there is much flexibility in how men and women use language, there are gender effects in how we produce, interpret and communicate with electronic language as with other media. Nevertheless, in the absence of cues about personal identity, including gender, other aspects of social identity, such as workplace status or job, can influence language use more than gender.

Niki Panteli and Monica Seeley, in Chapter 18, focus on email, particularly its text-based attributes, as an issue in CMC. Following a review of the literature on information richness theory as it relates to email communication, they analyse a series of emails sent within a university department over several months. They point out how gender cues emerge in the text-based features of these messages, especially gender differences, which are also encoded in other organizational features such as hierarchical levels. As a result, they argue that the place of email as a 'lean' medium in terms of information richness theory should be questioned. They conclude with some suggestions for how organizations can cultivate email's capacity to indicate social context in order both to further organizational goals and to relax traditional patterns of interaction across organizational hierarchies and between male and female users.

Mark Brosnan, in Chapter 19, takes a less optimistic view of email's capacity to equalize communication differences between men and women at work. On the one hand, email, which women use as much as men, presents a salient instance of equalizing technology uptake between the genders. As such, it is an exception to the 'digital divide' that has been posited to exist between women and men as a result of findings of higher computer anxiety among women compared to men, and other

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ways women's access to computer technology has been restricted compared to men. On the other hand, processes surrounding email use in organizations may reassert gender differences. Specifically, the very limitations of the medium, its 'affected' nature, may serve traditionally male approaches to communication better than female approaches. Women, by inserting politeness markers and making other attempts to re-insert a more social dimension into their email messages, take longer to send each email message. This may mean that female users are regarded as more inefficient at using email at work. They may also suffer less 'message agreement' as a result of misunderstandings arising, for example, from misinterpretations of the tone in email messages. Brosnan speculates about how these issues will play out as videophoning and texting become more prominent communication tools at work.

Finally, Victor Savicki, David Foster and Merle Kelley, in Chapter 20, examine gender issues in CMC in terms of how they affect the performance of virtual teams. Effective team communication is linked to the dual task of all teams, that is, to undertake both 'task' and 'maintenance' activities. Difficulties arise because maintenance activities have been under-recognized as part of what the team needs to do. This issue is amplified in the CMC environment, which is generally taken as less 'information-rich' than face-to-face environments. At an individual level, this is important for women members of virtual teams, since research has consistently shown women to be more sensitive than men to non-verbal communication and therefore more affected both by its presence in face-to-face communication and its loss in CMC. Nevertheless, even in anonymous virtual communications, it is often possible to tell by the presence of features of women's language, such as attenuated assertions, apologies, questions, a personal orientation, and so on, that a communication has come from a woman. In short, CMC mimics face-to-face communication, regardless of the lack of more obvious cues. The question then arises as to how group performance is affected by these gender-related features of virtual group communication. It is important to note that in group CMC situations, group culture is affected by the proportions of women or men in the group. In particular, the communication patterns generated by all-women virtual groups seem able to overcome the bareness of text-based communication. This is important for group or team performance since, with tasks that require high levels of group 'preference' as well as simply 'task' or 'intellectual' activity, it is important to achieve a balanced concern for working on the task itself and maintaining positive socio-emotional dynamics within the virtual group.

What is evident from the material presented throughout this book, is that while there are clearly many similarities in men's and women's approaches to communication in the work environment, there are also many differences. These differences are not only dependent on the sex of the communicators, but also on a variety of situational factors ranging from individuals' expectations of their own and other people's behaviour to the perceived status of the communicators. What is also clear is that until relatively recently, EO practices and policies have tended to imply that so-called 'female' communication differences, based on the 'male' approach as 'the norm', are in some way often inferior. The emphasis has traditionally been on

women needing to change and adapt to male ways of communicating in workplace environments in order to assimilate and succeed in predominantly male cultures. The management of diversity, on the other hand, seeks to fully develop the potential communication skills of each employee (regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, age, and so on) and turn the different sets of skills that each employee brings into a business advantage. According to Davidson and Fielden (2003), it is through the fostering of these types of differences (including communications) that innovation, team creativity and problem-solving can be enhanced.

### Research Directions

What the authors in this book advocate about the directions for future research suggests that more complex, nuanced and inter-disciplinary research approaches will have most to offer in increasing our understanding of gender and communication issues at work. Several of the authors in this book have looked at new or 'virtual' communication technologies and speculated about the extent to which communication using these technologies will tend to retain or change previous research findings about male and female communication patterns, suggest new, variant patterns, or require new research frameworks entirely to understand the gender implications of the interchanges that take place. From their conclusions, it is clear that it still too early to make judgements about this. Other contributors, however, have looked more closely at already established communication situations and workplace phenomena and sought to apply more complex research approaches to them to better understand the nature and role of gender at work. Many of their research recommendations indicate the potential for new ways of understanding gender issues in relation to familiar workplace concepts or events, such as the employment interview, the transfer of formal workplace training, promotion processes, or the international assignment, or ideas about work and organizations, such as leadership, hierarchy, the nature of 'advice' or 'clienthood', workplace story-telling, or even the meaning of silence in organizations. Still others have drawn insights from special workplace environments, such as emergency rooms, call centres or top-level management meetings to achieve new understandings of the role of gender. Typically, these authors have stressed how organizational discourse both constrains gender and is constrained by it, but also how renewed close inspection of these familiar situations reveals a more complex view of communication. The situations are seen as offering a range of strategic positions or discourses that both women and men can draw upon to achieve their goals at work. In various ways, they emphasize the nature of gender as 'performance'. This, in turn, suggests that gender issues in communication are best understood less in simple, 'essentialist', 'female vs. male' terms, and more in terms of a range of strategies, positions, identities, workplace roles and discourse genres that influence and are influenced by various gender schema. The interplay of all of these factors needs to be taken into account if we are to understand both how women may still be being disempowered at work and also how they may be accessing new ways of being

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and acting so as to reduce various types of workplace barriers. Diversities of understanding will be at least as important as diversity policies in knowing managing gender at work in future.

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# PART I

## Gender and Communication Situations in the Employment Lifespan