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Knowing Work Through the Communication of Difference

A Revised Agenda for Difference Studies

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L ike many critical theorists of organization, scholars of difference seek to illuminate and revise institutionalized relations of power. They recognize identity as political and central to the configuration and experience of power relations in contemporary organizational life. The distinctive turf of difference research is demarcated by its claim that, however idiosyncratic identity may appear in certain circumstances, it revolves in large part around key cultural formations of difference-sameness, such as gender, race, and class. While this chapter assumes that basic understanding of scope, it aims to establish grounds for a major shift in the current research agenda.

The tacit question guiding most organizational communication scholarship on difference asks: How can diversity be enhanced in professional workplaces? I argue that this is the wrong underlying question, premature and insufficient at best, misleading and self-defeating at worst. I propose an alternative point of departure that asks how

communication organizes work through difference—or how we come to know work individually, relationally, organizationally, and culturally through the communication of difference. Accordingly, I advocate shifting our conception of difference from an individual, group, or organizational property (e.g., so-called women's ways of leading, gendered bureaucracies) to an organizing principle of the meaning, structure, practice, and economy of work (i.e., the cultural organization of work via difference). The first section of the chapter builds a rationale for this shift in focus, while the second considers how to do so by confronting theoretical, practical, and political challenges entailed in such a shift.

❖ THE QUESTIONS GUIDING INQUIRY

Difference and "The Workplace": The Current Question

As with most areas of academic study, difference research in organizational communication is characterized by a rich variety of empirical questions. Without minimizing this variety, I suggest that a common underlying question or guiding motive threads through much of it: *How can diversity be enhanced in professional workplaces*—or elongated, *How are various kinds of control based on formations of difference fostered at the workplace, and how might we facilitate greater inclusion and equity?* If this is a fair characterization of shared focus, it is also not surprising. It reflects, for example, the critical orientation of most difference scholars, for whom the purpose of research is not merely to document, describe, or interpret relations of power and difference, but also to transform those relations and move toward some kind of emancipatory vision, however partial and provisional (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

My purpose is to examine this guiding question more closely—to consider how relations of difference are already embedded within it, affecting its transformative potential. I seek to reveal key limitations of a shared focus that, at first glance, seems both predictable and appropriate. Toward this end, I take up three key elements that frame the common question, all of which revolve around its focus on "the workplace," variously emphasized. After briefly characterizing each element, I weigh their broader consequences.

A first element entails attention to the workplace. Organizational communication scholars have mostly analyzed difference at the level of organization, conceived in terms of an actual site that *contains* interaction. This trend reflects dominant disciplinary interpretations of the ontology of organizational communication. Much has been said about

the limits of the container metaphor of organization historically steering those interpretations (e.g., Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996; Smith, 1993). It is worth noting, however, that different meanings of *contain* are in circulation among difference researchers. Elsewhere, for example, I have identified two broad strands of gender studies in organizational communication: (1) gender *in* organizations, where the spotlight falls on gendered people and interactions *within* organizational settings; and (b) gender *of* organizations (also known as *gendered organization*), where the setting itself (i.e., organizational forms, cultures, systems) is scrutinized as a consequential agent that facilitates individual identity and interpersonal interaction in particular ways (Ashcraft, 2005, 2006a). To some extent, both approaches retain a sense of organization-as-container, but whereas the container is largely taken for granted in the former, it becomes an object of keen interest in the latter. In other words, research on the gender *of* organization examines the gendered constitution *and* constituting force of organizational systems. Rather than treat organizations as inert, neutral contain*ers* that house lively interactions, this second strand regards organizations as active and political and problematizes their contain*ing* function with respect to interaction. Neither branch, however, has yielded much insight into the actual work of organizations, or the jobs and tasks members perform (Ashcraft, 2006a).

Although notable exceptions have long appeared beside these two strands, only recently have organizational communication scholars commenced sustained research on difference "at work" beyond conventional workplace boundaries—for example, in scholarly representations (Calás, 1992; Calás & Smircich, 1991), popular culture (Carlone & Taylor, 1998; Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000), occupational associations and public discourse about the professions (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), and labor union or social movement activity (Cloud, 2005; Ganesh, 2007). This emerging strain of research—which, for purposes of contrast, might be called the *organization* of work and difference (as opposed to difference *in* or *of* organization)—begins to foreground work itself and cultural notions about it, rather than only the formal sites in which it is conducted. In the process, this research begins to challenge conventional ontologies and epistemologies of organizational communication, revealing multiple sites where work happens (Ashcraft, 2007, 2008).

Although the latter point is explored more fully in the final section, for now I turn to a second element of the common question, latent in the preceding discussion: a focus on the workplace. Certainly, the scope of organizational communication includes interest in organizations

whose primary aims are not economic (e.g., Lewis, 2005) and whose primary activities are not designated "work." Indeed, early organizational communication scholars were careful to make this distinction, in part as a way of distancing the field from managerial, business, or corporate biases (Redding & Tompkins, 1988). Simultaneously, the majority of organizational communication scholarship and textbooks representing it accentuate organizations in which employment is the defining relationship and work the defining activity (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002), even though—as noted above—the spotlight tends not to illuminate work per se. This is all the more true in difference research, wherein arguments for significance often hinge on work in a generic sense: for instance, (a) the central role of work in contemporary formations of identity and power (see Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008); (b) the growing phenomenon and significance of diversity at work (e.g., invoking the infamous "Workforce 2000" report of demographic trends), and (c) the coordination and productivity implications of diversity as well as other aspects of a so-called business case for difference (for more on the latter two rationales, see Ashcraft & Allen, 2003).

A third key element of the guiding question involves its focus on the workplace, by which I mean its tacit assumption about *which* sort of workplace is most pertinent. To date, the majority of difference research universalizes professional or so-called white-collar settings, as evident when "the workplace" becomes the typical shorthand referent (Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). In gender and organization studies, for example, managerial and professional work/places (i.e., work *and* formal organizational locations thereof) are often taken as the natural or obvious site of women's labor difficulties and empowerment potential (e.g., Buzzanell, 2000). The enormous literatures (in and beyond communication studies) devoted to women in leadership and management and masculine and feminine professional communication styles provide a telling example. Here, problems associated with particular forms of Western, white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity tend to be normalized, taken as representative of women's workplace struggles (for a critical review of these literatures, see Ashcraft, 2004). Yet women of all racial identities are overwhelmingly clustered in other kinds of labor, as documented by the extensive literature on so-called women's work (e.g., Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2001). Similarly, research premised on increasing racial diversity at work refers implicitly to demographic changes in white-collar settings. After all, men and women of color have long been present—not to mention disproportionately concentrated—in sites

and forms of labor deemed un- or semi-skilled, menial, dirty, and otherwise undesirable (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993).

With notable exceptions (e.g., Gibson & Papa, 2000; Holmer Nadesan, 1996), difference research in organizational communication has largely neglected such labor sites and forms. It is worth pausing to ask; Why have we stressed "desirable" work/places—the ladder up, the ticket out—rather than also engaging difference in the less enviable work/places where other bodies are historically concentrated, or at least investigating difference in a range of work contexts? Unless one expects a radical redistribution of available jobs, would not the diversification of professional work/places depend on the diversification of others as well?

Some might rightfully interpret the pattern as evidence of the persistent class bias of organizational communication studies (e.g., Cheney, 2000). On the one hand, I concur that the overwhelming focus on professional work/places reflects scholars' (i.e., our own) reproduction of cultural notions about what work is more valuable and worthwhile, what sites are more alluring and potent, and so forth. However, this focus blends relations of difference—not merely of class, but also of race and gender—in a troubling way. Here, I suggest a proposition substantiated below: Gender and race shape the class of work/place; that is, the nature and value of tasks *and* the sites and systems in which they are accomplished are organized around difference (Ashcraft, 2008). Putting the claim in hypothetical terms for now, what if work/places are assessed at least in part on the basis of the bodies with which they are symbolically and materially associated?

If so, then there is an irony in current efforts to enhance relations of difference in professional work/places: namely, to the extent that they are effective, these efforts are likely to induce character and value erosion as well. Consider, for instance, the devaluation of various fields (e.g., clerical and librarian work) that women have entered in a critical mass—a phenomenon suggesting that cultural notions of worthwhile work/places stem at least in part from the historical inclusion and exclusion of certain people (for a review of related issues, see Wright & Jacobs, 1994). It follows that gendered and raced assumptions about the class of work—the labor to which "we all, of course, would aspire"—may be embedded in well-meaning efforts to diversify white-collar work/places. Put bluntly, emphasizing how diversity can be enhanced in professional settings, in the absence of common questions about other labor sites and forms, ironically perpetuates sexist and racist evaluations of work/place. My argument, then, is that despite its evident appeal, the current guiding question may be the wrong one; at

least, it is premature and cannot stand alone. The more pressing question seems to be, How does difference play into the organization of work in the first place?

❖ DIFFERENCE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF WORK: AN ALTERNATE QUESTION

Turning difference inquiry toward the latter question requires shifting the conception of difference, from (a) an individual or group feature (as in gender *in* organizations research—for example, so-called feminine styles of leadership communication) or (b) an organizational property (as in gender *of* organization research—gendered bureaucracy, for instance) toward (c) an organizing principle of the meaning, structure, practice, experience, and economy of work itself (as in emerging research on the *organization* of work through difference, mentioned previously). On what grounds might we make such a shift, and how far does it stretch organizational communication as a field? Addressing the first half of that question is the subject of this section, while the second half occupies the remainder of the chapter.

Grounding the Alternative Question

Here, I wish to substantiate the claim that work is *known* (i.e., its nature, character, and value—in a word, *class*—understood) in large part by the gendered and raced bodies with which it becomes aligned. Supporting empirical evidence continues to mount. Most of this research emphasizes material effects of bodily associations and conceives of gender and race in rather basic ways, stressing the habitual social coding of anatomy (e.g., sex categories) or other physical and/or hereditary markers of fixed social identities (e.g., race classifications). Early on, for instance, Phillips and Taylor (1980) showed how institutionalized skill classifications were derived in large part from the sex of those doing the task. In an extensive research program, Tomaskovic-Devey (1993) demonstrated that wage and institutionalized features of the labor process—such as degree of supervision and autonomy, task complexity and routinization, and promotion opportunities—develop around the gender and race profile of the people doing the work. Weeden (2002) also offered compelling evidence that occupational earnings are more affected by social closure (i.e., restricting an occupation to those of a particular gender and race profile) than by the complexity of the occupation's knowledge base.

More recently, symbolic approaches have demonstrated that—alongside, and at times regardless of, gender- and race-coded physical bodies—gender and race discourses are invoked to craft work in consequential ways (for a fuller review, see Ashcraft, 2006a). Studying the prestige of specialties in the medical profession, Hinze (1999) found that medical personnel in diverse physical bodies invoke gender symbolism to explain specialty complexity and value, such that surgical work linked to forceful hands and "sizeable balls" is ranked above the work of pediatrics and psychiatry, which are depicted as softer, easier, and emotionally sensitive. Reversing the usual emphasis on women's *exclusion* from the professions, Davies (1996) argued that women have long been included as silent partners (e.g., semi-skilled support staff) who enable professions in a dual sense: performing the adjunct labor that streamlines professional-client interaction while serving as the ready embodiment of what professionals are not. In this way, she indicted professionalism as "a conceptual frame that requires, but denies it requires, the Other" (p. 672), or as "a specific historical and cultural construction of masculinity" (p. 661). Kirkham and Loft's (1993) historical study of accountants is particularly compelling in this respect. Tracing the professionalization of accounting in England and Wales between 1870 and 1930, they show how gender discourse was the main means of securing the accountant's professional standing, creating a contrast between the elite knowledge of accountants and the simplistic "feminine" tasks of nearby clerks and bookkeepers. As these studies of gender and professions make clear, not only the *horizontal* division of labor (i.e., who does what tasks) but also the *vertical* division (i.e., how tasks are valued in relation to each other) rests on gender and race.

The growing interdisciplinary literature from which these examples are drawn make it difficult to deny that work is configured materially and symbolically in relation to those aligned with it. Organization and management theories that neglect this premise arguably misrecognize the fundamental character of work as a phenomenon independent of the body (Ashcraft, 2008). For scholars of difference, however, neglect comes with particular peril. Since the aim of most difference research is to facilitate work/place justice for those systematically controlled and excluded, it makes little sense to attempt social change primarily in work/places associated with privileged bodies. Especially if those forms and sites of work are valued precisely *for* or largely *on the basis of* that association, such efforts are self-defeating. In this light, the current guiding question (i.e., How can diversity be enhanced in professional workplaces?) not only reflects class bias, it also reflects disproportionate interest in work/places historically

aligned with elite (heterosexual, able-bodied, and so forth) white men and relative indifference to labor forms and sites linked with Other bodies. Moreover, these twin habits are tightly linked, for the "class-ification" of work is in large part a function of bodily associations (e.g., as when accounting became professionalized on the grounds that "only elite, educated, masculine men can do this"). To engage this sort of inequity, a different guiding question becomes imperative, one that interrogates the complex historical and ongoing alignment of work with "bodies of difference." The alternative question advocated here asks: *In what ways and to what extent is work materially and symbolically configured in relation to embodied formations of difference, such as—but not limited to—race and gender?*

Engaging the Occupational Segregation Literature

As the previous selective review suggests, there is an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation addressed to this concern, widely known as the study of *occupational segregation* (and affiliated areas, like the sex/gender- and race-typing of work, labor force composition, division and hierarchy of labor). This enormous literature[1] examines various axes (i.e., horizontal and vertical) and levels of segregation, including job, organization (i.e., firm-level), institution (e.g., educational systems), state, regional (e.g., by city), (inter)national comparisons, labor market, industry, specific occupation or family thereof (typically focused on professions and semi-professions, such as medicine), individual selection, and popular culture. Among the recurring factors of interest are occupational prestige or status, preference or choice, and mobility; part- and full-time configurations of labor; and wage differentials. Although the literature is overwhelmingly quantitative, showing a proclivity for longitudinal trend analyses, in-depth qualitative analyses of historical cases have long been part of the scene as well. To date, sociology, economics, history, and (social) psychology are chief among the disciplinary perspectives represented in the literature.

As hinted earlier, most occupational segregation research treats gender and race demographically, or as measurable individual characteristics with corporeal markers and cognitive as well as sociocultural effects. Although scholars have shown abundant interest in both gender and race, these have mostly been studied separately (sometimes even in the same work; see Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993), with notable and mounting exceptions (e.g., Sokoloff, 1992). There can be little doubt, however, that gender has received the lion's share of attention. Indeed, Charles and Grusky's (2004) recent, critically acclaimed meta-review of the sex segregation literature—interestingly titled, *Occupational*

Ghettos—makes an explicit case for this isolated focus. The authors situate the gender division of labor as one of the most defining features of work around the world—a core organizing principle of economies, workplaces, individual and relational choices, as well as a central factor in preserving wage inequities. They argue that, in contrast with race relations, persistent cultural faith in gender essentialism (i.e., the popular belief that men and women are inherently different) has led to an intensification of the horizontal division of labor by gender, or what the authors call "hypersegregation." Specific to the U.S. national case, they observe: "Racist occupational stereotypes were once legion in the U.S. . . . but now are largely discredited and live on in weakened forms . . . This is all to suggest that gender inequality is a uniquely cultural form that rests heavily on essentialist processes" (p. 317).

Against the preponderance of quantitative methods and associated visions of gender and race as fixed-choice variables based on anatomy or ancestry, occupational segregation research more akin to critical organizational communication and critical management studies (or CMS) is on the rise. This research investigates the social and political construction of work realities through discourse and symbols in use (for a fuller review, see Ashcraft, 2006a). Although CMS scholars initially attended to gendered job segregation (e.g., Collinson & Knights, 1986), such projects appear to have declined as concern for the gender *of* organization (i.e., gendered organization) took hold in the field. As symbolic approaches to gendered work resurge, gender becomes less a stable social identity category based on physical and cognitive traits, and more a loose set of evolving cultural discourses (or available narrative prescriptions) about the body, sexual difference, and identity. Gender discourses offer ways of being and acting in the world, which people in diverse physical bodies take up—in more and less creative ways, and toward consequential ends—through their everyday, interactive identity performances. Scholars in this vein examine how mundane interaction maintains the labor divide between so called women's work and men's work (e.g., Benschop, Halsema, & Schreurs, 2001; Monaghan, 2002). They also study discourse tactics through which people cross the gender divide. While the bulk of attention has gone to women in male-dominated work (e.g., Spencer & Podmore, 1987), studies of men in female-dominated work are on a sharp rise (e.g., Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Williams, 1993).

As this brief characterization suggests, gender has drawn far more attention than race in this emerging critical literature. Here too, as in the broader occupational segregation literature, gender continues to be approached in broadly binary terms, despite increasing

acknowledgment of rampant variation in gendered work identities. A strong push toward intersectional analyses—or studies of interaction *among* multiple discourses of difference, like gender, race, sexuality, age, and class—has been a major force in building awareness of variation (e.g., Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Hossfeld, 1993; Mills, 1998). Yet the gender binary persists in scholarly vocabulary and research design and divisions (like studies of masculine and feminine, or women's and men's, work). Moreover, other embodied formations of difference (e.g., race, age, sexuality, physical or mental ability) are rarely considered as organizing principles of work in their own right. As yet, then, we have little sense of how else different bodies of work might factor into the social, political, and material construction of work. The open-ended framing of the alternative guiding question is meant to invite such inquiry.

Until recently, however, organizational communication scholarship on difference has remained mostly silent on matters of occupational segregation, preferring to see difference in terms of work*places* and interaction within them rather than as an organizing premise of labor itself (Ashcraft, 2006a; Medved, in press). I argue that, by taking up the alternate question posed here (i.e., How does difference organize work?), organizational communication scholars could develop meaningful contributions to critical global problems surrounding occupational segregation. Furthermore, bringing communication perspectives into this collaborative interdisciplinary inquiry stands to challenge yet also strengthen the field of organizational communication on at least three levels: (a) theoretically (e.g., the development of "communicational explanations"); (b) practically (e.g., enhancing our role in public and policy dialogue, as well as intervention programs); and thus, (c) politically (i.e., raising the field's profile in interdisciplinary conversations and the public eye). In this sense, communication scholarship on the *organization* of work through difference could exemplify common calls for engagement, which typically imply dual motives: genuinely making a difference while also promoting the integrity and relevance of the field. Elsewhere, Medved (in press) and I (Ashcraft, 2006a) sought to ignite interest within our field by reading occupational segregation literature through a communicative lens. In the remainder of this essay I take on a different task, weighing theoretical, practical, and political challenges entailed in the following question: How (much) would organizational communication scholars need to stretch in order to confront not only difference *in* or *of* organization, but also the *organization* of work through difference?

❖ ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION "MAKES A DIFFERENCE": FIVE WAYS TO ENGAGE THE ORGANIZATION OF WORK

The call put forth in the previous section asks more of difference researchers than a straightforward shift in research attention or even an expansion of disciplinary scope. As noted at the outset of the previous section, adjusting difference inquiry to accommodate the alternative question requires a change in dominant conceptions of difference, from difference as an individual, group, or organizational property to difference as an organizing principle of work itself, in and beyond the firm level. Moreover, adjusting difference research in this way entails significant shifts in the ontology and epistemology of organizational communication, as hinted in my earlier reference to an emerging strain of studies attuned to difference "at work" beyond conventional workplace boundaries. Shifting what counts as organizational communication and how we go about studying it cannot be taken lightly, because it induces serious theoretical, practical, and political challenges and possibilities that warrant careful consideration. In what follows, I propose five specific ways that organizational communication difference scholars can begin engaging these challenges and realizing the associated potential. To illustrate some of these, I draw on my own work—not because I imagine it as a path to be followed, but because struggles encountered there prompted these reflections.

1: Develop work-specific and site-flexible conceptions of organizational communication (i.e., dis-/re-locating work)

The call issued by this chapter has at least two major implications for how we conceive of organizational communication. First, it necessitates (re)centering work (i.e., jobs, tasks, labor) in studies of difference. As noted above, organizational communication scholars have historically resisted an explicit emphasis on work, and for good reason: to avoid the formation of another academic field in the service of business, managerial, or corporate interests. In response, it is worth noting several points. The sort of inquiry proposed here is avowedly critical, primarily in search of more equitable relations of difference and power, not "diversity management" for better business. This is *not* to say that feasibility drops out of the picture, but that organizations and managers are not presumed to own performance measures.

Rather, the practical questions become the following: Are alternative ways of configuring work more equitable *and* feasible, and in what sense—for whom, for what purposes, serving what and whose interests (Ashcraft, 2002)?

In addition, studying the organization of work does *not* amount to the exclusion of organizations with goals other than economic. After all, work gets done in government and nonprofit organizations as well, and labor is performed in family, leisure, and other enterprises culturally defined against work. In fact, crucial to the organization of work is the cultural (re)production of a split between work and so called labors of love in private, or domestic/family, life. The separation itself reflects relations of difference (e.g., the gendered division and hierarchy of life activities), and so merits close investigation.

I also do not advocate that we cease studying difference at the organization-level. Certainly, workplaces (as conventionally defined) are a pivotal site where work is organized; they are simply not the *only* site. As this implies, nowhere in the previous call is a suggestion that current efforts to understand organizational systems should be *replaced* by an exclusive emphasis on work. Regardless of whether they engage work *per se,* studies of difference *in* or *of* organizations remain vital to understanding the role of individuals, interactions, and firm-level systems. My contention is that we need an equally strong strand of research on the *organization* of work to be developed alongside these other strands.

But perhaps the most serious reservation about a turn toward work is this: What does such a turn mean for the *organizational* in organizational communication, and might it therefore compromise our distinctive analytical turf? Preliminary answers can be found in a similar call for management scholars to "return to work," issued by Barley and Kunda (2001) and modeled in empirical observations of scientists, engineers, technicians, and consultants as they go about their labors. Barley and Kunda (2001) explained that a nuanced understanding of work itself—the "concrete activities" through which people perform tasks amid changing economies and technologies—is indispensable to understanding emerging organizational systems (pp. 76, 84). They go so far as to argue that the drift away from work and toward abstract forms and governance systems in organization theory has hindered our knowledge of contemporary organizational life. Thus far, however, their back-to-work enterprise mostly entails observing the conduct of work at the firm level—studying the *organization* of work *in* organizations, or returning to work in *the* workplace. As the preceding discussion makes clear, I am advocating more.

I propose that we conceive of work not only as a concrete practice occurring amid institutional systems (Barley & Kunda, 2001), but also as a discourse formation that evolves across many sites of cultural activity (Carlone & Taylor, 1998). The latter vision revises the traditional meaning of *workplace*, building a theoretical rationale for studying the cultural (re)production of work in and across multiple arenas. For those concerned about surrendering the spotlight on organizations, it is worth underscoring that the study of multiple work*place*s can enrich understanding of how work is organized in the conventional workplace. For example, organization scholars continue to call for greater intersection among sites of organization, occupation, and profession (e.g., Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). A plural conception of work*place* facilitates organization theory on the cusp of those relations (Ashcraft, 2008).

Herein lies the second major implication of the call: The claim that work is organized across cultural sites (i.e., that there are many work*places* not traditionally acknowledged) shatters any residual container metaphor of organizational communication. Instead, it invites us to consider the organizing property of communication (Cooren, 2000) in the myriad sites where work transpires—not only in the formal organizations where people perform tasks, but also in families, educational institutions, popular and trade discourse, legal and regulatory agencies, labor and professional associations, and wherever else we encounter representations, negotiations, and enactments of (who does what) work. In sum, communication becomes the pivotal site of organizing work, evolving in contexts ranging from store rooms and break rooms to living rooms and class rooms to rest rooms and bar rooms. As *evolving* suggests, the call is not simply to *spatially* displace and relocate work, but to do so *temporally* as well (Ashcraft, 2008). Simply put, work as a material notion is also an ongoing historical formation. In Van Maanen and Barley's (1984) terms, work "has a history of its own and, therefore, a context that is not organizationally limited" (p. 291).

Returning to the question of what happens to *organizational* communication, the short answer is that organization begins to traverse time and space, while communication becomes the mechanism of its production. This view can be condensed into the question: Where and how does (or has) communication organize(d) work? Such a move is consistent with a well-established body of scholarship seeking to know organization as a verb (Barley & Kunda, 2001) and as an ongoing process constituted in communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In relation to these developments, the call advocated here

entails further dislodging the verb (i.e., organizing) from the noun (i.e., organization).

2: Articulate communicational explanations of occupational segregation

Arguably, the overall aim of organizational communication scholarship is to weigh diverse conceptions of communication as a social practice, toward the articulation of "communicational explanations" of organizing that provide distinctive, useful alternatives to other sorts of accounts (Craig, 1999; Deetz, 1994). Scholars have produced, for example, communicative accounts of organizational culture, power relations, structuration processes, and the emergence of firms. Reviewing such efforts, some colleagues and I recently explored what it means, more precisely, to render a communicational explanation (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Whereas taking communication seriously once meant accounting for symbolic activity as a generative process, we argue that the bar is now set higher. Communication scholars are increasingly called to account for their apparent elision of materiality, as organization and work clearly exceed symbols and discourse, whatever their constitutive power. In this light, a communicational explanation becomes one that accounts for communication as the ongoing, situated activity through which the representational realm (e.g., symbols, discourses, notions) and the material realm (e.g., physical objects, locations, bodies) become entangled, transforming both realms and (re)producing lived realities in the process.

It is my contention that pursuing the alternate question posed in this chapter—rephrased accordingly, *How does communication organize work symbolically and materially through embodied formations of difference?*—can yield novel and useful communicational explanations of occupational segregation. For instance, the matter of *how* certain bodies become aligned with certain tasks (i.e., the constitution of the work-body relation) remains a highly contested matter in the interdisciplinary occupational segregation literature (for more on this and further support of the argument here, see Ashcraft, 2008). For many years, researchers have posited the relationship between jobs and the bodies who typically fill them as an outcome of economic, institutional, or cultural-political (e.g., patriarchal) forces. Scholars have especially deliberated whether tasks have inherent properties that, in light of cultural norms, summon particular bodies to perform them; or whether the initial sex and race composition of a job, more a product of other forces, leads to the gender and race coding of its tasks. Even as discursive

and critical perspectives have begun to influence the debate, symbolic activity is rarely considered as a viable answer to this debate. At best, discourse is taken as a maintenance mechanism (or "inertial force"; see Charles & Grusky, 2004) that helps to preserve already existing gender and race labor divisions, rather than as a generative force that activates divisions in the first place.

Following Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren (2009), I am coming to think that a communicative explanation departs from all of these accounts, that it treats the work-body relation as an indeterminate symbolic-material object constituted in communication. In other words, which bodies "logically" or "naturally" align with tasks is never self-evident; neither is it a matter of economic, institutional, or even cultural destiny. Instead, the work-body relation is always up for grabs to some extent and, thus, requires claims to be staked—a social construction contest of sorts (Ashcraft, 2008). Communication is the dynamic mechanism of that struggle; it is how individual and institutional voices vie for the particular combinations of materiality and symbolism in which they are invested.

Thus far, I have attempted to illustrate such a communicative explanation with the historical case of U.S. commercial airline pilots (Ashcraft, 2007; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Today, we might assume that flying labor was readily aligned with white men due mostly to task properties, cultural norms, and institutional links with the military, but such is not the case. By the late 1920s, both men and women were flying in the public eye. Dominant images of male pilots up to that point (e.g., the "intrepid birdman" of air shows, the rugged airmail pilot, the daredevil "barnstormer," the dashing Hollywood flier, the WWI "ace") put the pilot's body front and center, provoking adoration for his physical and sexual prowess but also epidemic fear of flight as the hazardous task of supermen (Corn, 1979). Constituents in the general aviation industry countered this fear with the emerging "ladybird" or "ladyflier" image (personified by Amelia Earhart and a sizeable cohort of female pilots). Promoters overtly employed ladyfliers to act in a hyper-feminine fashion, even primping in the public eye, because the point was to shame men into flying with the message: "'Flying must be easy and safe if *she* can do it" (Corn, 1979). But the mid-1920s saw the public in the throes of a love affair with the ladybird, and her intense popularity launched unanticipated turns. Commentators began to muse about whether flying was women's work; and constructions of the pilot's task began to range wildly, from physically and technically taxing, high-risk labor to a graceful, artful, sensitive, intuitive pastime.

It was into this tangle of images—none of which inspired public faith in flight as a viable mode of transportation—that the commercial aviation industry intervened. Responding to faltering ticket sales and widespread anxiety about airline safety, airlines and the budding pilot union collaborated in the late 1920s to transform the pilot into a dependable professional (Hopkins, 1998). The transformation involved a full-body makeover to minimize physicality with the cloak of professional regalia, such as that of a ship's captain—an officer's uniform complete with symbols of rank, a navigation kit housing technical manuals and resembling a briefcase, an intercom system broadcasting the invisible voice of authority, and so on. Ironically, this careful overhaul of the pilot's body was designed to erase it. Against the hyperfeminized body of the ladybird, the commercial airline pilot was reborn as a reliable professional. The communicative dust had mostly settled by the mid- to late-1930s, well before WWII brought a significant influx of military-trained pilots.

As this research suggests, neither initial demographics nor intrinsic task content adequately explain the case of airline pilots. Neither did status closure processes nor institutional strategies of occupational closure precede the social construction contest over the pilot's body and the work of flight. Indeed, the discursive struggle that activated the ladyflier and professional airline pilot *enabled* such processes and strategies. In other words, as communication constitutes the work-body relationship, it facilitates representational and material conditions in which certain economic, institutional, and physical realities are more likely to find footing.

The airline pilot case supplies one tangible example of a communicative explanation of occupational segregation and its (common yet understudied) intersection with professionalization (Ashcraft, 2008). But by asking *as a field* how communication wields difference to organize work, we could begin to develop a recognizable collective voice that contributes useful alternative theories and allied intervention tactics to a major interdisciplinary concern. In short, we could make a difference on a larger scale, both theoretically and practically.

3: Challenge current conceptions of gender and develop innovative vocabularies of difference (i.e., no more gender alone!)

Already, organizational communication scholars have contributed significantly to interdisciplinary literatures on gender and organization. For instance, we have joined CMS and other scholars in calling out the

tendency, among mainstream and critical analyses, to treat gender as a special interest in otherwise gender-neutral organizational systems and relations. We have also taken vital steps toward questioning binary models of gender and cultivating intersectional consciousness—that is, awareness of how embodied formations of difference such as gender, race, and class are entwined. Thus far, however, these steps have blazed more conceptual than empirical ground (Ashcraft, 2009).

I suggest that it is time for organizational communication scholars to systematically *conduct* (not only call for) analyses of difference that balance, on the one hand, sensitivity to intersections of difference as they unfold in work contexts and, on the other, commitment to theorizing formations of difference beyond gender in their own right. Stated bluntly, at this moment in the discipline, we need no more analyses of gender alone; in fact, the persistence of gender-only approaches in our field hinders its potential for broader contributions.

My call for a moratorium on analyses of gender alone takes two forms. First, difference scholarship can begin to genuinely exemplify the claim that gender identities in practice vary widely precisely because they are simultaneously about race, class, sexuality, and so forth. In this sense, difference scholars (myself included) can usefully apply our criticism of gender-neutral organization studies to our own work: Just as relations of power are never experienced in the abstract (i.e., we all inhabit gendered bodies), so gender is never lived in the generic (i.e., we all inhabit bodies that are simultaneously marked by factors other than gender). A major obstacle to making good on this claim is the fact that scholars, too, are trapped in an obstinately binary gender vocabulary (Alvesson & Billing, in press). A decent start, therefore, is relentless accountability to the following questions: *Which* women, *which* men? How, when, and why are references to *women and men* and *masculine and feminine* (counter)productive, and what alternative terms might usefully refuse or reframe the binary, activating sensitivity to difference in situ? I am skeptical about the adequacy of referring to "multiple masculinities" (e.g., Collinson & Hearn, 1996) and femininities, because this habit continues to imply gender as a primary difference a priori and to situate plurality within a dualistic frame, risking the impression that the masculine-feminine divide is better understood as a continuum of options (Ashcraft, 2009). To fully realize the claim that gender is never lived in the generic, our notions of masculine and feminine need far more than plurality. Among other radical encounters with difference, they need, for example, the heteronormativity supporting them utterly upended (Rich, 2006).

Calling for the suspension of gender-only analyses is *not* to say that we should stop theorizing the operation of other difference formations in their own right. It *is* to say, rather, that we have overdeveloped our understanding of gender as an organizing principle relative to other forms of difference. As such, there is actually ample danger in theorizing difference off of gender—in assuming that race, sexuality, and other dimensions are parallel organizing mechanisms that function similarly (Collins et al., 1995). Put simply, it is premature to cluster all forms of difference as organizing principles, even in the name of intersectionality. Instead, we can temporarily prioritize the examination of difference formations beyond gender—not in isolation (e.g., race alone), but in their own right (e.g., race as a specific organizing mechanism, entangled yet also distinct in comparison with gender).

The second form of my case against analyses of gender alone also requires balance; it involves recognizing that, as much as gender is an ever-pressing factor, organizing is always about more than gender and other forms of difference. Gender and organization scholars have pressed the former point of omni-relevance, as noted earlier, but have shown understandable reticence to affirm the latter claim. I would argue, however, that admitting (and even foregrounding) the salience of other organizing factors does not relegate difference to the backseat. On the contrary, it acknowledges, and engages difference with, the complexity of pressures people face. Such a stance opens new possibilities for dialogue across organization studies, and I see this as a shared responsibility. In other words, the so-called ghettoization of difference research does not simply reflect mainstream unwillingness to listen; it also reflects the tendency of difference scholarship not to frame problems in widely shared terms. I wish more organization scholars would ask: How is this problem *also* about difference? But I also wish difference scholars would ask more often: What *else* is this problem about?

In sum, my plea for "no more gender alone" is an argument against analyses of gender as (a) detached from other differences (or as the primary difference a priori) and (b) detached from other organizing phenomena. Phrased in more affirmative terms, it is an argument for engaging intersectionality in its most common usage (i.e., the meeting of gender, race, class, and so on), as well as enhanced intersectionality between difference scholarship and other research areas in work and organization studies. I do not mean to claim that gender and organizational communication studies is (or even has been) more prone to gender-only perspectives than other difference disciplines. On the contrary, it is my sense that these struggles—to substantively integrate multiple differences into our analyses, to let go of lingering gender

binaries, to engage difference scholarship with wider audiences—are shared among gender and organization scholars in many fields. However, if we could collectively prioritize these struggles and make substantial progress toward helpful alternatives, we would be developing contributions of great value to the interdisciplinary conversation on difference, work, and organization.

Returning to the occupational segregation literature affords a provocative interdisciplinary example of the consequences of treating gender in isolation from (a) other forms of difference and (b) other organizing phenomena. As previously reviewed, the gender and race segregation of labor have been treated mostly as separate phenomena and measured independently, while many scholars maintain that gender segregation is more pervasive than racial segregation (Charles & Grusky, 2004). But to what extent might this claim and the imposing statistics supporting it stem from the fact that gender is still operationalized around a binary variable, whereas the same is not tenable with racial and ethnic identities? And is a binary gender variable defensible, particularly in light of overwhelming empirical evidence of immense variation within so called women's and men's work? Such variation—for example, between the sorts of women who welcome guests to a fine hotel and those who clean their messy rooms, or between the kinds of men who fly commercial planes and those who serve the passengers in the cabin—hinge on intersections with other formations of difference, especially race, sexuality, class, age, ability, and nation. If we took such variation seriously and theorized from the lived reality that there is no gender in the generic, what would be the sense, meaning, or utility of claims about the binary division of labor? At the very least, it seems that occupational segregation research is helping to bolster, through the discourse of scientific methods, the cultural "fact" of two, and only two, sexes. In so doing, it compresses a wealth of evidence indicating otherwise and ignores its immersion in the very cultural patterns it seeks to challenge. In short, precisely because gender is one of many organizing principles, it is increasingly unacceptable to theorize it as an entirely discrete phenomenon.

Most of the occupational segregation literature could also be said to illustrate the second form of gender-only analysis: detachment from other organizing phenomena—in this case, mainstream theories of the organization of work. As I argued earlier and demonstrate elsewhere (Ashcraft, 2008), this detachment is the result of omissions on all sides. For example, scholars "returning to work" in studies of management and the professions continue to neglect the bodies performing labor, as if they are (co)incidental to the organization of work. Meanwhile, occupational

segregation scholars tend to address one another rather than confront mainstream theories—of professionalization or knowledge-intensive work, for example—with the role of difference in the cultural and economic evaluation of labor (for examples of exceptions, see Weeden, 2002; Witz, 1992). Consequently, we know little about how occupational segregation enables professionalization, much less how taking difference seriously would disrupt other traditional models of work.

If organizational communication difference scholars prioritized battling both fronts of gender detachment (i.e., from other differences and organizing phenomena), the resulting contributions could even exceed those of communicational explanations because they would introduce new tools and models (e.g., difference vocabularies) desperately needed across disciplinary lenses. As illustrated by the earlier example of occupational segregation in the professionalization of airline pilots, studying the work-body relation as an evolving historical formation provides one promising path forward. Not only would such studies address the meeting of discourse and materiality, they would also ask how embodied formations of difference become relevant in specific work contexts, rather than presume gender or any other difference as primary in the abstract. In this way, alternative difference vocabularies might arise from the diverse ways in which bodies are invoked to organize work. But this is only one possibility, and it will take concentrated collective effort to generate others.

4: Expand the methodological preferences and capacities of difference scholarship (i.e., adding to the toolbox, fostering new talents)

This section began by emphasizing how the revised conceptions of difference and organizational communication embedded in the alternative question induce ontological and epistemological change. Here, I stress the latter—specifically, methodological aspects of the challenge. Like most organizational communication scholarship that is both critical and empirical, difference research reflects a nearly totalizing preference for qualitative research methods. Most often, these involve participant observation and interviewing; and textually based forms of (rhetorical and discourse) analysis are increasingly included in the favored toolbox (e.g., Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Bell & Forbes, 1994; Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). To examine the organization of work across space and time, these qualitative techniques need stretching.

First, the notion of multiple work*places* induces site and boundary dilemmas for participant observation and interview methods. Whereas conventional organizational ethnography entails immersion

in an organization site to study people and activities that members deem within their borders, a dis- or re-located conception of work raises the question: Where (and how far) do we go to know work? There are no easy answers to the associated dilemmas of research design, but it is clear that difference scholars cannot effectively theorize the spatially dispersed organization of work without developing skills in multi-site qualitative methods. Moreover, the relevant sites may not all be organizational in the usual sense. We might need methodological lessons from our colleagues in interpersonal and family communication studies, or archival techniques from our rhetorical and media studies colleagues. Second, while recent difference scholarship employs textually based analytic methods, our collective training in this area—as a subfield—is currently insufficient to capture the temporally diffuse organization of work. Organizational communication difference scholars need greater agility with historical, archival research to address the alternate question posed above. As with studying multiple sites, we may initially turn to collaboration with other disciplinary colleagues (e.g., rhetoricians) who are more familiar with such methods. Ultimately, however, methodological training specific to organizational communication studies will need to be enhanced accordingly.

Finally, we cannot continue to treat quantitative methods as necessarily antithetical to critical difference inquiry. I do not mean to minimize vital critical and feminist critiques of positivist social science (e.g., Hawkins, 1989); my point is that such critiques no longer warrant (if they ever did) the near-categorical exclusion of quantitative methods that they are still invoked to support. In the wake of the linguistic (or interpretive) turn, post-positivist research methods are not inevitably incompatible with social constructionist ontology (Miller, 2000). If for no other reason than the quantitative bent of the interdisciplinary literature on occupational segregation, we cannot afford to dismiss the potential of quantitative critical analyses and innovative quantitative-qualitative fusions. Doing so diminishes our capacity to participate in interdisciplinary conversation and curtails our ability to make a difference beyond academic communities. Instead, we can grow our collective dexterity with methodological vocabularies and techniques, mindful rather than fearful of the tensions and politics incurred.

5: Cultivate interdisciplinary and international affiliations (i.e., practice disciplinary outreach)

As noted earlier, the division and hierarchy of labor by gender and race is a global, interdisciplinary concern. Although individual organizational

communication scholars are regularly cited by scholars in other disciplines (especially when the former publish in the disciplinary outlets of the latter), the collective field and its difference scholarship continue to struggle for broader disciplinary recognition. In other words, scholars of work and organization in other fields rarely seem to seek out communication perspectives (say, in *Communication Monographs* or even *Management Communication Quarterly*) unless particular names or works cross their path. (For more on this, see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006.)

However we may mourn this condition, the upshot is that the initial work of outreach falls to organizational communication scholars. This can entail many loosely connected individual and collaborative activities. At the very least, it involves purposeful reading and publishing beyond communication circles. To engage the interdisciplinary study of occupational segregation, for example, difference scholars must develop not only methodological dexterity, but also a capacity to seek, read, and respond to work from other disciplines, as well as deftness in translating communicational accounts for external audiences. Redressing the U.S.-centric tendencies of organizational communication scholarship, difference researchers would also do well to learn more about the international organization of work and to frame our research problems and contributions with a sharp eye toward concerns and literatures beyond North American borders. Admittedly, these are not simple tasks for those simultaneously trying for tenure in their home discipline. Hence, the greater share of this work may initially fall to senior scholars who can encourage a more interdisciplinary, international consciousness in students of difference by integrating broader literatures and research problems into graduate seminars.

Of equal importance, and stemming in part from reading and publishing widely, effective outreach necessitates strategic and supportive network-building. Speaking practically, organizational communication scholars will have to find creative ways to reach out beyond our discipline—to specific scholars; research projects, consortia, and centers; interdisciplinary and international conferences; grant opportunities and funding agencies; and other people and institutions concerned with the organization of work via difference—in order to nourish the four developments mentioned here with rich outside influences and then share them beyond our own disciplinary silo. As I have been learning recently (Ashcraft, 2006b), it may actually be through participating in wider conversations—fostering relationships across disciplinary and continental divides—that we best begin to appreciate what organizational communication can offer.

❖ CONCLUSION

This chapter has made two broad moves: first, to challenge and change the underlying question motivating difference inquiry and, second, to propose specific implementation strategies that reflect sensitivity to the significant challenges—ontological and epistemological as well as practical and political—sparked by such a change. To make both moves, I have drawn on struggles encountered in my work and explored some ways in which those are not so much idiosyncratic as indicative of larger patterns in the field. My intent is not to generalize from my own case (after all, that would be suspect auto/ethnographic practice!) but, rather, to share my experience in the hopes of hearing yours and, ultimately, of stimulating collective contemplation. Applying critical insights about the politics of identity closer to home, it becomes clear that our individual efforts to manage the identity of a research program not only reflect our own participation in systems of race, class, gender, and other axes of difference, but also interact with our collective sense of self, shaping our potential for being and acting as a field. In a twist on the chapter's title, then, we can better know—and do—our work through the communication of difference as well.

❖ NOTE

1. For diverse samples of acclaimed reviews that illustrate, elaborate, and complicate the characterization and terms provided here, see Blackburn, Browne, Brooks, & Jarman, (2002), Bradley (1989), Charles and Grusky (2004), Hakim (1992), Reskin (1993), and Tomaskovic-Devey (1993).

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