"Reasonably Bright Girls": Theorizing Women's Agency in Technological Systems of Power

Emily January Petersen
Utah State University

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“REASONABLY BRIGHT GIRLS”: THEORIZING WOMEN’S AGENCY IN TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS OF POWER

By

Emily January Petersen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Theory and Practice of Technical Communication

Approved:

________________________________________________________________________
Ryan M. Moeller, Ph.D.               Rebecca Walton, Ph.D.
Major Professor               Committee Member

________________________________________________________________________
Keith Grant-Davie, Ph.D.
Committee Member

________________________________________________________________________
Keri Holt, Ph.D.
Committee Member

________________________________________________________________________
Anita Armstrong, Ph.D.
Committee Member

________________________________________________________________________
Mark R. McLellan, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2016
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ABSTRACT

“Reasonably Bright Girls”: Theorizing Women’s Agency
in Technological Systems of Power

By

Emily January Petersen, Doctor of Philosophy
Utah State University, 2016

Major Professor: Dr. Ryan M. Moeller
Department: English

A woman’s experience in the workplace is an inductive process into a technological, hierarchical, and often male-dominated system. This study examines how female practitioners in technical and professional communication confront the technological system of the workplace. I trace the forces that contribute to the hierarchy and power struggles women face, I present how they claim authority and agency within such hierarchical and technological systems, and I show how these experiences can lead to activism and advocacy. In addition, my findings suggest that some women leave the workplace altogether in favor of less structured and more innovative ways of communicating about technologies, particularly technologies and processes they find more applicable to their lives as women. The data from 39 interviews with female practitioners reveals that the traditional notion of the workplace is in crisis, and that women are asserting agency in order to disrupt the system and ensure a place for themselves within it.

(226 pages)
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DEDICATION

To Mike, Olivia, and The Daphinator.

For the women who shared their stories with me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have always been fortunate in being surrounded by smart, gracious, and giving people. My journey as a doctoral student has been no different. I’m grateful for the countless hours that Dr. Ryan Moeller has spent with me, shaping my identity as a scholar, critiquing my work, supporting my research, and sending gossip texts. I would not have the confidence I have built without Dr. Rebecca Walton. We have laughed together, talked fashion together, cried together, and most importantly thought together. She is the role model and mentor I needed. I also benefitted from the support, expertise, and encouragement of Dr. Keith Grant-Davie, who always listened when I needed advice and who sent me kind, encouraging, and funny emails. I also owe gratitude to Dr. Keri Holt and Dr. Anita Armstrong, whose strong research skills and expert guidance has molded me into the kind of scholar I have always wanted to be. I have similar gratitude for my historian friends and mentors: Dr. Jenny Reeder, Betsy Crane, and Cheré Clarke. I’m additionally thankful for the critiquing, supporting, writing, teaching, complimenting, traveling, debating, listening, venting, and lunching I have done with Adam Bair, Breeanne Martin, Chris Dayley, and Eric Stephens. I would be remiss if I did not mention the support of my husband, Mike, who has read every paper and listened to every presentation. I would have never pursued an academic career without his encouragement and support. My children have been patient with me as well. Daphne has learned to wait for help until I am finished typing, and Olivia has shown interest in my research topics and engaged me in thought-provoking conversations about the continuing struggle for women. And of course, there’s my wonderful dad, Ron January, who is always there. I am surrounded by people of integrity, intelligence, love, and ambition.
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CHAPTER 1
ENTERING THE TRADITIONAL WORKPLACE

Introduction

The reality of my marginalization set in when I left a professional editing position at a worldwide corporation over a decade ago because I had become a mother. The corporation I worked for offered no flexible hours, no opportunity to work from home, and no daycare options. I began to feel that a career in technical and professional communication (TPC) was not open to me because of my gender and my biology. My experiences were not valued and the restrictions of my gender became painfully obvious. This problem was the culmination of many difficult work experiences: I faced sexual harassment, less pay than my male counterparts, and a lack of female coworkers and mentors. The research that I have undertaken for this project has shown me that my experiences are not unique. Women continue to face difficulties in the workplace for a myriad of reasons: sexism linked to traditional marriage and attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that disfavor women in the workplace (Desai, Chugh, & Brief, 2012); discrimination against and increased expectations for pregnant women (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015); demotions and layoffs during maternity leave (Gomstyn, 2015; O’Neill, 2015); the devaluing of caregiving roles (Slaughter, 2015); punishment for women who speak up at work (Sandberg & Grant, 2015); unconscious bias against women and minorities (Lewis, 2015); retribution for attempting to negotiate benefits and higher salaries (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007); sexist dress codes and appearance expectations for women (Pierce, 2015); and hiring practices that include “cultural” fit as criterion (Rivera, 2015). In other words, workplaces continue to be sites of conflict for women and their employers.
Given these constraints for women within organizations, I will elucidate and interrogate the underlying feminization and devaluation of TPC (Chapter 2), the power differentials in the workplace because of hierarchies and gender expectations (Chapter 3), the agency women enact when navigating power structures (Chapter 4), the advocacy work that has resulted (Chapter 5), and the innovations women have made to their workplaces (Chapter 6). All of these themes reveal the traditional notion of the workplace as in a state of constant tension, in which women are a disruptive force, and their reactions to what are often perceived as being powerful, hierarchical, and patriarchal systems may be to change and reform those systems. Ultimately, I illuminate how women in TPC experience and react to the myth of the traditional workplace.

The workplace is a systematic community with rules, and we can understand this further by realizing that it has a “formal or informal code of ethics that informs the morality of the organization, and even its own standards of etiquette and sensitivity that may or may not affect the work that is done, but that certainly affect the sociological environment in which that work takes place” (Allen, 1999, p. 238). TPC scholars have not thoroughly researched the status of women as practitioners within such environments. While some literature has asked questions about women and work, especially in scientific and technical fields, this research is dated. Boiarsky, Grove, Northrop, Phillips, Myers, and Earnest (1995) conducted two national surveys on women in technical and scientific professions, noting that workplaces were improving and that the “results indicate a need for further research” (p. 75). However, further research in TPC journals is scant. Studies on the subject in TPC journals do not pay particular attention to TPC as a profession, and little scholarship exists on female TPC practitioners’ experiences at work. Krider and Ross (1997) examined the
field of public relations, finding that a woman’s experience “in work [is] one of constant negotiations between roles so that they can be a woman and have a career at the same time” (p. 450). Herrick (1999) ethnographically examined the narratives of women at work as a dialogic process. My research addresses a central tension in the field: women make up 54.6 percent of editors and 55.5 percent of technical writers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014, p. 37), but their experiences and concerns are not represented in research. These numbers do not include women who work from home, who work part time, or who freelance or contract.

Not only does the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics show feminization of the field through numbers, the work of practitioners within engineering, computer science, and other traditionally male-dominated fields means that many practitioners find themselves a minority in terms of gender and in terms of the characterization and perceptions of the kind of work they do. In the scholarship, there is a recognition of the field as feminized. Dragga (1993) pointed out, “Clearly, women’s dominance of the field of technical communication is a subject that deserves research, discussion, and vigilance” (p. 319). However, making up a large portion of the work force in TPC does not lead to control of the workplace. Female technical and professional communicators may be surrounded by male colleagues, given that TPC often aligns with male-dominated fields. Women find themselves marginalized because of this imbalance. Allen (1991) highlighted a myriad of gender-based workplace issues that we have not discussed in TPC, including lower salaries for women, interactions of men and women on the job, women’s perceptions of male coworkers, women’s roles at work, promotion and training for women, and gender-based attitudes and behaviors (p. 376). Allen ultimately called for “[f]urther research ... to investigate questions about the kinds of support
women in technical communication find for their aspirations” (p. 377). Few scholars have answered this call. One notable exception is Sullivan and Moore’s (2013) article about mentoring for undergraduate women in STEM fields. They proposed that TPC instructors act as informal mentors by helping students “identify an organization’s culture in its communication processes [and] we can notice whether and how they as women need to frame their actions for a particular organization” (p. 340). My study extends this conversation and examination of women’s workplace experience by analyzing particular gendered workplace issues in more detail, working to understand the problem through women’s voices.

We know which issues are of concern to women in the workplace through scholarly research and the popular media. While the women I interviewed were mostly content with their employment, a few of them were extremely unhappy, and others had experienced difficult times and problems, whether or not those problems were persistent. My research acknowledges that women working in TPC generally characterize their work positively. Participants recounted being mentored by managers, being paid well and fairly, not having to worry about sexist dress codes, finding emotional support from coworkers and being willing to reciprocate such support, and finding ways to balance work, family, and home life.

However, problems persist, and through the narratives I heard, I theorize that a woman’s experience in the workplace is a process of being inducted into a technological, hierarchical, and often male-dominated system. By inducted I mean that women enter a system of domination, one they may not have encountered before, and they must learn the rules and norms of their interactions within that system. My research uncovers the process women navigate for power in the traditional workplace and which forces and disruptions
contribute to the tension of the traditional workplace. I present how women claim authority and agency within such hierarchical and technological systems and how this experience can lead to activism and advocacy. In addition, some women leave the workplace altogether in favor of less structured and more innovative ways of communicating about technologies, particularly technologies and processes they find more applicable to their lives as women. Women are innovating, but contests for power persist. Women must negotiate this complex, networked, and often “male” notion of the traditional the workplace, and consequently leave cracks and reterritorializations for others to do so successfully. Based on these interviews, we see that the traditional workplace is contradictory and contentious, and women are asserting agency in order to disrupt claims of power and demand space.

This tension is what I term the crisis of the traditional workplace. The images and notions we carry and reinforce about the traditional workplace—male, hierarchical, demanding of loyalty, strict with business hours—is mythic and becoming less of a reality. As family life for both women and men disrupts the workplace, among other changes, and the demography of workers shifts, traditional organizations feel the brunt and must readjust to maintain the myth.

Organizational tension is like capitalism, as it is a “myth of permanent economic stability” (Weeks, 1977, p. 281). Similarly, the workplace is experiencing crises because of myths we continue to adhere to; it is challenged by globalization, immigration, and a desire for work-life balance (Herman, 1999). Workers and organizations may cling to the myth of the traditional workplace, attempting to exclude the disruptive forces. Women, because their perceived connections outside of organizations are more visible because of biology as well as
Much of this confrontation can be traced via the attribution of power, which is transitional and fluid. Power can be characterized as hierarchical, mediating, social, disciplinary and omniscient (Foucault, 1975), interactional (Schneider, 2007), discursive, or knowledge-based. Theories of power shed light on its multiple uses, faces, characterizations, and negotiations. Power is ultimately unstable, transactional, and malleable. Tables 1.1 to 1.7 present taxonomies of power that outline the many theories that inform the analyses of this dissertation.

These descriptions of power illuminate the way power is used to maintain control and separation between organizations and their employees. Hierarchical power (Table 1.1) belongs to those in positions of authority as bestowed by a system or organization. Ideas about hierarchical power apply to Chapter 3 and highlight some of the strategic (or institutional) uses of power in Chapter 5 as well. Power is not always on top or vied for by those at the bottom of a hierarchy. Power is also present in the mediating work of communicators (Table 1.2). Table 1.3 applies to the advocacy and activism work described in Chapter 5. Power can be negotiated and claimed in social situations. These scholars describe the deficits and agency afforded in such contexts. Chapter 4 identifies the work that female practitioners do to gain and keep social power. Disciplinary power (Table 1.5) is also found within organizations and can be viewed as oppressive. However, disciplinary power can be internal as well as external. The analysis of systems of power in Chapter 3 is punctuated by Foucault’s ideas.
Table 1.1

Hierarchical Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorist</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bourdieu (1977)</td>
<td>Women “can exercise it fully only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation, to the men” (p. 41).</td>
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<tr>
<td>De Certeau (1984)</td>
<td>Strategy is “the calculation (or manipulations) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power ... can be isolated ... As in management, every 'strategic' rationalization seeks ... the place of its own power and will” (pp. 35-36).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimball (2006)</td>
<td>Strategies are “systems, plans of action, narratives, and designs created by institutions to influence, guide, and at worst manipulate human society” (p. 71).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feenberg (2002)</td>
<td>Strategic communication is operational autonomy or “the power to make strategic choices among alternative rationalizations without regard for externalities, customary practice, workers' preferences, or the impact of decisions on their households” (pp. 75-76).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaventa (1982)</td>
<td>“Power works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless ... Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, and interests from being recognized” (p. vii).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and Stone (2005)</td>
<td>Those enacting organizational strategies have social privilege, or “entitlement, sanction, power, immunity, and advantage or right granted or conferred by the dominant group” (p. 245).</td>
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Table 1.2

**Mediating Power**

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<tr>
<td>Neeley (1992)</td>
<td>“[P]eople who appear marginal or whom history has rendered invisible may be performing activities of crucial importance for the group as a whole” (p. 210).</td>
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Table 1.3

**Social Power**

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<tr>
<td>Wang (2009)</td>
<td>“[W]omen do not have equal access to social capital because they are often excluded from the social networks most important for power acquisition and career success” (p. 33).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herndl and Licona (2007)</td>
<td>“[T]he conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations ... constitute[s] the possibility of action” (p. 135).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schneider (2007)</td>
<td>“Social settings are never settled once and for all; they are constantly shifting, constantly accomplished in social interaction. Even when the conventions of an organization seem settled” (p. 187).</td>
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Table 1.4

**Disciplinary Power**

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<td>Foucault (1975)</td>
<td>“[T]hese techniques merely refer individuals from one disciplinary authority to another, and they reproduce, in a concentrated or formalized form, the schema of power-knowledge proper to each discipline” (pp. 226-227).</td>
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In order to create docile bodies, institutions must observe those bodies in all aspects of work and to ensure that those bodies internalized the discipline that kept them under control (p. 145).
Table 1.5

*Interactional/Negotiable Power*

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<td>Feenberg (2002)</td>
<td>“Reactive autonomy” or “margin of maneuver” is “Action on the margin may be reincorporated into strategies, sometimes in ways that restructure domination at a higher level, sometimes in ways that weaken its control” (pp. 84-85).</td>
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<tr>
<td>De Certeau (1984)</td>
<td>A tactic is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy ... It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’ [and] ... It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them ... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them” (pp. 36-37).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schneider (2007)</td>
<td>“Understanding power as constructed in interaction also allows us to see why it is that power can slip away so easily. If ... we understand it as an interactional accomplishment, we can see that it can never be accomplished once and for all” (p. 196). 1) “People in organizations use the interactional and interpretive conventions available to them to construct ... the power relations of the organization” (p. 187); 2) “the social realities of organizational settings are constructed through language use and social interaction among setting participants” (p. 188); 3) “participants themselves orient to the context and design their interaction” (p. 189); 4) “the deafening silence that meets many organizational decisions [or cultures] must also be seen as an interactional accomplishment” (p. 194); and 5) power cannot be possessed, but it can be “accomplished through access to interactional resources that allow one to have one’s reality claims accepted” (p. 196).</td>
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**Discursive Power**

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<td>Gergen (2007)</td>
<td>Polyvocality is “the use of multiple genres of self-representation” (p. 120). It is a way of “layering our voices” and making “a far more powerful case” (p. 124).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faber (2002a)</td>
<td>Change is “inherently a discursive project ... [which] means that change is restricted by the structures of language and by the conventions of language use” (p. 25).</td>
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Table 1.7

**Knowledge Power**

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<td>Wylie (2004)</td>
<td>Inversion thesis is that “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience” (p. 339).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortner (2006)</td>
<td>“[P]eople always have at least some degree of ‘penetration’ (if not virtually full awareness ...) into the conditions of their domination” (p. 6).</td>
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Power is not always hierarchical or disciplinary. Power is negotiated, claimed, slippery, and ephemeral, as described in Table 1.5. Feenberg and de Certeau describe ways in which those on the margins of systems of power can obtain it through maneuvering and tactics. Schneider (2007) adds to this understanding by describing power as constructed and
interactional. Power can be accomplished. Her specific descriptions of the interactional possibilities of power inform the analysis of Chapter 4. In addition, de Certeau’s tactics are visible in the advocacy and activism described in Chapter 5. Further, Chapter 6 is a case study about what happens when women design their interactions with (or without) organizations in order to claim control over their own work lives. Language (Table 1.6) can be used to maintain or obtain power. Discursive power informs the claiming of authority and agency in Chapter 4, the activism and advocacy in Chapter 5, and the podcasting of Chapter 6. Finally, knowledge power (Table 1.7) informs each chapter of this dissertation, as women’s voices and experiences as valuable and powerful are the basis of the study.

As illustrated above, power is constantly shifting, claimed, rejected, vied for, and even shared at various points throughout an organization. The ways in which an organization reacts to contests of power creates or diminishes the moment of crisis in which they find themselves. They may resist forces of change in order to maintain dominance, especially for the mythic notion of the traditional workplace. Such resistance is deeply embedded in broader societal gender relations, notions of separate spheres, and the performance of gender roles. As Harrison, Wheeler, and Whitehead (2003) pointed out, “It is evident that the workplace is evolving in a distributed form ... [and] the fluidity of the distributed workplace will set society some urgent problems” (p. 1). Part of these problems is the way in which organizations react to the shift and how both organizations and workers claim and negotiate power.
Women at Work

The academic literature covers a myriad of general concerns for women in the workplace, including workplace culture, gender harassment, maternity leave, family-life balance, the salary gap, a need for mentors and role models, education, and appearance. Popular sources have also recently contributed to this conversation (Slaughter, 2012; Sandberg, 2013). Below, I review these overriding forces surrounding women’s experiences in the workplace in an attempt to identify the sites of struggle and resistance that inform the situation of the workplace and my findings. We see similar tensions between the family and the workplace, and a better workplace is good for all members of a family. As notions of the nuclear family and traditional workplace shift and change, we have the opportunity to make all workplaces more negotiable for everyone.

Workplace Culture

Unbalanced numbers of men and women in a particular field or work site can contribute to gender relations and conflicts within a workplace culture. One of concern is the glass ceiling, or barriers that prevent women from advancing into management positions. Wrigley’s (2002) research suggests that “corporate cultures and maintenance of men’s power results in several unwritten rules: women are OK to hire, but only for certain types of jobs in certain areas ... and because women are willing to work harder, they will be given more and more work” (p. 41).

This is one dimension of workplace culture: who gets promoted and who does not. However, workplace culture in general is more complicated. Bergman & Hallberg (2002) explained, “women’s perceptions of what constitutes workplace culture are formed partly by
their encounter with an existing male-dominated organization and partly by their systems of norms, expectations, and experiences” (p. 312). Scholars have recognized a need to reform workplace culture and definitions in order to include women (Durack, 1997).

Other aspects of workplace culture may contribute to the fact that women leave workplaces quietly when disappointed. According to Hamel (2009), women are most likely to leave an organization after experiencing a psychological contract barrier, which is a belief “employees have about the entitlements they will receive and that they perceive were promised to them by their employers ... Violations of psychological contracts occur when the perceived implicit and explicit promises of employers are not fulfilled or are broken” (p. 235). When these violations happen, women quietly leave. Hamel found that some 90 percent of those she interviewed left employment without protesting or asking for what they were promised.

The idea of the double-bind is similarly central to understanding workplaces and women’s experiences within them. Thompson (2004) wrote, “The double bind occurs when a woman behaves according to the male gender role. Some TPC researchers have suggested that the double bind presents a professional woman with the choice of being effective as a professional or accommodating the female gender role” (p. 226). Additionally, Ely (1995) pointed out that when women are the minority or the “tokens” in their work groups, they have “increased performance pressures, isolation from informal social and professional networks, and stereotyped role encapsulation” (p. 589). While women represent a good portion of practitioners in TPC, they may also be the gender minority in their workplaces. Such imbalance must be accounted for when analyzing and listening to their experiences.
Gender Harassment

According to Rifkind and Harper (1992), sexual harassment is a label used “to describe certain behaviors of men toward women and the consequences of that behavior” (p. 236). Bergman and Hallberg (2002) explained, “Because gender harassment is about the abuse of power and status rather than being merely about unwelcome sexual invitations, it can lead to adverse psychological consequences as well as to impaired work performance” (p. 321). Young women may experience sexual harassment more than midlife women. Boiarsky et al.’s (1995) results of two national surveys found “that women are most vulnerable when they are young and inexperienced” (p. 70). The majority of women who indicated in the surveys that they had been harassed “reported they were able to ‘handle it themselves’” (p. 70).

Appearance

Dress and appearance are a consideration for women in the workplace because of the way they might be perceived and therefore treated, especially if their workplace is generally masculine (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997). Practitioners might struggle to dress according to a code, to create ethos, or to avoid unwanted sexual attention. This conflict is characterized as “professional beauty requirements …. women … must look attractive to gain visibility in a male-dominated business culture, but must also not appear too feminine because then they may be perceived as sexual objects instead of as professionals” (Rafaeli et al., 1997, p. 12).

Age is a related consideration. Trethewey (2001) wrote, “Age ideology is troublesome because it prepares professional women to expect and demand little as they age, diminishes
women’s individual and collective experiences, and treats rejuvenation through consumption as the only means of staving off eventual decline” (p. 186). Bodies are equally important and may be the underlying concern behind age and dress. Trethewey (1999) showed that “If women are to be successful, they must learn to embody a particular set of professional signals ... professional women must also constantly attend to the details of sitting, walking, and moving professionally” (p. 436). These discourses about the female body in the workplace connect with ideas about sexual harassment and may illuminate some of the underlying context behind problems with harassment.

Mentoring/Role Models

Mentoring and role models are often cited as a crucial way to help and support women in the workplace. Mentoring can ease their transition into a workplace and give women the confidence and guidance they need to succeed in a career (Boiarsky et al., 1995; Carter, 2002; Egan, 1996). Sullivan and Moore (2013) suggested that TPC as a field should “institute small changes in our courses to address this complex of problems related to the need for better mentoring of women preparing to work in STEM fields” (p. 335). Young or inexperienced practitioners are not the only women in need of mentors. Trethewey (2001) found “a very clear need for mentors in midlife. That there are relatively few midlife women in positions of power makes it difficult for other midlife women to seek out, learn from, and envision themselves as powerful midlife women and leaders” (p. 218). However, it is important to keep in mind that not all mentoring is equal; mentoring can be agentic and informative or it can be a way to induct workers into the norms of a controlling system.
Women who rise in hierarchies may be learning masculine norms that are not necessarily challenged or helpful to younger women entering the organization (Armstrong, 2011, p. 8).

Along the same lines, Wang (2009) suggested “that women do not have equal access to social capital because they are often excluded from the social networks most important for power acquisition and career success” (p. 33). She examined the networks available to workers, including formal, informal, and community-based. “The closer an actor is to others, the easier it is for the actor to access channels of information, establish mutual trust, and become less dependent on others. In this sense, closeness can be a source of social capital” (p. 35). Networking allows individuals access to social capital.

**Maternity Leave**

Liu and Buzzanell (2004) examined the reasons maternity leave can be difficult to negotiate in a workplace. First, it functions as a disruption, and secondly, it can pose a dilemma for bosses, who “may consider workplace pregnancy and maternity leave to be predicaments because they work to sustain organizational effectiveness” (p. 325). Some of the conflicts that arise during maternity leave situations include negative messages about family needs, which hurt “women’s self-esteem, added to their mental stress, and sometimes worsened their physical state” (Liu & Buzzanell, 2004, p. 335). In addition, during maternity leave it is often “the women’s coworkers who did the extra work in addition to their own paid work” (p. 336). In the United States, the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave. “According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 12% [sic] of Americans have access to the paid parental leave, which is considered a benefit by employers” (Gilpin, 2015). Researchers found that unpaid maternity leave contributes to
the gender pay gap (Budig, 2014), and we know there is a wage penalty for motherhood in the workplace (Budig & England, 2001; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Maternity leave, and consequently motherhood, is a clear site of conflict for working women and organizations.

**Family Concerns/Balance**

Women who work must also often balance family demands with their careers. We know that “structures (norms and policies) of the gendered workplace still prioritize work over family; men’s work and careers still take precedence over women’s work and careers ... These workplace practices traditionally privilege men and work and subordinate life and family” (Favero & Heath, 2012, pp. 334-335). Favero and Heath, however, pointed out that “today’s workforce, especially women, balance more than complicated family issues; they negotiate work and travel, volunteer work, education, and other nonfamily activities essential for a rich and fulfilling life” (p. 333).

While some claim technology has made it possible for women to balance family life with work aspirations (Stimmel, 1999), Ruppel, Gong, and Tworoger (2013) argued that “the boundaries between work and personal life are diminished when members of a global virtual team telework from domestic workplaces” (p. 440). Such telecommuting might complicate balance between home and work. Stimmel (1999) noted the cons of such technological advances, that women may lose participation in the social code, learning from mentors, inclusion in decision making, and the social confidences of others (p. 359).

Other concerns for working mothers may include breastfeeding (Ogbuanu, Glover, Probst, Hussey, & Liu, 2011), guilt (Guendouzi, 2006), intensive mothering (McCormick, 2010; Hays, 1996), role expectations (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Rich, 1986; Brown, 2010);
childcare (Vancour & Sherman, 2010); ambivalence (Tucker, 2010), self care (Langan, 2012), and “having it all” (Slaughter, 2012).

Pay Gap and Unpaid Labor

Researchers have uncovered unpaid emotional labor that women often perform. Guy and Newman (2004) argued that emotional labor fills the difference gap between men’s and women’s work, claiming that “[w]hen women work in ‘men’s’ jobs, they come close to earning equal pay, … [but] emotional labor is still expected of them there” (p. 291). In contrast, “sex-typed jobs … penalize women the most because these jobs require more ‘natural’ (that is, unpaid) tasks that are missing from the job description’s list of knowledge, skills, and abilities” (p. 292). This sort of labor is unpaid but valuable, as female employees are often tacitly expected to perform it, but it is not as valued as the education and skills learned formally and therefore not compensated through pay. It is intangible, much like the invisibility of women and the invisibility of TPC.

As to formal pay, women continue to be paid less than men for the same work in every field (Department for Professional Employees (DPE), 2010; DPE, 2011; Bollinger, Reitman, & Fawzi, 2012; Butcher, 2007; McQuade, 2012). Historically and in TPC, we understand that “although more women are working as technical communicators, their salaries remain less than their male counterparts’ salaries” (Allen, 1991, p. 373). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), women earn 79.7 percent of what men do in the same profession (p. 66). According to the Society for Technical Communication, women earn less than men in several of the field’s categories.

In 2007 ... median salaries for US medical writers with a master’s degree were $77,339 for female employees and $86,240 for male employees. Freelancers earned a
median of $85,406 for women and $107,444 for men. For those with a PhD, employees’ figures were $91,797 for women and $101,872 for men; and female freelancers got $114,692, and men got $131,143. (Bonetta, 2011, p. 256)

Allen (1991) argued, “we should be concerned that women technical communicators’ salaries do not equal the salaries of men technical communicators” (p. 375). She posited some reasons for such a disparity in salary and concluded that it is a result of “the feminization of technical communication” (p. 376) due to studies that revealed women to be “more fluent than men in both written and oral communication ... [and] that female students tend to be better writers than are male students” (p. 374). These results, although dated, reveal a troubling ideology, that women’s contributions and work experiences are not considered as valuable as men’s.

Another way of understanding the gender pay gap is through biology. Brabazon (2010) said, “Women are more likely than men to have breaks in their work trajectory, largely from taking time off to care for their children” (p. 208). As a result, “This often reduces or slows their opportunities for income raises and promotion, plus mothers are the most likely to refuse work, transfers, or promotions due to family responsibilities” (p. 208). These claims give us reasons for a gender pay gap, but also raise concerns about the myriad of inequalities women face in the workplace.

**Feminist Theory as a Lens for the Workplace**

When I entered graduate school, I was immediately drawn to feminist theory because it addressed the inequalities I had experienced in the workplace, and it worked to correct those issues and recognize my experiences, as a woman, as worthy of study in academia. We know that “most feminist views and perspectives are not simply ideas, or ideologies, but
rooted in the very real lives, struggles, and experiences of women” (emphasis in original, Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). Additionally insightful is feminist standpoint theory, which has two central understandings: “that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (Hekman, 2004, p. 226). Women’s experiences are best understood through their own voices.

Within the field of TPC, we have recognized the value of feminist theory. Lay (2004) called for inclusion of women’s experiences as legitimate subjects of study. Female experience “reveals what is missing within other discourses and theories” (p. 431). Feminists shy away from making “the feminine the negative of the masculine, always lower in the hierarchy” (p. 433). Not only should scholars acknowledge women’s experiences as valid, but female scholars should use these experiences to merge academic research with their own experiences as women.

To use feminist theory in research, Lay (2002) claimed, “The work of those technical communication scholars who use feminist perspectives generally makes visible previously ignored female rhetors, suggests how the field will benefit from adapting feminist perspectives, asks how the gender of the communicator might affect preferred rhetorical strategies, or demonstrates how language and knowledge making are gendered” (p. 173).

While feminism is my major theoretical lens, I will also take into account theories about users (Johnson, 1998; Salvo, 2001), because women are users of the technological system of the workplace. We know that technological systems can impose expectations and be difficult for users to navigate, but Seigel (2014) argued that the aim of TPC can and should be to give “users control over technological systems” (p. 34). Users of any technological system may find themselves without voice in “its establishment, organization,
or mode of conduct” (p. 50). She suggested that “[d]ocumentation that works toward system disruption might help a user to manipulate parts of the system, negotiate the system, or change the system even in a small, local way” (p. 74).

My examination of systems and organizations is informed by Spinuzzi’s (2003) genre ecologies, which views workers as agents rather than victims.

Because imposed standards cannot account for every local contingency, users will tailor the standardized forms, information systems, schedules, and so forth to meet their needs. The messiness of everyday work life—the unofficial, unpredictable ways workers assert their own agency, turn to their own problem-solving skills, and individually or cooperatively design practices, tools, and texts to deal with recurrent problems—is reflected in a considerable number of thoughtful studies. (p. 3)

The dialogic methodology for examining such work is genre tracing, which “is concerned with examining the ways that workers rescue themselves … by developing unofficial, frequently unarticulated work practices and genres, by adapting old genres to new uses, and by linking their innovations to established, official genres” (23). We know that genre is a typified rhetorical response (Miller, 1984), and Spinuzzi added that these are not “merely artifact types” but instead “a sort of tradition” (p. 41). “[T]hey are culturally and historically grounded ways of ‘seeing and conceptualizing reality’” (p. 41). He notes that mediating genres are often “developed by the workers themselves” (p. 48). Genre tracing “can provide insight into how local innovations are officialized, how they resist officialization, and why they exist in the first place” (p. 64). Some of this can be examined through contradictions, dis coordinations, and breakdowns (p. 66). As such “we can anticipate destabilization” and “we can anticipate innovations” (p. 160). In the end, Spinuzzi asked how we can accommodate workers’ innovations rather than resisting them. “The point is not to rescue
workers with a better designed system, but to provide a base for workers to build on” (p. 204).

Such agency is articulated through Bourdieu’s theory of practice, in which he highlighted the tendency to “establish a systematic hierarchization condemning women’s interventions to a shameful, secret, or, at best, unofficial existence. Even when women do wield the real power, ... they can exercise it fully only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation, to the men” (p. 41). Habitus is at work in such power relations; it is “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structure of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (p. 72).

I explore power relationships through Foucault’s ideas of surveillance and discipline. He connected education to the process of discipline, as it is linked to power. The reason to educate or transform an individual is to have power over her, to make sure she acts the way the state, the monarch, or the civilization wants her to act. Foucault noted, “But we must not be misled; these techniques merely refer individuals from one disciplinary authority to another, and they reproduce, in a concentrated or formalized form, the schema of power-knowledge proper to each discipline” (pp. 226-227). Of course, within such power structures there is room for maneuvering (Feenberg, 2002).

Maneuvering is possible through strategies and tactics, which de Certeau (1984) outlined in a book dedicated to “the ordinary man” which he calls “a common hero, a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets” (intro). Such study is “part of a continuing investigation of the ways in which users—commonly assumed to be
passive and guided by established rules—operate” (p. xi). He presented a theory of doing so through several key ideas, which inform my research. “La perruque is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer …. [and] the worker who indulges in la perruque actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit” (p. 25). We see this occurring in the way that women in the TPC workplace assert agency and use TPC genres to enact change and advocacy. In addition, workers engage in strategies and tactics, which de Certeau explained: “I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulations) of power relationships” (p. 35). A tactic is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition” (p. 36). He suggested that tactics are “an art of the weak” (p. 37). Such a description is not a value judgment but instead describes the position occupied by those engaged in tactics. De Certeau championed the mundane and challenged consumption in an effort “to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists, and to relativize the exorbitant claim that a certain kind of production (real enough, but not the only kind) can set out to produce history by ‘informing’ the whole of a country” (p. 167). Women work and produce, but it often is not recognized as such in a capitalist system because it does not make a profit and is performed in the workplace of the home. Research can and should recognize those traditionally thought of as “consumers” in order to upset particular ideologies.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand just why such systems of power protect the status quo and why outside influences serve as disruptions. Kaplan (2002) urged those within American Studies to reconceptualize domesticity as a microcosm of national imperialism, expansion, and exceptionalism. She reminded us that the doctrine of separate
spheres usually applies to “the work of white women writers in creating a middle-class American culture in the nineteenth century” (p. 111). However, if we consider the double meaning of domestic, as an opposite to foreign, “men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness” (p. 111).

I suggest that the same meanings of domestic and foreign may apply to the workplace, with domestic workers being those who have occupied public space for decades and who may be male and middle-class. The disruptive force (or the foreigners) is women and perhaps minorities (although this study has not taken those experiences into their fullest possible account). Women entering the workplace shift what has always been “normal,” and organizations and systems react by attempting to normalize and keep the borders shored up.

In sum, feminist theory shines a light on the often overlooked and undervalued experiences of women. Workplaces are public spaces, and as such they are particularly fraught when it comes to understanding women’s experiences in them, in contrast to the private lives we often culturally expect women to lead. However, the private lives of both women and men are inextricably entwined with the work they perform in organizations. Such knowledge is integral to understanding how workers connect with others and function within hierarchies. This knowledge and these experiences are often missing from discourses of organizations because male’s experiences are so often assumed to be “normal” or “standard.” Yet users of organizational systems are both male and female. We must begin to understand systems and ecologies, particularly within TPC, through the eyes of all types of workers, and an important place to start is by recognizing that workers are agents. Workers can practice the norms they wish to see emerge from organizations, and while the traditional
workplace might survey such actions or attempt to control them, ultimately, norms and cultures are negotiated. Such agency, of both organizations and workers, is described in the strategies and tactics of de Certeau and Feenberg’s margin of maneuver. Table 1.1 earlier is a taxonomy of the ideas about power presented in this dissertation.

Procedures

The following questions guided my research and analysis:

- How do female practitioners define the field and the work they do as technical and professional communicators?
- What elements of the workplace are relevant to the experience of women as practitioners?
- How do women enact change on the workplace via genres, practices, tools, and texts?
- What are the constraints and affordances of their rhetorical situations (Grant-Davie, 1997) as female workers?
- In what ways are female practitioners engaged in their own problem solving?

Such questions allowed for themes to emerge about the ways in which female practitioners experienced their work and their workplaces. The questions allowed me both to focus on identifying the sites of conflict for women and to highlight the ways in which these women acted against such conflict.

The data is derived from qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which are “conducted with a specific interview guide—a list of written questions ... to cover within a particular interview ... [This agenda] is not tightly controlled and there is room left for
spontaneity on the part of the researcher and interviewee” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp. 115-116). The interviews, of 39 female TPC practitioners, led to frank discussions of workplace experiences, and women often shared circumstances that they had previously written off as unusual or not worth sharing with managers or human resource (HR) representatives or departments. Interviews began with a brief written questionnaire about demographic information, including age, education level, job title, location, marital status, household income, and subfield of TPC. This short questionnaire allowed me to gather such data from participants quickly in order to focus on interview questions. The questionnaire and interview questions I used are located in the appendix.

My data collection through semi-structured interviews was based on the feminist idea that women’s experiences are best understood through their own voices. Wylie (2004) described this phenomenon through what she called inversion thesis, which explains that those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience. (p. 339)

Gender is a viewpoint from which people gain different knowledge than those who claim power. Gender is a site of marginalization and oppression, therefore women in the workplace have experiential knowledge that speaks to structures of domination within the workplace. As Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) found in their research of women’s voices and ways of knowing, “[W]omen often feel unheard even when they believe that they have something important to say” (p. 5). Women’s knowledge is often dismissed or ignored because of the scant value cultural and societal structures place on women’s voices (Belenky et al., 1986; Sauer, 1993). Yet such voices can and should be most useful when it
comes to understanding power structures in a workplace; we can best begin to discover which forces are at play by interviewing those who are subject to such structures. The nature of such structures is best revealed when interrogated. Semi-structured interviews as a data-collection method allows for gaps in which women’s expertise and voices can fill and drive the discussion.

Participants for interviews were solicited in various U.S. locations; respondents lived and worked in Washington state, Washington, D.C., California, Texas, Utah, Florida, Virginia, Maryland, Arizona, Massachusetts, Illinois, Maryland, Idaho, and Colorado. I shared a call for participants widely on social media, including on Twitter, Wordpress, and Facebook and on TPC listservs (the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, and TechWhirl). Such calls were shared by those who participated or who were interested in the research, and subsequently I had many women who wanted to participate contacting me through email and social media. I also used snowball sampling to find additional interviewees. They varied in age, class, industry, organization, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and marital/family status. I conducted 31 of the interviews by phone, with seven of them conducted face-to-face because of geographic proximity and one conducted via email due to hearing impairment.

After conducting interviews, I targeted three participants for observation, based on themes that emerged from early analysis of the interview data and those whose work and life experiences might give the most insight to the tensions occurring within organizations. I targeted for observations one woman whose work as a technical and professional communicator fit the typical description of that job (she worked for a large e-learning
company that produced web genres with instructions and curricula typical of classic TPC
genres); one woman who worked in the field for a small nonprofit organization and whose
work was primarily concerned with advocacy and social justice; and one participant who had
experience with a large technology company in TPC, but had used her skills to work extra-
institutionally as a podcaster of technical information in order to stay home with her
children. I spent 1 to 2 days with each of these three women, observing and shadowing their
work. I spent approximately 10 hours over 2 days with one participant, 7 hours on 1 day
with another participant, and 8 hours over 2 days with the final participant targeted for
observation.

Each woman’s engagement with the workplace varied, but in general, I arrived at
their workplace at a time they chose and spent the day shadowing and watching them work.
The observations involved me sitting quietly beside them while they engaged in work,
obscuring their interactions with others, taking notes on genres I observed, and ultimately
asking clarification questions about all of these factors. I was particularly interested in how
they engaged in forms of TPC, how they shared those forms and genres with coworkers,
how their interactions with others affected their work, how they used technology to perform
work, and how their family lives affected their work. I sometimes recorded parts of the
observations, depending on the situation. For example, during one observation, the
practitioner met with a subordinate employee regarding some personal issues, so I did not
record the interaction, but I did take into account the way in which the practitioner engaged
with and handled the situation. At the end of each observation, I conducted an informal
open-ended interview about what I had seen and heard during the observation. They
clarified statements, documents, actions, and policies for me, and I asked them about their own interpretations of what I had seen and heard, reviewing my own notes.

**Analysis**

Interview and observation data was analyzed through feminist content analysis, which focuses on description rather than explanation, recognizes that themes are present in the artifacts independent of the research methodology, and aims to maintain authenticity inherent in data (Leavy, 2000). Leavy (2000) explained that feminist content analysis and grounded theory support each other, as “as the distinctive properties of the cultural products are preserved” (p. 6). Portewig (2011) explained grounded theory as “a methodological approach adopted from sociology .... [which] focuses on generating a theory from data rather than verifying theory” (p. 150). I transcribed all interviews and observations, looking for themes and categories as I engaged with the data. I also asked and developed questions about the data while coding. My analysis resulted in research notes made in the margins (both handwritten and electronic) on the transcribed interviews, with emerging themes represented in this project. I used words and themes from the text of the interviews to code categories. Leavy (2007) wrote, “This kind of approach produces a thematic analysis with rich descriptive data that can be used to generate theory” (p. 228). After memoing and coding, I pulled data from the interviews into new documents based on category. From those coded documents, I reread and memoed and coded again, tightening themes and ultimately theorizing about the process of women’s experiences in the workplace and how such tensions affected organizations.

Tables 1.8 to 1.12 elucidate the coding categories for each chapter.
Table 1.8

*Chapter 2 Coding Categories: Misconceptions and Feminizations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncompensated Work/Administrative Work</td>
<td>Data from interviews focused on secretarial work, extra work beyond TPC, or emotional labor</td>
<td>“The old days the women were the secretaries ... so there is a tendency ... to turn a tech writer into something like that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconceptions about Abilities</td>
<td>Data from interviews that describes being treated as less capable</td>
<td>“I told them which was the front and they wouldn’t believe me, so I got the engineer and said, ‘I’m sorry but you’ve got to go down there. I’m just a girl, and I don’t know my foot from a hole in the ground.’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Undervalued</td>
<td>Interview data that describes the ways in which the women have not felt valued in the workplace</td>
<td>“I don’t get included in very many meetings simply because I don’t think they know what I do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconceptions about the field of TPC</td>
<td>Interview data that details how women have had to explain TPC to organizations and coworkers</td>
<td>“A lot of people think that I only change the format of the document.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.9

*Chapter 3 Coding Categories: Entering a System of Power*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchies</td>
<td>Data from interviews focused on the ways in which women faced difficulties because of a hierarchy, especially those that were male-dominated</td>
<td>“I was shocked to find out that I wasn’t in the bonus program when I know that many of the developers are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPC as Last in the Structure</td>
<td>Interview data that describes the work problems associated with deadlines and TPC work occurring last in the process</td>
<td>“There tends to be this crunch at the end of a cycle. We try to get started as early as possible but we’re toward the end of the food chain.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition and Gatekeeping with other women</td>
<td>Interview data that reveals conflict or tension with other women in the workplace</td>
<td>“I’ve had fantastic relationships with females. I’ve had disastrous relationships with females.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Undervalued</td>
<td>Interview data that describes the ways in which the women have not felt valued in the workplace</td>
<td>“I don’t get included in very many meetings simply because I don’t think they know what I do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism and Harassment</td>
<td>Interview data that details experiences with sexual harassment and other sexist practices</td>
<td>“He leaned really close to me and whispered, ‘You look really nice.’ And I almost threw up. That was creepy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems unique to TPC</td>
<td>Interview data that identified sites of conflict that were unique to TPC as a profession</td>
<td>“The work that I’m doing now is feast or famine. The stress that I experience is large quantities of work due in short periods of time.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Problems Unique to Mothers

Interview data that focuses on combining work with motherhood

“It’s hard to have a sick child. And I would beg to work from home. It’s hard to be active in your child’s school life.”

Table 1.10

Chapter 4 Coding Categories: Claiming Authority and Agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proving and Claiming Value</td>
<td>Interview data that highlighted the efforts of women to prove their value to an organization</td>
<td>“There’s nobody who’s going to advocate for you except for you, so I think in that way you have to make yourself valued.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting Hierarchy and Toxic Workplace Cultures</td>
<td>Interview data that reveals the efforts of women to change workplace culture or escape particular types of workplace cultures</td>
<td>“I’m able to be direct sometimes back with him ... I try to ... be assertive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Room for Women’s biology (specifically pregnancy)</td>
<td>Interview data in which women have resisted, changed, or faced company policies concerning maternity</td>
<td>“Before I told anyone, I wrote a four-page memo detailing what my responsibilities are and who would take care of them while I was on leave and what the expectations were for my involvement.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving in Documentation and Team Work</td>
<td>Interview data that describes the ways in which the women have solved TPC problems</td>
<td>“Maybe we should be putting something on people’s iPhones or maybe with each of our systems we should give away an Ipad that has all [of] our technical information on it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to the Traditional Workplace</td>
<td>Interview data about women who have found ways to work from home or to freelance</td>
<td>“I get to work from home remotely. I get to be the carpool mom. I get to go pick the kids up if they’re sick. I can take the kids to the dental visits. I work part time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Supporting Each Other</td>
<td>Interview data that highlighted the ways women have supported each other in the workplace</td>
<td>“[A]ll through my career no matter what I was working on, I make it my business to help other women as best I could.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting Sexism and Harassment</td>
<td>Interview data that focuses on how women have dealt with sexism and gender harassment in productive ways</td>
<td>“I’m married to somebody who is bigger than you, uglier than you, stronger than you, and a whole hell of a lot meaner than you, and if you ever touch me again, I will tell him and you will die.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling Emotions</td>
<td>Interview data that highlights how women have productively integrated or dealt with emotions at work</td>
<td>“[I]f I’m feeling somewhere in the downward spiral, I try and work on that, and I think more uplifting thoughts, and I hung a prayer on my wall.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.11

*Chapter 5 Coding Categories: Advocacy and Activism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tactical Communication</strong></td>
<td>Interview data that elucidates extra-institutional work as a form of changing policies or procedures for the good of many</td>
<td>“I talk regularly with my immediate supervisor and the managers up from there about problems that I see, especially gender based problems, and I try to educate them about power differentials in the workplace.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic Communication</strong></td>
<td>Interview data that reveals the efforts of organizations or individuals to communicate officially, often to maintain the status quo</td>
<td>“You have to think about women because they are, by and large, the ones utilizing those programs, but you can’t assume that everybody who’s going to be using those programs are going to be single moms.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other forms of Advocacy and Social Activism (not part of case studies)</strong></td>
<td>Interview data that highlighted ways that women have changed policy officially in their workplaces or advocated for an underrepresented group</td>
<td>“I saw a Ph.D. cancer researcher [who] can’t get shared information because some developer rolled their eyes about it. I’m like, ‘Seriously?’”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1.12

*Chapter 6 Coding Categories: Innovating*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Interview data that highlighted the professionalism apparent outside of the traditional workplace</td>
<td>“I think it’s really crass to listen to someone swearing and it’s when you have it recorded.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translating and Teaching Users</td>
<td>Interview data that highlighted the ways in which such work can be accomplished outside of a traditional workplace</td>
<td>“Or you can have it zipped from the top to your belly button if you want to, or perhaps if you have a growing midsection, which is useful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation and Usability</td>
<td>Interview data that highlights how such work is accomplished outside of a traditional workplace</td>
<td>“We have a few different notebooks. [They] just have the outline of what we do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Best Practices and Techniques</td>
<td>Interview data that highlights how such work is accomplished outside of a traditional workplace</td>
<td>“I also think doing it on a baby sweater is a good idea because undoing sewing on knitting is not a big deal if you’re not using a sewing machine.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Involvement and Social Responsibility</td>
<td>Interview data that highlights how such work is accomplished outside of a traditional workplace</td>
<td>“Well, you can knit a preemie hat in an afternoon, in an hour or two. And our local hospitals are always happy to have hand-knit nice things for the babies.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Awareness</td>
<td>Interview data that highlights how such work is accomplished outside of a traditional workplace</td>
<td>“If you’re listening to a podcast it’s very likely that you’re out walking, or during your commute, or while you’re scrubbing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
your kitchen. It’s a woman’s thing, and you don’t want to stop and take notes.”

| Familiarity and Authority | Interview data that highlights how such work is accomplished outside of a traditional workplace | “Not everyone is outgoing and not talking to new people, but my advice is to just pretend.” |

**Scholars Define the Field**

In the 1980s, the field of TPC took a humanistic turn (Miller, 1979), rejecting positivism and focusing more on the social and political aspects of the field, its research, and its pedagogy. This turn led to significant changes and modified the way we defined TPC. The characteristics of TPC, while previously aligned with scientific thought and technology (Dobrin, 1983), have come to be focused in practice. This includes social and political practice (Sullivan, 1990; Miller, 1989), rhetoric (Rutter, 1991), and context, which Dobrin (1983) described as including “the practice of the groups which the writer is writing to, writing for, and writing from, as well as the practices of the group in which the writer has located himself or herself” (p. 248). Of this concern with practice, Miller (1989) said, “that practice creates both knowledge and value and that the value created comprehends the good of the community in which the practice has a history” (p. 69).

While defining TPC is challenging, we see a framework for understanding it through the attempts of Sullivan (1990), Rutter (1991), Dobrin (1983), and Miller (1989) at defining it with a humanistic bent. Miller (1979) is credited with making the seminal argument for this change. She recognized that positivist views of science dominated the field of TPC, and
advocated that we view science as related to rhetoric and therefore recognize the humanistic qualities of technical writing (p. 16). She argued that “[g]ood technical writing becomes, rather than the revelation of absolute reality, a persuasive version of experience ... If we pretend for a minute that technical writing is objective, we have passed off a particular political ideology as privileged truth” (p. 21). Ultimately, she prompted the field to reconceptualize its definitions and to realize that rhetoric and writing occurs within communities, a key idea for understanding technical writing as humanistic (pp. 21-22).

Allen (2004) similarly explored TPC through practice, noting that one technical-publications competition disqualified a cookbook. She wrote, “I, for one, believe cookbooks are technical writing—regardless of whether they mention microwaves or nutrition and regardless of whether their authors get paid for the work. Would my volunteering to write—without pay—a software manual for a corporation disqualify the work as technical writing?” (p. 68). From this stance, she outlined the value in defining TPC, the previous definitions of it, the problems with defining it, and the disadvantages of defining it. She argued that “it seems pretty clear that any definition of technical writing should focus on what the writing does and not on what the writing is about ... All writing about technology, after all, is certainly not technical writing” (p. 71). In looking at the specific characteristics of technical writing, she mentioned “style (clarity, accuracy, conciseness, objectivity) and purpose (to inform or to persuade)” (p. 71). She also reminded us “that, in general, most technical writers write to communicate important information to readers who need this information” (p. 73). We must acknowledge that TPC is not always associated with the public workplace. Durack (1997) established that the workplace of the home is a site of prolific, although unacknowledged, technical writing. She argued that definitions in the field often used biased
language, especially historically. She argued that these definitions are problematic because of what we consider to be technological and “where we understand the workplace to be” (emphasis in original, p. 250).

**Practitioners Define the Field**

Consequently, my research questions are based on the ways women engage in TPC through organizations and workplaces. How do today’s female practitioners define the field and the work they do as technical and professional communicators? Do they see it as highly feminized and in need of restructuring, or do they find their work empowering and useful? How do women focus on TPC within the workplace in defining themselves as practitioners? How do they define themselves and their work?

Because the premise of this dissertation is that women’s voices best define their own experiences, I use participants’ voices to define additionally the practice of TPC. Based on the interview data, a common theme is that practitioners are translators of information. Data analysis revealed that practitioners see themselves as occupying an important and intermediary position between the technical world and ordinary users. Lois described it as “translating engineer and developer talk into everyday person conversation.” She was concerned with simplifying abstract concepts and making sure those are accessible to those who need it. Similarly, Jane described using the phrase “speaker to programmers” to describe her work. Geraldine had a name for the language she translates: “Engineerese.” Maya explained that this translation is necessary for topics that are not “widely understood in a way that’s clear to other people.”
However, users are just as important to practitioners. Gloria described her job as “taking any sort of technology and getting the user or the people who need to know the information to understand it.” For Jennifer, this audience focus, on training employees of retail brands, consists of using a lot of existing materials from our brands to create a brand-new e-learning experience ... we’re repurposing [and] we’re making like a little quarter turn to focus it on the retail audience and we’re also using a lot of e-learning techniques to make sure that information is really sticky that its really precise and short and interesting, and it’s need-to-know information not nice-to-know information.

Similarly, Alice explained, “Most of the time the initial readers of the documents when the engineers sends them out aren’t a technical person, most of the time it’s a person who is going to approve funding, so these technical documents need to be readable, understandable, by a semi-lay person all the way up to a person who’s very technical.”

This communication to users is often described as a form of teaching. Edith explained “the objective [is] teaching people to be critical consumers ... you need to make it more comprehensible so it has kind of a specific meaning for [users].” Her users happen to be politicians, but we know that users come from all backgrounds and industries. Louisa noted the importance of teaching people, and that “you have to be able to put yourself in the place of somebody who’s never seen it before but knows what it’s supposed to be accomplishing.” She understands that her users are important and that they do have some knowledge, but she sees herself as a teacher in taking them to the next level.

Corrie and Laurel’s definitions are the exigence for the many industries examined and practitioners interviewed for this study. Corrie explained that TPC is “anything that helps people get the technical information they need to do their job or perform a task.” Laurel defined it as “organizing information and knowledge into content that is accessible to
my audience.” All of the women I interviewed engaged in some form of documentation from various industries, including software development, cabinet manufacturing, healthcare equipment and technologies, oil and gas, knitting, nonprofit work, public policy, scientific research, engineering, e-learning, retail, and others. No matter the industry, these women often described themselves as generalists. They must learn a little bit about everything, depending on their current position and current field. Jhumpa at times has had to understand “what a Ph.D. in geophysics wanted to accomplish,” and Catherine noted that she does “a little bit of everything.” They realize that the position they occupy requires trust, as Lucy noted, and being able to translate, teach, and reach users, they must be trusted by experts and users.

**Tracing the Female Practitioner Experience**

This introduction has defined TPC practice and situated women’s workplace experiences to recognize how women in the TPC workplace enter a system of power and ultimately disrupt it, thereby creating tension in the workplace. While female practitioners are thoughtful, insightful, and vital to the companies for which they work, their work is often undervalued and they must find ways to improve their situations and prove themselves to colleagues. I have used critical theory and feminist theory and research methods to outline how I will investigate the way women in TPC negotiate complex, powerful, networked, and male-dominated systems at work. A negotiation is embodied in the work of women like Pearl, who saw the devaluation of her team’s documentation work and created a PowerPoint presentation for managers from other teams (Chapter 4). Negotiation may also include Flannery’s work within a traditional workplace and her decision to freelance in order to
control her schedule and be more involved in her children’s lives (Chapter 4). While this chapter provides a broad overview of how workplaces may attempt to discipline or marginalize women, the following chapters will examine the problem in detail.

Chapter 2 examines the feminization of TPC as a field and highlights the misconceptions many have about the work that practitioners do. TPC has historically struggled to gain respect as a field, and the women I interviewed described their frustrations with the misunderstandings and devaluation of the field as a whole. They realize their work has the power to shape and communicate culture, but find resistance to the idea that such work is meaningful or necessary. Women in TPC are constantly attempting to prove professionalism, resist categorization as administrative, and demonstrate the complexity of TPC.

Women enter unfamiliar systems of power when entering a workplace. Chapter 3 identifies the ways in which power in organizations exerts itself over women, including through exclusion and marginalization, control and discipline over the body (especially the female body), the expectation of freedom (from home and family), and the competition of women with each other. Participant experiences reveal that people in positions of power defend the notion of a traditional workplace when presented with gender and biology in the workplace. The discipline and docility of women’s bodies in the workplace reveal the many crises experienced within organizations and workplaces because of power struggles related to gender.

Chapter 4 identifies the ways in which women have responded with authority and agency to the exertion of power through organizations. Women have found ways to prove and claim value within organizations, solve documentation problems in unique and
innovative ways, claim space for pregnancy and breastfeeding, balance work and family life, support and mentor other women, resist sexism and sexual harassment, and manage emotions. They do so through interactional autonomy and face the difficulties of the workplace squarely, maneuvering around systems and crises to create beneficial situations and organizations.

Such experiences with power structures and discipline may lead women to become advocates for others, either within their workplaces, or in the larger community. Social justice issues and advocacy are usually informed by personal experience, and Chapter 5 focuses on the case studies of two women who draw from personal experiences to advocate for others. The practitioners I highlight use both tactical (unofficial) and strategic (official) communication to achieve advocacy and social justice goals for marginalized groups within their contexts. They employ TPC expertise to advocate for others, and they engage in forms of communication to counter the messages received from powerful hierarchies.

Chapter 6 examines innovations to TPC and the workplace by specifically focusing on two women who produce and record a knitting podcast from the workplace of the home. They demonstrate the ways in which new media technologies can be used to perform TPC work, and that the difficulties of the traditional workplace can be managed by creating new workplaces. Women may leave or maneuver outside of the system in order to reterritorialize the workplace.
CHAPTER 2

ARTICULATING VALUE AMID MISCONCEPTIONS AND FEMINIZATIONS

Knowledge Work and All-Edge Adhocracies

Johnson-Eilola (1996) warned, “If technical communicators do not take action to change their current situation, they will find their work increasingly contingent, devalued, outsourced, and automated” (p. 262). Technical and professional communication (TPC) has often been characterized as a “helping” field, one that provides a service to other fields and one that is highly feminized. Malone (2010) referred to the reputation of the field historically as a service ghetto, one for female engineers, technologists, and scientists (p. 146). As Kynell (1999) pointed out, “the long-standing association between the feminine and writing has been well documented” (p. 92).

In addition to the perceived and stereotypical femininity of TPC and related fields, TPC university courses are often considered “service” courses, ones “looked down upon by colleagues” (p. 93). A faculty member in 1916 called these courses “the scullery maid of our engineering college household” (p. 93). Connecting such courses to “the female figure of relative low status was not unintentional,” Kynell noted (p. 93). In the profession’s history, we know that “new type-writing technology ... provided an opportunity for women to train as typists and enter the workforce without displacing men” (Longo, 2000, p. 111). This disciplining factor created workers that would be suited to TPC.

While these references are historical, current workplaces and practitioners face such stereotyping. Johnson-Eilola (1996) has argued for positioning the discipline as postindustrial by situating work as symbolic-analytic, rather than “[f]ocusing primarily on
teaching skills[,] [which] places technical communication in a relatively powerless position” (p. 247). Moving away from this characterization is a concern for scholars and practitioners. Johnson-Eilola, Selber, and Selfe (1999) suggested, “The field is slowly beginning to rearticulate its value away from service and support roles toward more meaningful and central work, and technology, if understood and used in rhetorically sophisticated ways, can help the field accomplish this rearticulation” (p. 207). Through the stereotypes in this chapter, we see cracks for practitioners to rearticulate their work within their specific contexts.

Just as “[t]here is no one way to be a woman,” there may be no one way to be a TPC practitioner (Snyder, 2008, p. 185). We can learn from third-wave feminists a multiperspectival view of the field, one that accepts “multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” (p. 175). We can “embrace a multiplicity of identities, accept the messiness of lived contradiction, and eschew a unifying agenda” (p. 177). Individually, people perform multiple identities, and we know that gender is one of these performances. Butler (1988) explained, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts [proceed]; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (emphasis in original, p. 519). Based on these ideas, we can emphasize inclusiveness and a nonjudgmental approach “that refuses to police the boundaries” of what it means to be a gendered practitioner or scholar of TPC (pp. 175-176). Gergen (2007) suggested that polyvocality is “the use of multiple genres of self-representation” (p. 120). It is a way of “layering our voices” and making “a far more powerful case” (p. 124). Such layering, performing, polyvocality, and multiplicity allows us to see TPC as a vibrant field that crosses disciplines and connects knowledge work.
However, my data, based on 39 qualitative interviews with female practitioners, shows that the field still has work left to accomplish in terms of proving our value and articulating itself in rhetorically sophisticated ways. A lack of authority permeates the very nature of the work that practitioners do. Because TPC is often considered a “helping” field, one that provides a “service” for other, “more important” fields, practitioners may not see upward mobility. Participant Dorothy explained to me, “I see people come in after me and move up the ladder, because there is a ladder. But I don’t have anywhere to go. There are no other tech writer jobs at my company except for my supervisor’s job.” This echoes the findings of Halle’s ethnography of chemical workers, in which he learned that “To the male workers, even women with paid employment, including the clerical and office workers in the men’s own plant, [women] were not seen as ‘working’” (in Ortner, 2006, p. 29).

The myth is that TPC work is mostly expendable, perhaps because it is a luxury, and that myth continues to thrive in the organizations for which my participants work. Participants highlighted several of the misconceptions and mischaracterizations of their work, including the myth that TPC work is cosmetic and therefore unskilled and comparable to the work of administrative assistants. However, women are moving the workplace forward despite misconceptions. They face a host of pressures, but these conflicts are opportunities to prove value and change misconceptions. While frustrated, these women are dedicated to proving that their jobs are invaluable to the organizations and fields in which they work. TPC crosses boundaries and is therefore networked in a way that no other profession currently is. TPC is poised to be the job of the 21st century, because it resists siloing, builds teams and relationships, promotes human-to-human and human-to-object
interaction. The pressures facing these women demonstrates that TPC is changing and ready
to face the future.

The type of work that TPC practitioners do is connected to what Spinuzzi (2015) defined as all-edge adhocracies. This compilation is a result of the metamorphosis of the workplace from bureaucracy to adhocracy. All-edge adhocracies are agile and reliant on “always-on, all-channel connections among specialists in open networks” (p. 28). Knowledge work is central to this new way of organizing workplaces:

Knowledge work is, simply put, work that involves thinking about, analyzing, and communicating things rather than growing or manufacturing things. It includes occupations such as graphic design, web development, and copywriting. It involves specialist work, it tends to be project oriented, and its products tend to be symbolic (designs, working websites, text) and thus electronically transportable, circulable through information and communication technologies. (p. 60)

In other words, TPC is knowledge work, and what it contributes to organizations is invaluable within a new economy that has moved away from bureaucracies and toward adhocracies. While particular organizations may not understand the value of TPC, the economy does, and practitioners are poised to continue to dominate in the skills necessary for networking across and in-between field and organizations.

**Women as Practitioners**

Including women’s experiences with technologies and workplaces that are not necessarily “professional” or associated with men’s ways of knowing is not a feminizing of the field. Instead, it is recognizing that women have been at the forefront of all-edge adhocracy work, which relies on freelancers and understands that “the nature of employment contracts is changing from relational to transactional contracting” (Spinuzzi,
Women have been pushing for this kind of work over the last several decades, as working part-time, remotely, or as freelancers is a common solution to work-life balance problems.

The challenges facing female practitioners are routinely included in research about TPC without qualification of their femaleness. Giammona (2004) surveyed and interviewed practitioners in order to understand TPC practitioners in the workplace. She found, “people drawn to this field are often introverted, smart, artistic, creative, perfectionistic, rigid, and fascinated with details of writing and technology” (p. 351). None of these characteristics are solely masculine or feminine. From the data gathered in interviews, a participant argued that TPC practitioners “have to do it all,” such as writing, editing, visual design, user experience design, online publishing, web page development and languages, interactions with users, networking, interviewing, translating, and distributing, just to name a few (qtd. in Giammona, 2004, p. 358). This language closely resembles the language used to describe women’s lives as mothers and workers (Slaughter, 2012). Such imagery highlights the complicated and messy nature of contemporary life for both men and women.

Employers often misuse practitioners or underappreciate them, according to Hart and Conklin (2011). They suggested empowering the workforce through “effective relationships, clear communication, a spirit of initiative, and a willingness to engage in respectful conflict” (p. 114). They saw two-way communication as important in work environments (p. 115). Their findings show that TPC practitioners spend a lot of time working in teams, and I suggest that their characterization of communication (both intercultural and cross-gender) might help to overcome some of the lingering perceptions of “feminization.”
Workplace studies of women’s experiences are necessary to countering misconceptions. In an ethnography of Wall Street, Ho (2009) examined the problem of perception for women who must overcome service and domestic stereotypes, an issue pervasive in TPC as a discipline. In Ho’s study, women avoided taking trays of food to colleagues or helping an IT person with computer cords. They also avoided talking or associating with the support and administrative staff. Ho noted that if “your peers or bosses witness you performing a ‘support’ role, they will believe that you do not take your own time seriously and might assume that you are willing to be taken advantage of and do ‘scut work’” (p. 119). This is somewhat counter-intuitive because of meritocracy, but for women, “hard work, instead of being associated with upward mobility, is reduced to, as well as conflated with, grunt work” (p. 120). These women’s experiences give insight into the female experience in the workplace, but also give dimension to TPC’s own problem with perception as a “service” or “helping” field.

**Viewing Misconceptions as Strengths**

The above views, however, are shallow based on the treatment of TPC within bureaucracies, which rely on a division of labor, narrow specializations, hierarchy, and control (Spinuzzi, 2015, p. 22). Bureaucracies are “not so good for innovation and adaptation” (p. 23). When we look at TPC in this atmosphere of the traditional workplace, it is easy to view it as cosmetic, superfluous, reducible, menial, incapable, and service-oriented because it is in a supportive role for other fields and types of work: science, engineering, computer programming, and so forth. However, when we broaden our scope and definition of the workplace to include nontraditional workplaces like the home, the free-lancer’s space,
and the contractor’s workspace—these in-between adhocracy spaces—TPC becomes less service-oriented and more about knowledge work. When characterizing TPC, looking at the fringes along with traditional workplaces gives us a broader sense of how workers are exploding TPC work, participating in knowledge work, and networking beyond the confines of bureaucracies. (A specific case study of innovative work will be examined in detail in Chapter 6.)

This section reports what participants said about the feminization and misconceptions of the field, which highlight the multiplicity and complex nature of knowledge work. I specifically asked all 39 participants about the misconceptions of TPC and their work. Nearly every woman had an immediate answer to that question, and other misconceptions and feminizations emerged throughout the stories they told in the interviews. Overall, TPC is misconceived as cosmetic, secretarial, unarticulated across disciplines, unnecessary, invisible, and unquantifiable, which means such workers often feel expendable. However, they know and can articulate the value of their work, meaning they are on the edge of moving toward more autonomy and participation in networked and horizontal workspaces.

**Cosmetic**

A common misconception is that TPC work is cosmetic, and not in fact technical or professional at all. Jodi shared, “One of my co-workers was once told to make the documentation look pretty.” Alice experienced this on a daily basis, with engineers trying to avoid her and her coworkers and assuming that she “only change[s] the format of the document.” Catherine laughed about this misconception, and described it as “the make-it-
pretty philosophy, and we do so much more than that, but that’s still the way it’s seen by a lot of people.” This leads to the belief that practitioners are therefore not skilled. Maya explained, “I think that people sort of feel like as long as you have a checklist, anyone can run spell check, anyone can make sure things are capitalized.” Because of these misconceptions, practitioners get devalued or lumped in with other, less skilled work.

**Secretarial**

TPC may be conflated with other forms of feminized work, meaning that it is often considered to be administrative and secretarial. Corrie, an experienced technical writer, explained that a new position at her company was described as an administrative assistant with 60 percent technical writing. They hired a woman for the job, and “so far she hasn’t done any tech writing because they keep giving her other tasks to do that are more admin oriented,” despite the fact that the woman who got the job is trained as a technical writer and has the title “Technical Writer.” Corrie sees a blatant connection to writing and secretarial work that creates this misconception:

[In] the old days, the women were the secretaries and they’d take the [notes], they’d do the typing, they’d make letters, they’d take short hand, ... so there is a tendency ... to try to turn ... a tech writer into something like that.

The comparison of technical writers to administrative assistants is common, which makes it hard for many women to feel they are valued or taken seriously within their organizations, especially if they are a lone writer or working in an industry that is not accustomed to employing the varied skills of a TPC practitioner. Hiring a TPC practitioner is a luxury, and when companies become successful enough to do so, they may not completely or immediately recognize the added value.
Conversely, women might see opportunity in entering a company in administrative work that could lead to a promotion that involves TPC. I experienced this (detailed in the introduction), as did Edna: “When I graduated college with a fairly useless B.A. in English, I had taken professional typing in high school, business typing ... I had a brain in my head, and I could type 60 words a minute so I got several different jobs as administrative assistant.”

On the flipside, Jean explained, “There are companies that will take secretarial people or somebody like that and just turn them into a writer with no training or anything.” There is a conflation of what women in TPC do with what less skilled workers do as administrative assistants and receptionists.

Of this problem, Anne argued:

I don’t see a lot of guys who get tech comm degrees come into tech comm as an admin assistant. I’ve heard that story from women more than once: that that’s how they get into tech comm ... [M]y husband is pretty much in tech comm. He was in the Navy, he taught on nuclear technology, and then he went out into the real world ... He would never be an admin assistant ... [A]nd then the most of the support staff was all female, and when they needed someone to cover the receptionist for lunch for answering the phones, that would fall to us, always. The guys never had to answer it.

Women may enter the field by first doing administrative work, but they may also continue to experience being treated as secretaries once they move up into TPC positions. Women in TPC tend to be treated as support staff, while men get more professional respect, according to the experiences of the participants in this study. However, TPC workers are skilled enough to handle multiple roles and varied tasks/documents. Employers may entrust TPC workers with broad organizational and writing tasks as a show of confidence.

Other women described doing work that was uncompensated or not part of their job description, but often characterized it as a way of helping out where they can and pitching in
because they are salaried employees and, according to Emmeline, it “falls a little bit under the umbrella of professionalism.” The practitioners I interviewed have performed such work for others, including assembling paper copies, answering phones, taking meeting minutes/notes, shipping packages, creating posters, planning holiday parties, giving emotional support to coworkers, cutting party cakes, taking email dictations, hunting down missing office supplies, entering data, organizing mail, sorting, scanning, and collating, to name a few. While some women told of these tasks in annoyance, especially if they were regularly asked to serve food, other participants characterized themselves as willing and able to help when and where needed. TPC practitioners have skills across disciplines that organizations often want to utilize and harness.

However, some practitioners may perpetuate the mere scribe characterization by acting as administrative assistants or proofreading, instead of engaging in the complex activities and networks of TPC. Rebecca described: “[S]o basically the scientists write up the report and then I’ll edit it for their grammar, for making sure it makes sense and then I’ll format all their tables and data and stuff like that.” Iris said, “I really like grammar and making things clear and concise and just like perfectly laid out so it’s understandable, so professional writing was kind of perfect for me.” TPC professionals often reject such simplistic descriptions because it downplays the complexity of the work and the skill it takes to perform. Because TPC is poised to be one of the most important jobs in all-edge adhocracies, practitioners must engage in complex documentation, networking, and collaborative tasks.
Unarticulated

TPC work may be confused with administrative work because coworkers and managers may not understand what the field contributes. Jhumpa shared,

[Un]educated managers [are] probably my biggest stress. I've just in early November got transferred under the one of the engineering managers, and she has absolutely no idea what a documentation person does. As far as she's concerned, the user guide just describes the software. She doesn't comprehend that no, it tells the user how to do the job they want to do using this software. So every time I change managers, pretty much I have to reeducate them as to exactly what we do, and I relate that really to the fact that you know our degree has been around for a while but somehow we have not generally communicated our value and exactly what we do over the whole world. We've only done it person to person for each manager we've worked for, and it hasn't spread.

She makes an important point, that perhaps proving value is something for which we, as a discipline, are responsible. While efforts have certain been made toward this (Redish, 1995), Jhumpa also noted that much of this work is done at a personal level. She sees a need to educate managers and colleagues, but she questioned whether or not doing so in the workplace in a singular situation is the right way to go about articulating the contributions of TPC.

Power differentiations are not often changed through the efforts of one person communicating with another, although such efforts are important and necessary. Power changes might need to occur at a different level, such as in the academy, where colleges within a university can communicate with each other and perhaps encourage students to work with each other across disciplines and recognize what each field has to offer. Part of the problem may be silo-ing.
Unnecessary and Invisible

TPC work has been characterized as unnecessary. Shirley has heard the misconception “that it’s not useful.” Colleagues may engage with the user guides or online help as much as customers do, but they might also think that Shirley’s hand in creating that documentation was unnecessary, and therefore she is adjunct to the real work of the company and product. She explained that this is frustrating because, “I sit in sales now, and I can hear them talking about my work every single day, that’s part of how they sell the product ... I know they use it.” She sees them using the documentation, but she has also heard that what she does is unnecessary. There is room there for her to prove her value and give voice to what she is witnessing. Such misunderstandings provide opportunities for TPC workers to claim successes and draw attention to the usefulness of their documentation. When practitioners see their products being used, they can make others aware of it. Because TPC is knowledge work, it can be invisible. Willa said, “I also run into some who say, ‘We have people who write stuff? That’s not automatically generated?’” Her colleagues did not realize that she existed, as work can easily become siloed and insular within bureaucracies. TPC practitioners are positioned to address this problem in organizations because their work is about making connections and building relationships.

Unquantifiable

Documentation specialists may be perceived as not quantitatively valuable, because they do not necessarily earn money for companies. Jennifer said,

[W]e’re a cost center for the company, and while that is technically true, it annoys me to no end. The idea that we cost the company money in salary [and] that we don’t make the company money because we’re not selling things. So the sales department, they get to go on all these fabulous retreats and just today they were up at [ski resort]
all day skiing on the company dime just having a blast, and ... our department has never had a department retreat .... We don’t have that same luxury. I think it is because we are a cost center, but in my opinion we make the product. Sure the sales guys might sell the product and have the contracts come in and be actually producing revenue for the company, but without us, there would be no product.

She claims the elevated position of TPC work in her organization. Companies are driven by profit motives, and if writers cannot quantify their work, they occupy a precarious position, one that is often seen as adjunct to or unnecessary for the “real” work of the company. Pearl noted, “I try to explain, you know, that it’s more than just writing a paragraph because if you added a new feature, you know, there’s a lot of other things involved in our jobs.” While these women might not directly be making money for their organizations, they are doing much to improve the products and make those products accessible to clients, customers, and users. Their work affects many stakeholders and there is a need for TPC to claim this authority as part of the organizational process.

However, this devaluation is inevitable as workplaces have a distinct connection to management and profit. Longo (2000) explained, “This linking of knowledge to money through a management technology works to ensure that technical writing students conform to behaviors and attitudes resulting in efficiency and productivity within organizations that have evolved from the application of time management and assembly-line models of production” (pp. 74-75). Practitioners in TPC continue to be part of that assembly line of production within traditional organizations, and as Chapter 3 will discuss, they are usually the last in that line. (However, Chapter 4 will examine the ways in which women have changed their relationships with traditional organizations.) TPC work is not linked to money or management, and consequently, practitioners often find themselves devalued. They are part of bureaucracies that value profit and efficiency, and women entering this system in the
field of TPC must learn to navigate it on several levels. In addition, technical writing itself plays a role in keeping this system in order, as communication within an organization will move “upward into the management through reports and summaries generated by ‘brain’ workers at various levels of the system” (Longo, 2000, p. 101).

Devaluation permeates the profession. Even when people compliment her work, Anne laughs at the idea of being valued. She said,

[You still have this feeling like you’re the redhead stepchild, and you’re going to be the first to go because ... you’re not really providing the actual thing ... So I’m always cognizant that we could be the first to go, because people don’t think that they need us anymore.]

Anne feels the precariousness of her work, as did others. However, the work they do is essential in a knowledge economy and for networks and adhocracies that are beginning to replace and expand traditional workplaces.

**Conclusion**

TPC as a field involves understanding human interaction and the crossing of boundaries with technologies, rhetoric, research, and design. Women participate in this as much as men do, and their engagement should be equally valued. Recognizing women’s ability to participate, without problem or special dispensation, means that “feminized” does not have negative connotations and that it does not place our field in a “lower” or unsatisfactory position. Instead, it gives breadth and depth to TPC in understanding our capabilities and the ability of all human beings to participate. After all, communication “spins the life thread of awareness, negotiation, dialogue, criticism, self-criticism, and solidarity by which the variegated agencies of the collective worker develop their basis for alliance, create
a recombinant politics, and recognize each other as members of a compound subject capable of reclaiming” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 186).

Women are moving the workplace forward despite a myriad of tensions. They face many pressures, but their work and their positions are pivotal, poised to address the issues through extra-institutional work, freelancing, and networked adhocracies. While their stories register as complaints, these women are actually working hard to show that their jobs are invaluable to the organizations in which they work and the fields to which they contribute. Their experiences and this chapter highlights the room TPC practitioners and academics have for crossing contexts and articulating value. Perception problems are well documented and identified; the next project is then to change that perception and elevate the status of TPC work within a knowledge economy.

As the varied work of women in TPC demonstrates, women’s work is part of an expanding knowledge economy, all-edge adhocracies, and unique and networked organizations, not marginal to them. Women engage in TPC because it is human communication, and because women are users, researchers, innovators, technologists, designers, and practitioners. Their work is threaded through the history and current practice of TPC and gives us insight into the importance of communicating through varied and multidimensional means.
CHAPTER 3
SYSTEMS OF POWER: THE CRISIS OF THE WORKPLACE

Introduction

As a 21-year-old college graduate with an English degree that emphasized editing and technical writing, I searched for jobs with confidence. However, after a week of temp work as a typist at a law firm, another week as a temp proofreader for a direct mail company, and an interview that ended with the declaration that I was not even qualified to be a secretary, I found myself discouraged. I became aware of the role hierarchy and power play in entering the workforce, especially for somebody who is young, female, and armed with an English degree.

I eventually found a permanent position, as a secretary for a large nonprofit corporation’s security department, where they needed somebody who was good with language to proofread and distribute a daily document. This department was also composed of some 300 men and six women. While this job eventually led to a promotion to associate editor (the main technical writer of that document and other reports), the road there was not easy. I graduated from college with what I thought were important skills, and I had purposefully chosen the technical and professional communication (TPC) track in order to be employable. Yet I faced skepticism, devaluation, and not being taken seriously. It seemed that I had earned a degree in order to become an administrative assistant without a future. Such work was not glamorous or exciting. The other female secretaries often excluded me from lunches with executives and vied for recognition as accomplished editors and writers themselves. My male boss often yelled at me, and his managers and supervisors appreciated
but often argued over my proofreading of their documents. Once I was promoted, another female secretary who held a master’s degree was angry that I had been promoted instead of her. While my promotion led to my inclusion in upper-level staff meetings for our division, I was the only woman, and I often heard inappropriate jokes from male colleagues. In fact, when interviewing for the promotion, the director of our division asked me when I planned to start a family and expressed anxiety over the possibility of me becoming pregnant. I am sure he did not extend these same questions to his male employees. I saw power dynamics and hierarchy in action. I learned that my education was not valued, nor were my skills. I learned that women were often objects for sexual jokes, and that my biology made me a liability to my company, no matter how good my work ethic, training, and abilities were.

The women I interviewed had similar experiences to mine. While almost all of them were content with their jobs and mostly felt valued, they had experienced feeling undervalued and shuffled aside for male employees. Very few of the women I talked with made hierarchical or organizational decisions. While some of them acted as managers for their teams, not many of them enjoyed this role, and those who did conceded that they did not have the power to fire, hire, or make decisions for their employees. They must consult a chain of management, instead of acting autonomously for the good of their team. As Longo (2000) suggested, the dominance of management systems requires “the mechanism of technical writing that both communicate[s] knowledge about management systems and enable[s] these systems to control workers and their work” (p. 127). While technical writers may have some level of influence or control through these communications, such work may threaten subject matter experts (SMEs), leading to additional tension in the workplace.
Women’s experiences expose the gendered tension of the traditional workplace and demonstrate what could be rather than what is and has been. A woman’s experience in the workplace is an inductive process into a technological, hierarchical, and often male-dominated system. This chapter traces the forces that contribute to the power struggles women face when entering the workplace. Traditional notions about the workplace are mythic, and women are seen as a disruptive force because of the willingness of corporations and workers to hold onto and enforce those myths.

This chapter examines the role of power within organizations and identifies sites of struggle for women in particular. It builds on what we know about TPC as an often misunderstood and feminized field and identifies the ways in which power struggles affect women in the workplace. Before understanding how women claim authority and agency within the system of the workplace, we must understand the tensions that arise for users of such systems and what such structures tell us about the nature of power and gender.

The data is derived from qualitative, semi-structured interviews of 39 female TPC practitioners. The following questions guided this chapter of the dissertation research and analysis: What is the nature of power from the perspective of those in marginalized positions, particularly because of gender? How do organizations and individuals attempt to maintain power over employees, particularly women? What do we learn about power from women’s experiences in the workplace? This chapter documents the sites of struggle in the workplace as they happen and identifies the way in which power responds to disruptive forces. TPC may be a young, emergent discipline dependent upon docile bodies, and this chapter uncovers the ways that the traditional workplace is exercising discipline on female workers and creating subjects.
**Workplace in Crisis**

I argue that traditional workplaces, which historically have been dominated by men, are undergoing a moment of transition and crisis. According to economist Weeks (1977), “As in all crises, it is the proletariat, the possessors of the source of value, labor power, which must bear the burden of the crisis” (p. 300). Women represent a disruptive force to the workplace, and in consequence their places within organizations are not comfortable for them or for their employers. It is a period of transition for women, one that has been occurring for over a century, and it reveals the instability of a traditional workplace as an effective power structure.

By interrogating pressure points in the workplace, especially from a gendered perspective, I will demonstrate that the notion of a traditional workplace is akin to the emperor’s new clothes: it does not exist. Beliefs about what a traditional workplace looks like and how it functions are mythic and archaic. Organizations may expect workers to do the following:

- be (or at least act) male;
- be loyal to the organization for many years without breaks;
- spend at least 40 (and often more) hours a week in the office;
- be reachable on weekends or in emergencies;
- wear clothing based on business attire standards from a bygone era; or
- maintain the status quo by not doing anything that would disrupt a “traditional” notion of workplace dress, gender, or behavior.
The traditional workplace might also assume that restrooms are the only accommodations that need to be made for workers’ bodies. These ideas are mythic and archaic because they ignore the fact that women have entered and continue to enter workplaces consistently over the last 50 to 100 years; the workplace has consequently changed demographically. Yet women’s bodies and family situations are ignored within these myths. Organizations may not recognize just how different their cultures and environments are based on the steady employment of women, and the changes are pressure points within organizations that resist change. The disconnect between what is actually occurring for and among employees of traditional workplaces and the image (or myth) that the workplace seeks to maintain creates tensions and crises.

This organizational tension is like capitalism during the postwar period, when we “generated a myth of permanent economic stability, and a faith among the bourgeoisie that capitalist economies could expand without limit, with only minor crises” (Weeks, 1977, p. 281). From a Marxist perspective, scholars argued, “crisis is tearing off the veil that had partially concealed the real face of capitalism ... and that it thus favours [sic] a rise in proletarian class consciousness” (Lieten, 1979, p. 71). Similarly, the traditional workplace experiences crises based on the myth of the traditional workplace: it is challenged by the distribution of labor across time and space (globalization), it is challenged by an increasingly diverse workforce (immigration), and it is challenged by an increasing desire among workers to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Herman, 1999). As long as workers and organizations cling to the myth of the traditional workplace, they end up vying to exclude the disruptive forces. In this project, I show how one of these disruptive forces is women. Their entrance into the workplace, over the last 100 years or more, has created a situation
that challenges the notion of a traditional workplace and forces everyone to confront the evolving and changing workplace.

Much of this confrontation can be traced via the attribution of power. Gaventa (1982) wrote, “Power works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless ... Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, and interests from being recognized” (p. vii). As I explore the cracks and crises in the workplace demonstrated through power in this chapter, I will show just how quiescent some of the women acted or felt they needed to act in order to survive the experience. In addition, “the benefits of the status quo are high for the powerful, [while] the costs of challenge are potentially higher for the powerless” (p. 145).

According to Zachry and Thralls (2007), communicative practice is central to understanding how power and control are distributed in the workplace, meaning that TPC is often central to such struggles. They said, “Beyond the explicit controls of governmental and administrative bodies, a complex configuration of factors exists that orders the communicative practices in which people in workplaces and professions engage” (p. vi). As such, communication is often a site of control. Yates (1993) argued, “new communication genres developed as a product of organizational needs and available technologies” (p. xviii). As such, organization needs must be met, and communication and power structures are meant to keep organizations intact and in control. Communication becomes the way in which organizations standardize and systematize, allowing a hierarchy “to pull data up” and “to monitor and control lower levels” (p. 263). The move toward efficiency in workplaces and organizations has led to a tightening of control that has effectively dehumanized workers (Yates, 1993). Therefore, when workers’ humanity, sociality, and familial concerns coincide
with an organization, conflict ensues. Workplaces focused on achieving efficiency and control through communication will experience human interference as a crisis, and for women, because their connection outside of organizations is more visible because of biology as well as social and familial expectation, bear the brunt of this crisis of the workplace. Schneider (2007) delineated, “Understanding power as constructed in interaction also allows us to see why it is that power can slip away so easily. If ... we understand it as an interactional accomplishment, we can see that it can never be accomplished once and for all” (p. 196). This tension and inherently transactional quality of power is evident in the workplace, where hierarchies are challenged to maintain what are perceived as “traditional” or “orderly” workplaces, while women serve as a disruptive force to such structures. Yet such disruption and consequent regulation is complex, and “like any communicative activity, are social acts and choices that take place as multiple coordinated, discursive activities” (Faber, 2007, p. 204). Traditional notions of power and hierarchy have never been completely in control or natural. Power has always been shifting, claimed and rejected at various points throughout an organization.

The workplace is always being redefined (Harrison et al., 2003, p. 12), and it is often in need of redefinition because of gender (Durack, 1997), but the way in which organizations and systems of power accept those changes and incorporate them may represent the moment of crisis in which they find themselves. They may resist forces of change in order to maintain dominance, especially for the mythic notion of the traditional workplace. Such resistance and crisis is connected fully to broader societal gender relations and notions of separate spheres and the desire for or rejection of clear gender roles. Societal changes affect organizations and workplaces, just as technological ones do. Harrison et al. contended, “It is
evident that the workplace is evolving in a distributed form to deal with these changed circumstances [globalization, economic, environmental]. It is equally evident that the fluidity of the distributed workplace will set society some urgent problems” (p. 1).

**Findings**

**Exclusion and Marginalization: “Just a Flea on the Tail of the Dog”**

The traditional workplace attempts to maintain power by excluding and marginalizing particular kinds of workers; we see this through the reported experiences of the female practitioners. This occurs for women who might be the only writers on their teams, through gatekeeping structures such as human resources (HR) or deadline structures, or through a lack of respect for the work of TPC. Some of these challenges are unique to TPC; some of them are not.

Women may find themselves as the only woman on a team or in a large department, or they are often the only writer in their division. Corrie described the challenges of being the only woman: “You have to really fight to get into their meetings ... They exclude you ... [T]hey call it the tribal mentality in engineering and software development. It’s kind of a tribal mentality where the information is shared privately.” Louisa similarly noted that over her many years in the field, she’s “had trouble getting invited to meetings.”

Gatekeeping is a way for an organization to maintain power. The women I interviewed identified HR departments as one of the perpetrators. They described HR departments and representatives that are not supportive and do not take notes when an employee complains. Specifically, Alice felt unable to report some bullying and physical
harassment in which she felt unsafe because the policy for it is vague and “we have a very strong hierarchy in our company ... [S]ometimes it’s hard to navigate that hierarchy to make sure things get done.” When hierarchies are in control, employees may feel powerless, even when systems are supposedly in place for reporting problems. Longo (2000), in her discussion of the possible political and ideological contests within TPC, paraphrased Lyotard to say “actions taken through discourse must privilege one way of knowing over other possible ways of knowing” (p. 15). If a hierarchy is meant to be controlling, the HR department may be in league with that power system, in fear of losing their own jobs, rather than looking out for the best interests of the employees.

Such exclusion also occurs among various types of knowledge workers within organizations. Some organizations may not recognize TPC as an integral part of their operations. Catherine noted that early in her career, people asked her when she was going to move up into technical support or to being a programmer. She had to explain that she had actually gone to school for TPC. In addition, those who must send their products or work through practitioners are often paid more and think of themselves as higher in the food chain. Such coworkers may not care that shortened documentation periods and deadlines are putting stress on practitioners. Alice said, “A lot of [engineers] just see us as a sort of a hoop to jump through that they’d rather not, and they’d rather go around us, and if they can go around us they will.” This demonstrates the place of practitioners at the end of the line, and Alice felt invisible. Her work is not as dependent on deadlines as a software documentation specialist’s might be, but she still finds herself last, and when she gets skipped, she gets the message from coworkers that she does not matter, and neither does her work.
Deadlines create the most pressing problem for practitioners in the workplace in terms of gatekeeping. Deadlines are part of any field, and they are necessary. However, for women in TPC (and practitioners of all genders) deadlines can be particularly stressful because TPC work is usually last. Corrie said, “I call myself ... just a flea on the tail of the dog, so things start sliding off across the dog’s back, and I’m just down here you know, and I’m the last outpost.” For example, when developing software, the computer programmers work on it first, and once they have developed it to a sufficient degree, the documentation is the last step before releasing it to the public. Release dates are usually set ahead of time, and when developers face glitches in their work, they push their deadlines back without changing the release date. This means that practitioners lose time for documentation and must also wait for quality assurance to conduct testing before starting on documentation. Practitioners often get a product a week before its release date, without the ability to push back the deadline. Practitioners often lack the power to change such deadlines. While frustrated over this process and the inevitable time crunch it means for her, Jane described herself as powerless to fix it and described it as one of the biggest workplace stresses.

There may be only one situation in which TPC practitioners are considered first, and that is for layoffs. Betty has been laid off at least six times, and alleged, “many small companies just treat technical writers as the people that they lay off first when the going gets tough.” She understands that if technical writers are last on the list when it comes to a project or development schedule, then they will be the first to go when the company needs to save time and money. She laughed, “I’m good at being laid off. It’s part of my skill set.” She and the other women understand that technical writing is often viewed as unimportant
to the function of a company, and that the work is considered adjunct to the rest of the organization’s goals.

Sharing information can be difficult within hierarchies and organizations, as information often means having power (Yates, 1993). Because TPC is often considered as adjunct to or in service of the “real” work of a company, those in power or at lateral levels of production may keep information from practitioners. Corrie recognized, “The power of a software developer is in the information he knows that nobody else knows. So I come into that situation and I’m kind of stealing his power, right? ... The more information he gives to me, the less power he has.” SMEs may find their own expertise threatened or their territory invaded by technical and professional communicators attempting to document such information. They may not want to share the information that gives them power. Because of these hierarchies, official and unofficial, women might find themselves without authority.

**Power, Bodies, and Harassment: “Will I Still Have a Job If I Actually Take 3 Months Off?”**

Women’s bodies have long been sites where domination and power are manifested (Brownmiller, 1975; Petchesky, 1980; Davis, 2003; Ehrenreich, English, & Faludi, 2011). Foucault (1975) suggested that the industrial economy required docile bodies that were disciplined or trained to work in various work environments in key ways. In order to create docile bodies, institutions needed to be able to observe those bodies in all aspects of work and to ensure that those bodies internalized the discipline that kept them under control (p. 145). Similarly, the traditional workplace seeks to control its workers by keeping them onsite, requiring performance reviews, assigning managers, keeping track of hours, and giving them
cell phones and computers to keep connected to workers when they are at home. The traditional workplace seeks to observe work at all times and levels, or enact what Foucault called enclosure, “the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself” (p. 141). Women may challenge such surveillance by working from home or freelancing, acts that may be threatening to workplaces holding onto tradition. This section will examine how such control is enacted on women’s bodies.

Women may discipline each other when it comes to their bodies, as they know what one woman does with her body might affect the control of an organization on her own body. My interviews found that women blame each other for the difficulties posed by maternity leave, rather than asking that a company work with women’s situations and understand that their biology is not an illness or an anomaly. Many companies treat maternity leave as sick leave, as maternity leave is fitted into a male model of “normal” and women must be “sick” or “disabled” if having a baby occurs. Such policies and ideas about female workers has been an ongoing problem, and reflects the workplace’s inability to accept women’s bodies as different from men’s (Petersen & Moeller, 2016).

Maternity leave is a site of conflict because workplaces can no longer control women’s bodies onsite, and they might object to the break a woman is taking from the work or the desire of a woman to work from home during her recovery and the early months of her child’s life. From a supervisor’s perspective, maternity leave means losing a worker and possibly losing her for good. Many of the women who managed other employees talked about maternity leave as stressful or annoying. Anne said, “I manage a very small team ... and one of them just went on maternity leave, so we’re having to cover for her while she’s gone ... [H]er going on maternity leave is a huge burden on me.” Similarly, Jennifer explained,
“with the other female copywriter being pregnant right now and headed out on maternity leave in the next few months[,] I know that if I ended up pregnant right now my boss would be super pissed.” Not only do the bosses feel the toll that the absence of an employee takes, but the coworkers of that woman do, too. They might find their workload increased or they might feel as if they are “not allowed” to have babies of their own.

The women I spoke with, interestingly, sided with the organizing hierarchy, which counts on “the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture” (Foucault, 1975, p. 148). They were more concerned with maintaining obedience and proving discipline, rather than questioning company policies. Jennifer noted, “I think a lot of people take advantage, especially of the health savings account for childcare and then medical issues … [I]n general women who get pregnant and take maternity leave are viewed as nuisances.” Conversely, Jennifer explained that this view of maternity leave as a nuisance can be interpreted as a reflection of how much these women are valued: “[I]t’s seen as a nuisance when someone has to leave on maternity leave because you don’t want them to go. They’re good employees. We want to keep them around, and we’re hopeful that they’ll come back.” However, she explained that women who do not return after maternity leave are viewed as taking advantage of the company. Foucault suggested, “In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless” (p. 152). The women who have not surrendered their bodies to the system completely are seen as undisciplined and disobedient. The work they are doing as mothers does not benefit the company, and therefore such time is wasted and their bodies are useless.

When workers do not return after using such time to be inefficient, they are similarly rejected as idle and uncontrollable. Catherine bought into this traditional workplace
philosophy, and therefore suggested that one coworker had “ruined” it for the rest of them when she took maternity leave and did not return. Catherine, who was pregnant at the time, said:

I didn’t feel like I could take a longer maternity leave like she had, because the males were very nervous that I was going to, you know, do what she had done. So I do think that as women we have to take a sort of personal responsibility in making each other look good and ... [I] only took 6 weeks off and ... [I] had to handle that different because another female had not handled hers well.

Catherine has bought into the idea that her workplace controls, places, moves, and articulates bodies. She did not see that perhaps her male workers did not handle maternity leave well; she accepted the idea that her workplace controls her body to prove that she was loyal. In some respects, this was a way for Catherine to show that she was “one of the guys” and that her biology did not slow her down. She had to keep up in order to keep credibility with her coworkers.

Women therefore must carry the burden for all women, when the power structure says that female biology is an abnormal nuisance. While Catherine realized that it is wrong to be judged on another’s experiences, she ultimately explained that women have to worry about setting other women up for failure or stressful situations. In addition, Catherine’s male coworkers starting talking about pulling a “the other woman’s name” in a derogatory manner, essentially bullying Catherine into taking a shorter maternity leave. The men were derogatory toward the woman after she had gone, viewed as a traitor rather than a mother. There is hostility toward women and their bodies, and Catherine bought into it in order to survive in this demonstration of power. Women seem to have internalized the rhetoric of the power structure, that women’s bodies must be managed and controlled within the workplace because they are disruptive.
Biology can also create competition between genders because of the misconception that female practitioners may not understand technical and scientific information. Edna summed it up: “There are a couple of developers who I’m certain, deep down inside, believe because I have boobs and I don’t code that I’m not very bright.” Part of discipline is the education of a body, “to accelerate the process of learning and to teach speed as a virtue” (Foucault, 1975, p. 154). A traditional workplace may be based on the false assumption that men are smarter and/or more technical than women. Corrie, a staunch feminist who lives in a conservative area, also faces this underestimation of her abilities on a daily basis. A photographer taking pictures for a brochure needed to find the front of a large piece of medical equipment. Corrie directed him to it, and

they wouldn’t believe me, you know. So I came up here, got the engineer and said, “I’m sorry but you’ve got to go down. I’m just a girl, and I don’t know my foot from a hole in the ground, so you’re going to have to go down there and tell them the front from the back because they wouldn’t believe me.”

She found her words humorous, but she ended up being called into HR to explain her comments and to prove that she was not going to sue for discrimination. She had to maintain discipline, despite the underestimation of her abilities, to keep the workplace running efficiently. Her unwillingness to be docile in the face of such treatment reflected badly on her, not on the dismissive actions of her coworkers.

Sexism and the myth that women and their bodies are liabilities to organizations can lead to disillusionment, especially for young practitioners who might enter the traditional workplace with high hopes. Alice said, “[I]n college I was told, you know, women should get equal pay for equal work, and, you know, discriminating against someone based on their gender is not a good thing.” However, she described her workplace as “hostile” and has
witnessed “some really sexist remarks to ladies in our office” from a manager. She said, “I just couldn’t deal with it. I found myself depressed.”

Sexual harassment is often a problem talked about as if it has been solved, even by many of the women I spoke with. However, it continues to be a way to enact power on women’s bodies. While nearly all of the women I interviewed had experienced it, most of them had experienced it as a young woman, and therefore thought that it did not happen anymore if it was not currently happening to them. They saw it as a common occurrence in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, but did not see it as a continued issue. However, many of them recognized that they were older now and likely not the target of such attention or that they had become unconcerned with it and more confident in themselves. We know that younger women tend to face harassment (Boiarsky et al., 1995); in this trend, we see power dynamics at play through gender and age.

The women I interviewed had experienced being cornered in a stairwell by a large man, being expected to wear low cut shirts for promotion, being asked to visit bosses’ hotel rooms, having reference made to being sexually aroused by celebrities, sitting in meetings while men discuss racy or chauvinistic topics, being physically cornered and hit on by a client at a trade show, getting unwanted hugs and touches from colleagues, or being called “sweetheart” in a senior-level meeting.

A few of the women said they had not experienced harassment, yet gave descriptions of their workplaces that were hostile without recognizing them as such. They did not recognize the discipline of the traditional workplace on their bodies in this form. For example, Iris suggested that her coworkers often shared crude jokes or engaged in “guy talk,” but not when she was around because they were “respectful.” In addition, Shirley
called such incidents “flukes” or people being “clueless.” However, a “respectful” workplace would not require a woman to be present in order for the men to behave themselves as adults and professionals.

Among those who recognized harassment in their experiences, they often blamed themselves for the incident or gave the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt. Flannery shared, “I handled the comment appropriately, but what if I wasn’t on my game that day or what if I wasn’t careful enough? I could give the wrong impression.” There is a sense of personal responsibility for the incident, and in some ways she believed that she was in control, although this situation was heavily entrenched in power differentials. She seems to have bought into the myth, as many women do, that women are somehow the moral keepers for men and that women are responsible for helping men to control their sexuality.

Many women buy into the idea that they are responsible for men’s actions, and they feel a false sense of confidence and control and blame when it comes to sexual harassment. Jennifer recounted, “I can see now that that was a mistake, that he was actually interested in me, you know, in dating. And so I think if I had it to do over again, I would know right away to shut it down.” Shirley explained, “I can think of just a handful of situations over the past 15 years, and two I would just cross off as just, you know, men who are kind of dumb and awkward and not knowing even what’s inappropriate.” She suggested dealing with such “dumb” men by ignoring them. It is a “boys will be boys” attitude that adds to the problem and gives men (and women) permission to act inappropriately in professional environments. Shirley described another situation in which she “had nothing to wear, and I just put something on without thinking about it, and I just I shouldn’t have.” She blamed herself for what happened, which was that many of the men in the office asked for her help that day so
they could stare at her legs revealed from a slit in the back of her skirt. She said, “I didn’t think it would be an issue. It was a long dress. I mean it’s not like I was wearing a short dress.”

Again, she focused on herself and the responsibility she has to dress appropriately, rather than expecting her colleagues to control their thoughts and comments and to respect her as a person. She felt the pressure of making sure that her body was disciplined. These women have experienced power being ascribed on their bodies, but their consciousness of it, “even as it emerges, may be malleable, i.e. especially vulnerable to the manipulation of the power field around it” (Gaventa, 1982, p. 19). While the particular perpetrator attempted to exert power, it is ultimately the power of societal norms and ideals about gender roles and ideals that manipulate these women into believing that inappropriate sexual advances are either their fault or just something that will inevitably happen.

Instead of empowering themselves, women may seek for approval or organizational authority to explain their discomfort with sexual harassment. They have learned that their bodies are the property of other people, and therefore others might best guide them in how to respond to such advances. For example, Dorothy, a 40-something mother of two, is currently experiencing some unwanted attention from an older man at work. “I can’t tell if he’s just a sweet old man or a dirty old man, but he’s just a very touchy-feely guy, and a couple times he’s touched me in places he shouldn’t touch me.” She has dealt with it by not dealing with it, but instead by checking with coworkers about whether or not this man has inappropriate intentions. She makes excuses for him as being “sweet and nice,” although she is uncomfortable and she thinks his unwanted backrubs, which sometimes go too low, are inappropriate. She seems to think that she is in control and that she can and should handle it
herself. When we discussed the possibility of her being direct and telling this man that he was making her uncomfortable and to stop, she said it would be awkward. Women are often afraid to speak up in these situations because they are more concerned with being nice and not hurting feelings than they are about their own comfort and boundaries.

In addition, when women do report incidents or treat occurrences as unacceptable, the culture may be to dismiss the incident and to ignore it, implicitly telling the perpetrator that it is okay for him (or her) to act that way and telling the victim that she (or he) must put up with such behavior. Anita recounted that her boss had asked her if she would perform a pole dance, and when she mentioned it to a colleague, “They said, ‘Oh well. It’s just so-and-so. That’s the way he is.’” We cannot keep saying that such behavior is just “the way it is” and expect women to carry the burden of men’s morality while acting powerless.

This is especially important for young women learning to navigate the system of the traditional workplace. They do not yet know what kind of power dynamics they will face, and there is no way they can address those without preparation. Participants responded the way many women do in situations of power differentials. They stay quiet or exit quietly (Hamel, 2009). Although they might try to raise their voices, nobody hears it because power has positioned them as objects.

More disturbingly, pregnancy is a particular site of sexual harassment, a signal that women’s bodies and their natural functions are not welcome in traditional workplaces. Maya described, “I was pregnant with my first daughter and ... as I walked up, the control man ... basically said [that] as a pregnancy develops that women’s breasts grow larger, and that he was excited to see how that change would affect me.” Such disregard for her body is disturbing and inappropriate. She responded with humor by saying that she was happy her
baby had not developed ears yet to hear his nasty comments. She also tried to maintain some control in the situation by speaking up and making sure that others knew it was unacceptable. In another incident, Carol described having a client that insisted on touching her stomach while she was pregnant. Pearl, during her pregnancy, heard a “rumor going around the office that they weren’t sure if it was this guy in engineering that I was friends with or this guy in sales that I was friends with that was the father.” She felt as if it was somewhat dangerous to have male friends, because the assumption became that they were sleeping together. Pregnancy seems to be a particular problem when it comes to inappropriate comments. Pearl’s experience, especially, sends the message that women are first and foremost sexual objects, and if they are in the workplace, their interactions with males must somehow be sexual.

In addition to sexual harassment, women might be physically intimidated at work. At least half of the women I spoke with had felt bullied at work, and some of these situations were connected to sexual harassment and made the women feel physically threatened. Alice expressed:

[S]ometimes I think it’s a man’s world. I don’t want to. Engineers are often men, and my department is all women, ... I feel like there are times when a male engineer has kind of put himself in an imposing, almost threatening, physical stature to get me to do something he wants. And I find those to be ... the most scary ... I just try to make myself as small as possible.

She went on to describe how such behavior is not acceptable, but that as a young, recent college graduate (she was 26 years old) who is working in TPC for the first time, she does not know how to handle the situation. She seemed to be pleading for help with how to deal with what she has experienced in terms of physical displays of power from her male colleagues. I suggest that TPC programs have an obligation to address this issue, and others
like it, since women in the field will likely face similar situations, as many of our female practitioners will find themselves in largely male work environments.

Carol and a few others have experienced being yelled at by colleagues. In Carol’s situation,

he just started screaming at me one day. This was in a cubicle environment. I mean we were having a discussion, and he just started screaming at me about the documentation and how horrible it is and all this stuff, and I finally just quit defending myself until he shut up, and I walked away and I went to my manager.

She refused to work with this man again. Jhumpa had a similar experience in which HR did not act, so she went to the man’s manager who assured her that it would never happen again.

**Freedom from Responsibility: “You Are Supposed to Be Nurturing Your Kid”**

We know that the female body and biology are sites of conflict for workplaces and their employees. Motherhood continues this conflict, meaning that women who are mothers often experience unique problems and setbacks as part of being in the system of the workplace. Power relies on the notion that the actor is disciplined and docile, and motherhood responsibilities are viewed as inhibiting a woman’s ability to be loyal to an organization and its power structures. Power does not want to share the subordination of its subjects. This is part of the double-bind which, “occurs when a woman behaves according to the male gender role. Some TPC researchers have suggested that the double bind presents a professional woman with the choice of being effective as a professional or accommodating the female gender role” (Thompson, 2004, p. 226).

Organizations may deny support, emotional or circumstantial, to workers with children. Catherine works remotely and has a daughter with special needs. As a single mom,
her time is stretched between work and mothering. Her male manager dismissed her situation, referring to her daughter as “her issue.” Her family responsibilities were not seen as integral to her life, but instead as a disruption to the company. Organizations may send the message that they do not offer support for or tolerance of working mothers. Power is jealous and may attempt to make the lives of disruptive workers harder in order to get rid of them. Power ignores that families are a real part of both male and female employees’ lives.

Not all organizations react this way; however, the women who experienced support from their workplaces described it as “lucky” or “surprising” or “fortunate.” They realize their biological functions and the consequences of that through motherhood do not put them in favor with managers and companies. However, workers should expect companies to act this way, to respect their lives as people, and the fact that they might need to attend to home and family needs while also being a worker. Men deserve the same respect for their home lives, and systems of workplaces might benefit from changing rigidity for flexibility when it comes to recognizing and supporting families and outside lives.

Many women may feel guilt for working because of their loyalty to an organization and their career. They may self-discipline, as they feel the pressure of cultural or familial expectations to stay at home with children. May described feeling guilt constantly for either working more than she should or for being at home with her daughter and not enjoying that time as much as she feels she is expected to. Flannery felt guilt for not being able to participate in her children’s schools. She expressed gratitude to the mothers who were at home or who did have time to volunteer at school. She shared, “You’re dependent on a lot of other women, and there’s a lot of guilt with that.” She is currently involved in freelance
work, which has allowed her to “make up for that.” She has tried to do as much volunteering in her children’s school as she can to “pay it forward.”

Mothers who continue to work, despite the lack of support from powerful organizations, may be penalized for being mothers (Correll et al., 2007). In Antonia’s adoption situation, she had no medical or short-term disability leave to take time with her newborn child because she had not given birth. During her subsequent pregnancies and deliveries, she was “demoted” to work alongside the people she once supervised. She said, “I felt like it was unfair treatment because I had the baby. I felt like I had the baby, and I told them I couldn’t travel anymore, and so they said, ‘Well, you can’t do this job anymore, and so we need to move you to this other position.’” She confronted her managers about it, because they did not consult her about this decision or give her a chance to address their concerns. “I really had no choice in the matter and ... it was a very very difficult time for me, because I felt like I was being kicked out of my job unfairly.”

**Female Managers: “The Devil Who Wears Talbots”**

Some practitioners may face the brunt of power structures through managers. Many of the women I interviewed had good relationships with their managers, but many of them mentioned being unhappy in positions where their managers would not support or defend them. Several women specifically complained about the fact that managers would not stand up for them or protect them in difficult or frustrating work situations. The type of manager may depend on how well that person has become disciplined to the traditional workplace, and as a manager, that person feels a responsibility to make sure that others are correctly trained.
While I have discussed the many ways in which gender is entangled with power and hierarchies at work, I must acknowledge that sometimes women engage in gatekeeping with other women, making work hard for their own sex. Those with similar gendered and socially constructed experiences can still attempt to wield power against those who are supposedly like them. Subordinate workers can engage in subordinating other workers, in effect doing the disciplining work of the hierarchy. This was particularly common among the women who had experienced bullying at work. They often described the perpetrator as another woman, when not related to sexual harassment. Corrie said, “I’ve experienced it more from women than from men in the workplace.” Several of the women mentioned this phenomenon, that they had experienced more trouble with other women at times than with men.

However, Corrie thought this was related to a male-dominated hierarchy. She recognized the need for women in positions of management to discipline themselves to the structure of the organization in order to survive. She said, “I think they tend to promote those women because they back them up, right? First of all they can do some dirty work for them, if you really want to know what I think.” She sees women in management, especially in HR, as there to police other women, not really to make strides for women in management. Flannery had a different outlook on the situation. She explained,

I totally think it is confidence. But if you’re more confident in yourself, you’re not worried ... I don’t compare myself. If a manager starts to compare or starts to get worried or isn’t confident, I think that’s going to start some conflict ... I love working with confident women because then you don’t have to worry ... If you work with an insecure female, forget about it. She’s going to be paranoid, she’s ... not going to be supportive.
She did not see much of a male role in this phenomenon. We could ask why these women are not confident, and perhaps return back to Corrie’s suspicion that male hierarchies play a role. However, Flannery suggested, “Females have got to learn how to work with each other and we have to learn that we’re not competing against each other and we also have to learn how to support each other.” However, if an organization expects docility, it is hard for a worker to claim authority and agency; it becomes even more difficult to then support other workers.

Other problems with women at work include Jean’s experience of not being treated with as much respect as her other bosses have treated her, Shirley experiencing gossip from another woman behind her back, Carol feeling micromanaged by another woman, Jodi feeling as if she has always done something wrong in the eyes of her female manager, Anita working with a known colleague at a new position and finding out that she was controlling and demeaning, Dorothy watching a female manager give special privileges to a male coworker, Joyce being treated as if she weren’t experienced enough by her female supervisor, Jennifer dealing with a woman who constantly lied and another woman who refused to give her a closer parking space after knee surgery, Carol watching her female manager pit people against each other subtly, and Willa feeling punished for being aggressive but being called “bossy” and “bitchy” by other women who were acting the same way. These experiences are common, and more examples could be shared. Sandra summed up her feelings and considered the experience to be bullying: “[T]hat was not a very good experience at all with working under a woman.”

For mothers, this competitive spirit of women in the workplace can take on a decidedly frustrating tone. Edna disclosed, “I think female, child-less managers tend to look
very much down on female workers with children who have to juggle the child with the job.” She explained that leaving early does not impress managers, but that the work is still getting done, likely at hours that are not traditionally expected from employees. Edna’s point is that women with children may work longer and/or harder in order to stay on top of things, and many times managers do not see that because the work is invisible. She related this to her experiences with female managers, but male managers might have similar misconceptions about mothers. Edna concluded, “[W]omen in management treat other professional women much worse than men in management do. Men in management can be sexist, they can be annoying, [but] women in management are cruel.” Jennifer and her friends called one such manager, “The devil who wears Talbots.”

**Conclusion**

From a cultural and critical perspective, these women’s experiences demonstrate that the notion of the traditional workplace is under constant tension in its interactions with women and other subordinate workers. The gender crises described in this chapter illustrate how the environment of the traditional workplace attempts to discipline women and their bodies to be docile workers in a male-dominated system. Kotz (2010) argued, from an economic and historical perspective of economic crises, that crises require “significant restructuring—that is, institutional change—if the crisis is to be resolved” (p. 363). Weeks (1977) noted, “as the crisis becomes more profound, the fact that large capitals gain relatively in the crisis is tempered by the possibility that capitalism itself may be destroyed” (p. 293). This same tension exists in the notion of the traditional workplace. The data presented in this chapter suggests that in order to end the myth of the traditional workplace,
organizations and institutions must restructure and change, especially in the way they stereotypically characterize employees.

While workplaces have and are certainly changing, much of the continuing crisis is fragmented through the quashing of workers or resisting their autonomy or freedom. Such defense of the traditional workplace is not necessarily strategic, but tactical among various managers and coworkers, just as the response of the women is tactical. As we will see in Chapter 4, women do not necessarily accept the consequences of tensions. They may instead react with autonomy and agency through tactical means to subvert the power plays of their organizations or managers and to fill the cracks of the traditional workplace structure. This represents the antenarrative (Boje, 2007) of what is occurring within workplaces. Boje (2007) argued that there is more to narratives, or “something that is swept away by narrative closure” (p. 223). He called this antenarrative, “a bet that a prestory can be told and theatrically performed that will enroll stakeholders in intertextual ways by transforming the world of action into theatrics” (p. 224). The official narrative for the workplace is that it is traditional, and if it is not, then the organization is somehow restructured or progressive. However, through the antenarrative fragments of the women’s experiences, we see that they must claim and perform some of that restructuring and authority for themselves, by influencing policy makers or speaking up when their voices need to be heard. As Gaventa (1982) found, “the action of the dispossessed will serve to counter social inequities” (p. 3). Women may enter a system of power, one that sees the need to maintain myths; however, they can also respond to that domination by claiming authority and agency. As such, “antenarrative can thus broaden our inquiries into the discourse of organizations, allowing us to examine the multivoiced and emergent ways discursive regulation occurs” (p. 225).
CHAPTER 4
CLAIMING AUTHORITY AND AGENCY THROUGH INTERACTIONAL POWER

No More Nylons

While in the workplace, I figured out ways to claim authority for myself, whether that was through my supervisory role over an assistant editor, being friendly with SMEs, or asking for leadership roles. My experiences in the workplace ultimately ended with me feeling as if I had been kicked out of my job; however, over the years I have come to realize that the men I worked with did respect my abilities. When I network with them almost 12 years later, they are receptive and complimentary.

Claiming complete authority and agency over my career path did not occur until I entered academia as a graduate student and I found feminist theory. I learned to apply it to my experiences, to the texts I examined, and in my classroom as a graduate student instructor. The authority I feel able to claim in the classroom is an authority I wish I could go back in time and employ in the workplace. I should have spoken up when the mail delivery guy for the corporation came around my desk and put his arm around me with a creepy grin. I should have asked for a better salary. I should have spoken up at meetings, especially when I attended meetings outside of my department. I should have reached out to the other women I worked with and created a network in which we supported each other. I should not have been so afraid of the male executive directors, as that gave them the power they enjoyed wielding over me. If I had not cowered, they would not have been able to intimidate.
I had one moment of triumph, in which I entered my manager’s office, declared that I would no longer be wearing nylons. I also told him that I would be wearing sandals. Where I worked, nylons were required (with skirts) and no sandals were allowed. I told him that I was pregnant, that it was my last trimester, that it happened to coincide with the summer months, and that I refused to obey the dress code any longer. He looked at me, nodded, and said, “Okay.” Sometimes, you have to take what you need.

Because workplace cultures operate through power structures and hierarchies, such systems must adapt for women and understand that women still experience the brunt of such philosophies (Yates, 1993). For instance, participant Flannery saw her company attempt to diversify by bringing in foreign workers. Managers “had to change their attitude toward these individuals. It was their responsibility to assimilate to these workers. It wasn’t the workers’ responsibility to assimilate into [the company] culture.” Flannery, of biracial ethnicity, noted that this worked well, but when the company attempted to do the same with women, the company “didn’t get that they changed, not the minorities. So what they had to get was that they had to change, not the women. When you hire women, you hire women. You don’t hire women who act like men. You don’t hire minorities who act white” (emphasis hers). She has hope that with further attempts, her employer will continue to make progress for both minorities and women in terms of company culture. While women may maneuver on the margins in order to change power differentials, Flannery argued that workplace culture must change in order to accommodate women. However, paying attention to what women have already done in terms of claiming space in traditional workplaces through interactional power is part of the subtle shifts that are already occurring because of conflict. Whether or not workplaces want to change, they are.
Interactional Power

Chapter 3 reported on the ways in which power structures and hierarchies within the traditional workplace can affect women. While all participants had experienced some form of disappointment, stress, or hostility because of power differentials, they did not necessarily accept those experiences or allow them to continue to happen. Once women enter the system of the workplace, they face challenges because of power and hierarchy, but they also respond to these challenges in ways claim that authority and agency and reject the control or intimidation of power-laden situations.

Practice theory suggests that we pay attention to human agency and “the processes that produce and reproduce those constraints” (Ortner, 2006, p. 2). The actor within a social context should be considered as part of the larger structure, as “people always have at least some degree of ‘penetration’ (if not virtually full awareness . . .) into the conditions of their domination” (p. 6). Ortner connected practice theory—intertwined with the power theories of Michel Foucault, James Scott, and Raymond Williams (p. 6)—to gender studies and feminism. She suggested that in examining a feminist or minority theory of practice, we must focus on “questions of direct resistance, but more on ways in which domination itself [is] always riven with ambiguities, contradictions, and lacunae” (p. 7). Power is not all-powerful, nor is it attainable or concrete. Power is slippery and can shift between and among the dominated and the oppressed.

As demonstrated by Spinuzzi (2003), workers and users are able to rescue themselves through interactional autonomy and creative design. He rejected the “worker-as-victim” trope that situates users as in need of rescue “by a heroic figure, an information designer” (p. 
2). Instead, he recognized the potential users have for creating their own solutions to problems. Workers can maneuver to meet their needs within what Feenberg (2002) called “reactive autonomy” or “margin of maneuver” (p. 84). Spinuzzi (2003) suggested that resulting genres represent “the community’s history of problem solving” (p. 48). Paying attention to workers’ ways of rescuing themselves and users’ maneuvers within a system of power is one way of studying the movement within a field.

These actions demonstrate agency, or what Herndl and Licona (2007) called “the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of action” (p. 135). Within traditional workplaces, we see constraints and social expectations placed on workers, yet this coincides with workers’ own experiences and abilities. The combination creates tension, what I have identified as the crisis of the workplace, or an inability to separate myth from changing reality, but through the actions and resistances of the women I interviewed, we see how the traditional workplace is shifted and remolded because of agency. Women in the workplace are capable of what Schneider (2007) noticed: “Social actors are thus seen not as pawns, moved around at will by forces in the social environment within which they happen to find themselves. Rather they are regarded as reflexive beings, ‘active agents in the constitution of their unfolding social worlds’” (p. 186).

Because of the myth of the traditional workplace, and workers’ reactions to the tension therein, the territory is unstable and shifting. Hierarchies and organizations may try to reassert authority through new expectations or micro-aggressions manifested by those in elite positions. However, “Social settings are never settled once and for all; they are constantly shifting, constantly accomplished in social interaction. Even when the conventions of an organization seem settled” (Schneider, 2007, p. 187).
Schneider suggests adopting a view of power as interactional, an ethnomethodological approach, which can be navigated and produced “by participants in the course of social action” (p. 182). Such an approach acknowledges the following, which serve as a framework for this chapter: 1) “People in organizations use the interactional and interpretive conventions available to them to construct ... the power relations of the organization” (p. 187); 2) “the social realities of organizational settings are constructed through language use and social interaction among setting participants” (p. 188); 3) “participants themselves orient to the context and design their interaction” (p. 189); 4) “the deafening silence that meets many organizational decisions [or cultures] must also be seen as an interactional accomplishment” (p. 194); and 5) power cannot be possessed, but it can be “accomplished through access to interactional resources that allow one to have one’s reality claims accepted” (p. 196). In this chapter, I will use Schneider’s concept of interactional power to structure this chapter, noting how women in workplaces use interactional accomplishment and agency to shift conversations, expectations, and cultures, especially for women.

Interpreting and Constructing Power Relations

As Schneider (2007) mentioned, “People in organizations use the interactional and interpretive conventions available to them to construct ... the power relations of the organization” (p. 187). One of the major problems for practitioners in TPC, especially women, is a lack of respect or value within an organization. Because organizations value monetary gains and often measure an employee’s success on this criterion, women in TPC have turned to this interpretive convention in order to speak with their employers’ about
their accomplishments in a way that mirrors the conventions of the organization. This may not be possible for all workers in the field, but for May it was because she is a grant writer. “In 7 years, I’ve brought in 10 million dollars. Not everybody can do that. And I’ve made sure that [the boss] knows that number.” She knows her value, and she has outlined what she does for management. This has led to managers advocating for her with upper management. She knows the conventions of value within her organization and she fit her work into that framework to make herself visible and appreciated.

Similarly, Jane noted that the interactional and interpretive conventions of her coworkers were related to technical knowledge. She uses her own competence in this area to improve her work product and impress subject matter experts who are coworkers. In a particular instance, Jane added to an engineer’s documentation, and he came back asking, “Where did you get the information since ... you didn’t talk to me? Who told you this?” She informed him that she had known the information, and he responded, “Oh. I’ve never met a tech writer who could look at code before.” She proved herself through her work by knowing the codes and conventions that the engineer knew. Jane said, “[H]e had a new respect, not just for me, but for the field ... [H]e didn’t believe that anybody but programmers could write stuff, and so I didn’t do it to show him up or anything like that, but it was nice to sort of crack that image.” She realizes that many view TPC practitioners as lacking technical knowledge; consequently, “I have personally had the joy of knocking that image completely out of people’s heads by showing up and doing something.”

Sometimes joining the power structures through interactional accomplishment is not as straightforward. To get information from SMEs or integrate with an interdisciplinary team Louisa suggested, “being patient and being smart. You have to not waste their time. So if
you demonstrate in your first encounter with them [that] you already know something about what they know and ask only relevant questions, that helps.” While not as direct, Louisa is describing using the conventions and expectations of an SME to prove value and raise esteem in terms of power. She understands the importance of identifying with her SMEs, and in some ways, she treats them as an audience, similar to the one she might imagine or study for her documentation. However, making personal connections with them may not always work the first time around. Louisa ended up getting the attention of her colleagues in a more flamboyant way. She told,

When I was working at the startup, I had some ... trouble getting people to talk to me, and we had a weekly meeting where everybody got to say what they were doing ... So I stood up at the meeting, and I’d made a t-shirt with iron-on letters across the upper, less-interesting part of my chest ... in our computer language “ignore this object.” I stood up and pointed to it and that proved to them: number one, that I had a sense of humor; number two, that I’d learned enough about the language so I could do that; and [number three], that I was going to be persistent.

She got their attention, proved her knowledge and worth, and made a friendly connection with people who may have been skeptical or unsure of her benefit to their team. She interacted with this team on their terms, by using their computer language, and by imposing her humor and persistence on them. She claimed authority by refusing to be left out and constructing the interaction she wanted to have with her coworkers.

**Using Language and Social Interaction**

A second point that Schneider (2007) makes about power is that the realities of an organization are “constructed through language use and social interaction among setting participants” (p. 188). Virginia used language and discourse to stave off a potential conflict. Because of previous incidents, she knew that having a child would be seen as a problem at
her organization. She is currently expecting her first child, and she has attempted to counter any perceived or anticipated problems by heading off any speculation or managerial action.

Before I told anyone, I wrote a four-page memo detailing what my responsibilities are and who would take care of them while I was on leave and what the expectations were for my involvement while I’m on leave, like how often I would check email and how they could contact me if they needed to, et cetera.

She did this so “nobody would have an opportunity to say, ‘Oh, are you coming back?’ which nobody ever asks a man when he has a kid.” She constructed the social interaction she wanted to have through official documentation and language and refused to allow the system to decide for her what she would do with her life and career as a mother. She also realized that her leave would affect others’ work, and she wanted to make sure her colleagues knew that she was aware of them and had already thought about how to address those issues. Virginia shared,

I think I’m the most senior woman in my area, and I think that, I hope that, it will be different in some ways for the women who come after me, because I’m very cognizant of the fact that my managers ... prior to me hadn’t dealt with a woman getting married while they work with them or a woman having a child or any number of these other things and so I’m very consciously educating them and shaping their expectations.

She is a trailblazer in her organization, and she wants her experiences to be positive but also to shape the experiences of other women as they come after her. She is conscious of her legacy to other women, and to the men in charge. She regularly speaks up and addresses these issues through language to shape the social interactions she and other women have with the dominant culture of the organization.

Such social interactions can be shaped in the moment. Corrie reclaimed attention and authority in a meeting.
[T]he two men wouldn’t look at me or talk to me. I tried to interject some questions. They would answer the questions by talking to each other, not to me. I finally said, “I’m sorry guys, but if you want me to work on this project, you’re going to have to talk to me.” They were shocked, but I was never treated like that again.

She claimed her position as a documentation specialist, by interjecting herself into the conversation and letting the men know that she could not be ignored. She included herself and made herself visible. Women speaking up at work, while it seems to be difficult for some, especially those who may be younger, is an effective way of claiming authority and asserting agency. Language shapes our social interactions and our claimed authority, and if women allow difficult situations or people to silence them, they miss an opportunity to claim interactional power.

Constructing and claiming power is also accomplished through targeted social interactions. Most of the women I interviewed did this by forming networks with other TPC practitioners or females in order to claim a social space that was comfortable and supportive. Jane’s workplace has recently formed a women’s group “for networking and professional development.” She is the point of contact for this group at her office site. Such a group allows women to connect with each other in the workplace and to share concerns with each other in a sort of consciousness-raising effort and in a way of supporting each other through difficulties and concerns. In addition, the group works “with high school students. They go into the school and give talks ... to get the girls in middle school, high school who seem to be interested in STEM to actually go there and be involved in technical careers and not just be dismissed because they’re women.” She wants to see more of this in her particular office site and views it as an important way for women to support other women in the system of the workplace.
Maya’s colleagues have formalized mentoring and support of each other through a Center of Excellence. She described it as a few editors that come together and talk about ways to improve documents ... The people who are in that group sort of have a certain expertise, and that’s recognized ... We all feel very encouraged to express our opinions. We all feel that each person has something unique to bring to that project ... We all have a different perspective basically, because our group may have different needs and expectations.

Such interaction and collaboration is a way of fostering mutually beneficial relationships in order to encourage and accept differences, and to use those to improve work processes and to value each employee’s strengths. They are engaged in positive discourse and social interaction to claim spaces for themselves within their organization. She explained that the group comes together based on projects, meaning that employees have a chance to communicate documentation needs among each other depending on the individual goals of the project. They are constructing their own realities of the workplace through language and social interaction.

Women may group together as a form of social action to benefit each other, but many of the women I spoke with had specific managers who had influenced their career development positively. Influential managers are an important part of any worker’s developmental process and work experience. Corrie called her female manager from 25 years earlier “a mentor.” This woman had supported Corrie in the workplace when she was a young mother with a new baby. Of that time, Corrie emphasized,

Women helped each other, like you’re trying to do. You know women had more the attitude that you have or that I have. I want to help [my coworker] make the most of her life and use her skills to the best of her ability ... [A]ll through my career no matter what I was working on, I make it my business to help other women as I as best I could.
Such an attitude should be a priority for all women in the workplace, especially since social interaction is a central tactic for negotiating power. From the interviews, I learned that many women are focused on just such an attitude, of cooperation and mentoring to encourage younger and less experienced women to continue to succeed and learn.

Gloria remembered an influential female manager from over 20 years ago, and Laurel also noted her boss was “a strong woman in leadership that I thought could kind of talk through what I was going through.” She also had another woman that she reached out to for “career advice or thoughts about work.” From her female manager, Anne was learning to “smooth things out a little more. She’s a little more sociable than I am.” Even when personalities clash, Betty discovered that you can still learn something.

When I first started working for her, I thought, “[T]his woman is going to drive me crazy!” And then I started watching her ... [and] she’s really smart. “I need to be watching what she does and learning because she’s really smart and she knows what she’s doing.” And we ended up becoming good friends.

Betty ascertained that skill and ability can and should outshine personality, and she created a productive relationship with this manager; they developed a new process for review with SMEs. Catherine found that her female manager is better able to understand her situation as a single mother of a disabled child. “She always asks how my daughter’s doing, and she starts out almost every call asking me about my daughter. That’s just such a small thing, but it does make a difference.” She feels cared for as a person because of the way her manager has engaged with her on a personal level. Alice appreciated receiving constructive feedback from her female manager, and she learned on the job because of it.

Colleagues are just as important in tactical social interactions. Betty recounted how a female colleague had guided and supported her through a difficult time.
This guy would come in and close the door and just chew me out for stuff ... it was just really abusive, and eventually he did it one time too many. After he stomped back off to his office, I went into my friend’s office and ... burst into tears.

Her friend took her to an upper manager’s office and demanded that they do something about the behavior of the other employee. “He got me to tell him what was going on, and inside of 10 minutes he was on the phone to corporate HR, and not long after that they gave my boss the choice between leaving on his own or being fired.” Betty was experienced with telling men to keep their hands off of her in sexual harassment situations, but in this verbally abusive situation, she felt powerless because of her experience with an abusive marriage and difficult divorce. The support of her friend guided her through this difficult situation, and “fortunately,” corporate HR and other upper manager listened to her concerns and acted. By social interaction with a colleague and the use of language to make the problem known within the larger network, Betty and her colleague acted agentially to change the course of the abusive interactions, making the workplace safer for Karen and likely other employees as well.

Louisa’s humorous story highlights how women can band together and turn negative interactions with colleagues into bonding experiences. She remembered:

I was working in a group where we were going to do interactive training for an army supply system ... We were sitting around the table, and this guy ... looks across the table and he says to the Ph.D. instructional designer, “You look like a reasonably bright girl. I’m sure you’ll understand this. Let me try to explain it again.” ... So our reaction to that was we obviously didn’t throw anything at him. We held our peace but ... we called ourselves the Reasonably Bright Girls after that. This sort of informal alumni group from that company is called the Reasonably Bright Girls.

They reclaimed the derogatory term—much in the same way the cultural groups often do (Tirrell, 1999)—as a way of banding together. They knew they were “bright” and that this
man’s comments were unwarranted, so they dismissed his ignorance and focused on the strengths they shared with each other as educated and professional women.

These social interactions among women create avenues for women coming up in the organization to claim authority and show how leadership can be modeled in egalitarian ways. In Chapter 3, I noted how many women had reported problems with female managers and other females in workplaces. However, these experiences demonstrate how such dynamics can change through social interaction and discourse that is focused on the success of employees. While women can be seen as competitors or gatekeepers in the workplace, especially when hierarchies are involved, women also can act as mentors and allies for other women navigating the same system and its rules. The women I interviewed told many stories of being supported by female managers or colleagues and feeling an obligation to support the women around them, whether directly or indirectly.

Using language and social interaction as a tool for accomplishing work is equally as powerful. As identified in Chapter 3, deadlines are a huge source of conflict and stress for practitioners because they are last in line when it comes to product development and documentation cycles. Jane experiences this but has explained to managers and colleagues, “[W]e’ve bit off more than we can chew. We need to do something. Hey, if we just delay it another couple of days, we can make this work and this extra thing will get in and that will make things so much easier and so on.” She finds that pushing back against perfection and contributing to the construction of reality through her words can be effective. “[I]f people spend too much time focusing on the ideal thing and they don’t get there, then on the way you end up with something that you can’t use, because you know we tried to make it perfect instead of making it good enough and then working from there.” She pushes against
deadlines and realizes that her product does not have time to be perfect and that her conveyance of this fact can change the way others view her part in the process.

Once the documentation is out there, Jane can revise and perfect. She has pushed for what she called “an incremental approach,” the point where the documentation is basically usable and can be updated over time. She has also learned to “promise little and deliver as much as you can.” A lot of what she engages in is managing expectations, particularly of her manager and of the lead developer of any given project. Such communication is a way of asserting her authority in the workplace, and making sure that those around her know what she is doing and how she is doing it. The approach seems to work for her, and it creates a dialogue that requires SMEs to understand what practitioners do. She constructs reality by engaging with others through language and social interaction and she communicates a reality that is feasible.

**Orienting to Contexts and Designing Interaction**

Related to constructing realities, Schneider (2007) suggested, “participants themselves orient to the context and design their interaction” (p. 189). For women in workplaces, the most common form of this is their decision to change their relationship to the traditional workplace by creating their own jobs from home, freelancing, doing remote work, and contracting. The reason for designing this sort of interaction with work is usually to balance their careers with their families. One of the biggest work challenges for women with children is the time that corporations demand. Women have maneuvered around and without the workplace to create their own schedules and to spend more time with their
families. Women also engage in designing new contexts as a way to balance their careers and their personal lives, even if they do not have children.

A flexible schedule is an across-the-board necessity for women with children, and they design this interaction with work by freelancing, working remotely, or contracting. Of course, they must find situations and companies that are amenable to these situations, but such work allows them to be both workers and mothers. Catherine explained,

> [A]s women, we really have some we have different things to juggle, and my perspective of being a single mom with a child of special needs, it’s sometimes, is really trying, but ... I’ve been lucky to have a pretty supportive um management at work to allow me to have that flexibility ... I think this is a really good career for females because you can have flexibility and, as working women, that is a great thing.

Freelancing is a tactic meant to exert control over one’s relationship to the traditional workplace, as it eliminates stress or toxic environments. Flannery noted, “the majority of stress that comes out of just working ... comes from your supervisor, right? Or from people or groups you work with ... As a freelancer, I have the freedom to choose ... I’ve eliminated the stress.” She also sees freelancing as a way to avoid making decisions, if one doesn’t want to be in management, or rejecting hierarchical decisions. She disliked dealing with internal politics and advancement issues, so she works for herself, acts as her own boss, and ultimately finds her work more satisfying. She understands the context of the traditional workplace, and she has rejected it in favor of what suits her.

Remote work is another strategy for designing a work context that balances work and home. Freelancing may not be feasible for everybody, without large networks or access to clients, so some women turn to remote work to be able to stay at home or be flexible with their schedules. While these opportunities are sometimes workable and fulfilling, Carol mentioned that she had turned to a remote editing service for work, given some of the
health issues of her husband and daughter. She needed to be home. “I can’t be tied down to an office or a long commute somewhere, ... but they do not pay anything like what I’m used to. They pay by the piece, by the word, instead of by the hour. So it’s the pits, but it’s something.” Her attempts to balance her family concerns with work have backfired in that she is not happy with the interaction; the work fits her familial needs but not her financial needs, and she does not enjoy it.

Remote work is not always fulfilling or well compensated, especially if the employer sees workers as dispensable, minimum wage employees. It may be hard for workers to first orient themselves to the context of the larger company before being able to design the way they wish to interact with it. Carol’s remote work has led to isolation and feeling unappreciated because she had never worked on-site for this particular company. However, had she worked on-site, that would not have guaranteed happiness either. But the ability to understand the company for which she worked before venturing out on her own may have alleviated some of the conflict or allowed her to design her interaction with the workplace more carefully and deliberately.

In contrast, Anne found remote work to be the solution to her geographical difficulties. Her husband traveled for work, and they lived far away from family. She sought out remote work that would allow her to live near family. She finds that “working from home, you don’t have a lot of the drama that a lot of people have.” She is additionally able to manage her team from home, and it has been beneficial to her work-life balance and satisfactory to her employer. Josephine saw the benefit of her remote position as similar to Flannery’s freelancing benefits. Josephine said, “I’m not into the gossip. And it is nice being physically removed from that.” However, her reason for this is productivity, not dislike of
people. She explained, “I think for those that are there in the office all the time, that lack of productivity happens all the time. It just gets stretched out ... They see each other everyday, and so they chat.” When she visits the office occasionally, she finds that she gets no work done, so she finds remote work more productive. She has designed a context in which she can be efficient and produce work, rather than worry about social interactions as well. While her focus on work may be evidence of her loyalty to and discipline by the organization, we can see it as empowering to her because from her perspective, it was. She preferred to be efficient because she explained that she likes her free time and “when I’m done from work, you know, I want to do my own thing.” She works efficiently in order to reclaim her personal time.

Finally, a work style that women have employed for balancing life responsibilities is contract work, similar to being a freelancer. Anita explained,

I think I’m a better employee as a contractor, because basically I work for me and ... don’t have to do all the performance reviews and goals and objectives and all that kind of stuff. You’re basically hired to do a project ... So you’re just there for a very specific reason and ... you have a little more control over it.

While Anita is not married and does not have children, she has found that contract work has improved her life, both as a worker and as an individual. She has time for herself and time to devote to particular projects with more enthusiasm than she might feel at a desk job. Jhumpa also enjoys being a contractor. “If I don’t have a project that’s urgent, [I can] take off time from work.” She viewed her contracting and the profession as one that is inherently flexible. She said,

[O]ne of the reasons I chose the degree is the chance that I could be flexible, that it could be done at home. And I always considered that the best thing for my children would be if I could take care of them as much as possible ... That’s the benefit I see of being a contractor is that a great many work-life balance hassles disappear
magically. You know, the company doesn’t care if you take off a week here or there as long as your deadlines are met and they’re not paying for it.

Contracting for practitioners then becomes a way of claiming power by designing one’s own work context and interactions with the traditional workplace. Jhumpa feels the profession itself is inherently flexible and that her contract labor is the perfect way to balance her family life without disrupting the flow of a company. However, her reclamation of power by orienting herself to the field and then deciding how she wanted to engage with it is a form of interactional autonomy.

Conversely, a few of these women considered orientation to the traditional workplace necessary before they could engage in this sort of interaction design. Flannery saw work-life balance and the option to freelance as something that came after establishing one’s self with hard work. She suggested:

I’m 43. It’s going to take a while, and you’re going to have to work your ass off in the beginning so that in the later years ... you learn what works and what doesn’t work. And then you get to a point where ... I can be a freelancer, I get to work from home remotely, I get to be the carpool mom, I get to go pick the kids up if they’re sick, I can take the kids to the dental visits. I work part time. I request not to work full time. I’ll do it if the project requires it, but it’s not something that I want to do.

She sees early sacrifices as having earned her the ability to work more flexible hours, from home, and to be more in control of her life and schedule. Being a freelancer has been especially helpful to Flannery in balancing her life. “I’ve eliminated commuting. I’ve eliminated all the crappy things that come with working in an office ... As long as I get my work done, it’s not about me being present and then counting heads. It’s about me getting a job done.” She has rejected work aspects that cause stress and conflict, and she solved her problems through hard work and “earning” that ability, through orientation to the traditional workplace, to balance her life with her children’s lives.
Similarly, Emmeline did not advise this flexibility for “younger people.” Emmeline works at home, but finds it isolating and sees the importance of mentors in the workplace for inexperienced workers. She also sees value in learning the system of the workplace first and having awareness of corporations’ values and goals. In addition, staying in the workplace is beneficial for networking. Emmeline has contacts from her past workplace experiences that allow her to funnel work as a freelancer. “I haven’t gone out and done cold-calling, and it’s been people that I’ve worked with ... having some corporate experience is helpful.” She reveals that orienting one’s self to the system leads to the ability to then design interaction. The two go hand-in-hand.

From a different perspective, women have designed the way they interact within traditional structures based on uniquely female problems. While the laws now require time for pumping milk and a place to do so that is not a bathroom in companies with over 50 employees (Spiggle, 2014), some women have had to maneuver to find ways to breastfeed and/or pump breast milk at work. Edna explained that there was no room set aside for her, so “I found an empty office on a floor of our building that nobody seemed to be using, and I went in there twice a day and I pumped.” Later on, another woman wanted to use the space as well, but people began moving into that floor, so they “took a free office that wasn’t being used. They covered the door with paper, because it was a glass inset in the door, ... [and] that was the pump room.” Edna called herself the “trailblazer” and believed it was important to have given the women that followed her into motherhood a way to cope with breastfeeding at work. She designed her interaction at her workplace by recognizing a problem and solving it.
Countering Deafening Silence

Silence implies complicity, which is why “the deafening silence that meets many organizational decisions [or cultures] must also be seen as an interactional accomplishment” (Schneider, 2007, p. 194). When conflicts arise at work, whether because of culture, policies, coworkers, or misunderstandings, female practitioners must push back or risk reinforcing problems as norms. One major way to accomplish this is by speaking up. Another is to leave the workplace and refuse to take part in a toxic culture. While problematic in terms of silencing women and perhaps perpetuating problems by not asserting agency to be part of the solution, leaving an organization can be a way for women to personally reclaim the workplace and speak up for themselves on a private level.

Flannery found that speaking up was harder for her as a younger woman. “[T]hey did say things to me, not about my race, but about other races. I’m embarrassed to say as a younger person I didn’t speak up, but as I got older and became more confident and more brave I was able to speak up.” She has found ways to tell coworkers that gay jokes, foul language, and leering looks are inappropriate. She is not afraid to say what she thinks and to call coworkers on their sexist, racist, classist, and unfavorable behavior. In many ways, refusing to remain silent in these situations is an enactment of Schneider’s (2007) observation about power: that it can be navigated and claimed through language and social interaction.

However, for sexual harassment, speaking up is more powerful in these women’s lives. Simply using language and social interaction to claim power within a space takes time and patience. Speaking up becomes a singular and jolting act that usually happens once per
situation, rather than slowly over time. Speaking up is an immediate way to claim authority over one’s body and prevent further harassment. For example, when a coworker put his arms around Betty from behind and groped her chest, she reacted.

[I] turned around and I said, “I’m married.” He said, “You’re supposed to say you’re happily married.” And I said, “I’m not finished talking. Don’t interrupt me. I’m married to somebody who is bigger than you, uglier than you, stronger than you, and a whole hell of a lot meaner than you, and if you ever touch me again, I will tell him and you will die.

She explained that he never touched her again, and acted as “a perfect gentleman” from that day on. While her invocation of a husband and violence is problematic, her words and her ability to react loudly and forcefully resulted in her taking power in this situation.

As Betty advised, “It’s always been true that you’ve got to call out bad behavior.” She noted that as expectations change, bad behavior changes. As women make their expectations heard, they will shape the ways in which others behave at work. They will also bring awareness to what is acceptable and what is not, letting aggressive coworkers know that it won’t be tolerated. However, keeping the bad behavior of others in check is not a woman’s job, but it is her prerogative to protect herself and to claim space and respect. Using our voices renders what is usually silenced, loud; what is usually invisible, visible. Just as experiences will become known through telling of them, expertise and abilities and boundaries can be known through voicing them and making others aware.

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the prominent causes of concern based on misconceptions is the undervaluing of TPC work and those who perform it. We know that they may be categorized as secretarial or unimportant, adjunct to the “real” work being done in an organization. Because practitioners are often undervalued, many of the women I interviewed discussed ways to prove value, and they did so by broadcasting their work and
accomplishments. As Jennifer suggested, “There’s nobody who’s going to advocate for you except for you, so I think in that way you have to make yourself valued.”

Pearl, the manager of a documentation team, made a production of her team’s value. She gave an internal presentation to the managers of engineering and development teams “to show what all we do and how it is beneficial to the company, because I don’t think they understood ... so it’s a constant education, you know. I’m constantly trying to show them why what we’re doing makes sense and provides more value.” She makes concrete the value of documentation and gives her managers and others a visual representation, engaging them in a conversation about her work. These managers will not know what her team does unless she tells them about it.

Pearl keeps the conversation about value going by sending reminders to these managers. When her team receives favorable user comments about online documentation, she “always forward[s] that stuff on to my boss ... it’s good to toot your horn for your team.” She additionally forwards the articles she has published in Intercom, an industry magazine affiliated with the Society for Technical Communication (STC), to show “that the largest tech comm organization ... in the world is publishing this in a magazine, which goes to show we are on the right track for the industry with what we’re doing with content.” She knows her work is valuable and that she’s performing competently, but she constantly brings that to the attention of other team managers. This creates respect for her as a documentation manager and for her entire team.

Women may also make a statement by leaving organizations that have toxic cultures, meaning that companies that insist on retaining sexist, difficult, or unfriendly policies and cultures will lose out on bright and motivated employees. Willa worked at a particularly
cutthroat technology company, where it was common to answer emails all night long and to be competitive with coworkers. She solved the problem by changing jobs. She now works for a company that has an inverted organizational chart, and she said, “It’s very nice to be in a culture where pissing contests aren’t rewarded. Like being mean or throwing a tantrum or throwing your weight around to get your way isn’t respected here, which is nice.” She found a culture that suited her needs as an employee, and she dismissed hierarchies and cultures of stress and competition. She spoke up by “voting” with her skills and expertise and opting to use them elsewhere.

**Accessing Interactional Resources**

In the previous sections, I have illustrated that power cannot be possessed; however, Schneider (2007) maintained that it can be “accomplished through access to interactional resources that allow one to have one’s reality claims accepted” (p. 196). Women must have access to the resources—interpretations and constructions, language and social interaction, orientation and design abilities, and voice—in order to engage in such accomplishment. These resources may come from the organization itself, in terms of professional development or precedents and norms for certain kinds of employees. Women may tap into those resources in order to shift power toward their own interests.

One of the most measurable ways that women can claim authority in the workplace is through salary, yet women continued to be paid less than men (American Association of University Women, 2016). However, because of salary surveys, put out by the STC or the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, many of the women I interviewed knew they were
worth more than what they were being paid. This is a resource that can be used to persuade an organization to accept one’s reality claims.

Several of the women I interviewed were successful in getting raises by approaching their managers and making a case for it. Maya did this at her company. She was offered $42,000 when hired, but she requested more money because “the position I was leaving paid more, and so in order for me to continue the same standard of living I asked that the offering salary be increased.” She was given $60,000 instead. Her resources were her knowledge of the field, her experience, and the job for which she had already commanded a higher salary.

Jennifer’s story is more complicated, and played out over time, but she found resources for negotiating her salary from the women she worked with and from her boss’s old files. At a lunch with female coworkers, “this woman mentioned that some of the men in her department make more money than her even though they’re doing the same job.” With this information, Jennifer asked her manager if their department was Lily Ledbetter compliant. “I brought it up with my performance review, and I was offered a raise that year ... I did the exact same work as ... the male writer on our team, and I [asked] to be paid the same that he is.” Her boss was flustered by her request, and he tried to chalk up any differences to experience. However, this interaction laid the groundwork for future discussions. She said, “I think by bringing it up like that, perhaps it wasn’t the most diplomatic thing to do, but I did put him on notice that I expect to be treated the same in terms of my salary.” Even in her outspokenness on this issue, she worried that perhaps she was not “diplomatic” or, in other words, playing the subordinate feminine role that women are often expected to play in traditional workplaces.
Despite this misgiving, Jennifer continued to push. She took the approach from her boss, using his example as a resource. When cleaning out some old filing cabinets, she found a printed email that her boss had sent to his boss, outlining his accomplishments and asking for a specific dollar amount in raise. She copied his approach, using the fragmented workplace documentation found in an old file as a template, and she was successful. It was a resource there to be used, and she said, “If this is the way he thinks it should be done, that’s the way I’m going to do it!” She asked for a specific dollar amount.

I made a list of all my accomplishments from the past year, I told them what I wanted in terms of a raise, and I told them I wanted a title change, too. I did not get the title change, but I did get a big raise so I think I’m going to take that approach again every year. Ask for it.

Jennifer exercised her agency, based on good information, to claim the position and compensation she believed she deserved by using the resources available to her.

From these women’s experiences, we see that recognizing and using resources for claiming authority is effective. Joyce described the salary negotiation process as hidden and unknown. In some ways, Jennifer’s discovery of her boss’s approach to salary negotiation was a boon in terms of giving her a template, or the genre, of how to ask for a salary increase. However, workers can pay attention to the resources, genres, and templates used by others or lauded as acceptable within their organization’s context and wield those with confidence.

Another resource might be the knowledge of how the job market currently works. According to Sandra, changing jobs is the best way to increase salary. She said,

I’m a big believer that if you stick around for a long time in the same role, you’re going to only be getting the 3 percent, 4 percent that they want to give you every year ... Unless you get a promotion or you move up into a role that’s a higher paid rate, it’s pretty tough to get a significant increase.
She has learned to change jobs in order to command the salary she wants. Participant Antonia noticed the same pattern and cautioned, “When you get hired, you’ll get hired with the current economy.” Knowing these strategies of organizations is a resource in terms of learning to respond tactically.

Jhumpa also discovered a tactic that depended on her knowing what was available to her through her organization’s computer system. She found that updating her resume in the company database would increase her salary, as when hired she submitted a shorter resume that eliminated many years of her experience. Human resources had classified her as a Technical Writer 1, so “I replaced my resume in the company database with my full resume and my rating went up.” Women need to actively be involved in their employee profiles, using the resources tactically in order to best claim the salaries deserved.

Resources can be claimed outside of organizations. Many of the women participated in professional development groups and societies, even without the financial backing of their workplaces. Joyce participates in a group called Women in Technology, a national organization that has branches in various cities. Most of the women participate in STC, and were mostly positive about its benefits. Corrie noted appreciating STC, and she took webinars and e-courses through it. Geraldine posted questions on an STC discussion board to get help as a lone writer in her organization. Anita has attended the STC conferences, and she has is involved in organizing the international competition. For her, the conferences and her involvement are about meeting people and networking. Anne described her involvement with the STC as making her feel as if she has a community. All of this networking becomes resourceful to the women in their individual workplace circumstances.
One of the best ways for women to claim professional authority is through their skills, and they improve and expand these by engaging in professional development. They ensure their value to the company by constantly learning and engaging with new technologies and techniques. Women have found many ways to engage in this project, including taking advantage of the classes and support of their corporations. However, not all women have supportive companies, and not all women have access to corporate resources, whether they are remote workers or freelancers, so they have found other ways to gain the expertise they need to keep up with technology and documentation innovations to stay current in the field.

A common problem that practitioners face is being the lone documentation specialist, often the only female on a team as well. This situation calls for resources. In response to this, several participants found creative ways of networking within their companies to create and claim interactional resources. Sandra’s initiative is particularly noteworthy. She has been the lone technical writer in nearly every job she has held. She explained her proactive response to this situation, which was to create her own network.

For the most part, there wasn’t always someone readily available to ask tech comm related questions. One way I would kind of get around that (if I knew that there were other tech writers or similar in the company or whenever I would start a new job) is I would just start looking through company personnel directories or searching for job titles that said anything like technical writer, communicator, document specialist, [or] something similar to kind of find out where everybody else was, where my peers were, and built a little mini-network within the same company. So I would have other resources, like somebody somewhere that I could reach out to and ask a question. While I also have my STC network and my friends who work at other companies, the disadvantage to that was I couldn’t very easily email them a screenshot of a document I was working on, because I wouldn’t be able to share proprietary information, whereas if it was in an office ... halfway across the world but ... at the same company, then I probably could.
She formalized this networking by asking the IT department to create an email distribution list with everybody on it, and she would search out people to invite. They could then send emailed questions out to everybody in the company who worked with documentation and communication and have the support and information exchanges that were necessary to promote and produce good work products and constructive processes. Sandra’s initiative benefitted “some people in Canada, for example, who only had two or three people within 500 miles who did the same kind of job.” In addition, she created a Sharepoint site for a similar purpose, to share resources and information. She sought out this resource as a way to resist silo-ing and claim the knowledge that is available to her through other workers.

**Conclusion**

Women might experience difficulties because of the power differentials in the system of the workplace; however, they engage in ways of maneuvering around those systems and turning situations to their own benefit. Women know they have access to power by viewing it as interactional and engaging in reactive autonomy. They claim space within the system and consequently change it and shift the power dynamics.

To review, the practitioners I interviewed accomplished Schneider’s (2007) observations about power and its shifts by viewing power as interactional and acting as such. They used the norms and conventions of organizations to participate in constructing the power dynamic. They recognized that the realities of an organization are constructed through language and social interaction, so they used language and their interactions with peers to shift conversations, experiences, and perceptions. A key aspect of being able to navigate power through interaction is first becoming aware of the context in which power
struggles take place, and then using that knowledge to design new participation. Furthermore, when an organizational context is hostile because of silence and a lack of resistance, these women saw opportunities to speak up and mold conversations and experiences by speaking up. They made coworkers and organizations aware of their needs and concerns and consequently saw progress and forward movement. As Schneider warned, “the deafening silence that meets many organizational decisions must also be seen as an interactional accomplishment” (p. 194). Lastly, women who claim authority and agency in the workplace understand that power is not possessed, but that they can access resources in order to take part in power shifts and dynamics and address their own concerns.

While this chapter does not highlight massive alterations within particular organizations—changes that would be studied more effectively at one site with a particular group of employees engaged in conscious transformation—it does elucidate the ways in which power is loose, unarticulated, malleable, and claimable. These women have individually interacted in effective ways to assert their agency, but as a whole, with many women in scattered positions across many organizations in the United States, we see that small modifications can lead to large changes in cultural attitudes and norms. While one woman may access resources, network, speak up, and expertly navigate the design of her organization, she leads the way for others to do so. As many women across organizations engage in personal autonomy, they teach those around them to listen, include, and design with the needs of all coworkers in mind. Personal exchanges toward interactional power lead to larger cultural changes over time.
CHAPTER 5

WOMEN’S ADVOCACY, ACTIVISM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Advocacy and Activism

We know that women navigate power structures in workplaces (Chapter 3), and that they may react to this in various ways, including by claiming authority and agency in their interactions with those hierarchies (Chapter 4). A few women take this authority a step further by becoming advocates. They often have experienced traumatic or disappointing events because of the system of the workplace and life experiences, and they use this understanding and empathy to advocate for others. They do not wish only to work within or around the system; they work to change it. They use personal experiences to speak up and act on behalf of other women at their work sites or to extend that passion to the general public in social advocacy work through technical and professional communication (TPC).

Advocacy is inherent to a technical communicator’s experiences, because the field is concerned with advocating for the user (Johnson, 1998), and practitioners engage in user advocacy, as participant Dorothy described:

I feel like I am the advocate for the users ... I’ve started to pipe up a little bit. So if something looks confusing or it’s named poorly or even if I think it won’t work or it doesn’t make sense, I speak up. And so I consider myself a ... user experience professional ... because I’ve gotten to know these systems so well that I can speak up for the users.

She takes responsibility for being accountable to her audience or the future users of her documentation. Her work is mediational, and therefore she takes her concerns about user accessibility to coworkers and managers, instead of simply producing what her traditional workplace wants her to for efficient and instrumental reasons. While TPC practitioners do
this routinely in their everyday work, as professionals who apprise users of technology and its intricacies, some of the women I spoke with saw themselves as advocates for users of the system of the workplace and political systems, especially when it came to women and power differentials. The two case studies in this chapter will address the advocacy addressing the oppression of the traditional workplace and the social justice goals of nonprofit writing aimed at legislators.

User advocacy in TPC has flourished into social justice, beyond civic engagement (Jones, Savage, & Yu, 2014; Rude, 2008); social justice provides context for focusing on “the multiple voices of the marginalized, the discriminated, the colonized, and the oppressed” (Muñoz, 2014, p. 11). According to Jones and Walton (in press), “Social justice research in technical communication investigates how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (p. 1). They note that the key to such work is “taking action to redress inequities” (p. 2). So practitioners who keep the oppression of users in mind and advocate for better documentation as a result are working to equalize inequities. To take this a step further, the case studies in this chapter address specific ways to change conversations about inequities in the traditional workplace and in a state legislature. Walton and Jones (2013) also suggested that “Centrally relevant to social justice is work that examines the importance of the role of technical communication for activist groups and other stakeholders involved in affecting change for disenfranchised and marginalized populations” (p. 31). This chapter highlights not only the advocacy work of two women, but focuses on the role of TPC in social justice work.
This chapter will examine advocacy and activism for social justice through the use of TPC. Specifically, I will present two case studies of how the women I interviewed and observed reject powerful systems and maneuver within and around such systems to improve the situations of others. The practitioners I highlight use both tactical (unofficial) and strategic (official) communication to achieve advocacy and social justice goals for marginalized groups within their contexts. They employ TPC expertise to advocate for others, and they engage in forms of communication to counter the oppressive messages received from powerful hierarchies. What do we learn from these women in terms of how social justice and advocacy work intersect with TPC?

The first case study will examine Virginia’s experiences as an advocate. Because she has faced hierarchal and patriarchal gatekeeping in her workplace, Virginia has acted tactically to advocate for other women when they go up for promotions, experience and report sexual harassment, or take maternity leave. She is aware of the dangers inherent in her workplace hierarchy for women, and she speaks against those problems in her advocacy work. The second case study will focus more broadly on Edith’s advocacy as part of her work for a nonprofit organization. She writes a report on poverty for her state each year as a form of strategic communication to benefit her organization and to lobby with her legislature to improve services and understandings of poverty across ideologies. These women have vested interests in and experiences with the issues for which they advocate.

Many of the women I interviewed engaged in some form of advocacy or activism. Not all of them have made it as “official” as Virginia and Edith have, but they have certainly taken steps to improve the workplace for others and to engage in social justice issues. Edna has promoted 508-compliance for users with disabilities, a consideration discussed in TPC’s
academic circles. Meloncon (2013) wrote, “[D]isability studies scholars do sophisticated work with language and discourse to highlight the power of words and their overarching impact on binaries that are of interest to technical communicators” (p. 3). Charlotte, who described herself as a minority in terms of her bisexual orientation, has done editing work for an app that provides the day’s history from a queer perspective. Similarly, Jodi expressed her desire to get involved with LGBTQ issues as a straight ally. Gloria advocated for same gender health benefits, which was successful because of many allies. These women are engaged in what scholars have identified as “A second stage of queer rhetorical work ... [which] take[s] a more universalizing approach to sexuality, understanding that sexuality is an aspect of all our lives” (Cox & Faris, 2015, p. 6). Their approaches are interested in recognizing “heterosexuality and heteronormativity as discursive constructions” (p. 6).

Similarly, May is involved in the diversity training at her work, informing coworkers about her childhood experiences with being homeless and Pagan, as such information is applicable to the organization’s stakeholders. She developed a relationship with a skeptical coworker who frequently talks with her about diversity and tries to understand. She realized that the conversation was worth having, even if difficult at first, because it ended up breaking down barriers.

Women also advocate for other women within traditional workplaces. Jennifer worked with a group of female employees to have a nursing room designated. This was a grassroots-level approach to social justice within the context of a particular workplace system. They had to make the need for a nursing room known to the male executives, as nothing would have been done if they had not spoken up. Nobody would have realized that a nursing room was needed. The notion of the traditional workplace would have prevailed.
Women’s Experiences as Knowledge

The experiences and advocacy of these women highlight the importance of valuing the mundane and everyday experiences, especially women’s, as a source of knowledge. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges experiential knowledge as valid and has two central understandings, according to Hekman (2004): “that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (p. 226). Collins (2004) elucidated feminist standpoint theory through self-definition and self-validation. “[D]efining and valuing one’s consciousness of one’s own self-defined standpoint in the face of images that foster a self-definition as the objectified ‘other’ is an important way of resisting the dehumanization essential to systems of domination” (p. 108). In other words, knowledge is built and shared tactically, especially in terms of tactical communication being “an art of the weak” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Those who are not in official positions of power may see breaks in the power structure and act strategically to make their own concerns and the concerns of those oppressed known. They insert these seemingly lesser concerns into the larger conversation. In this way, knowledge is embodied, articulated, and displayed on a day-to-day basis in workplaces and systems of power by those who view the oppression from on the ground. We find valid knowledge in the hidden and antenarrative communication of those who are subject to the system.

Within TPC as a field, we have recognized the value of feminist theory. Lay (2004) suggested that feminist theory redefined the field and called for inclusion of women’s experiences as legitimate subjects of study. Lay pointed out that validating women’s experiences as subjects of study “reveals what is missing within other discourses and
theories” (p. 431). Not only should scholars acknowledge women’s experiences as valid, but female scholars should use these experiences to merge academic research with their own experiences as women.

Those with experiential knowledge must act, because not all women (or men) are willing to advocate for themselves or others. As participant Shirley said, the trend at her work to refer to everybody as “guys” “drives me up a wall, but I think it’s just sort of in style now here, and I think it will just go away, but it really drives me nuts.” She is concerned by the trend, but seems to accept it. She has not yet taken steps toward being an advocate by speaking up or raising awareness. Perhaps her experience and the awareness of the problem is a form of burgeoning activism, as those who are oppressed must first become aware of the situation before acting. As Collins (2004) stated, “First, defining and valuing one’s consciousness of one’s own self-defined standpoint in the face of images that foster a self-definition as the objectified ‘other’ is an important way of resisting the dehumanization essential to systems of domination” (p. 108). In other situations, when I asked each of the women I interviewed whether or not they were involved in writing or shaping workplace policies, the answer was usually “no.” This pattern suggests that TPC practitioners, while some might specifically work in policy, do not generally get involved with making policy for the workplace. However, with their expertise in advocating for users and documenting in ways that are accessible to all (Meloncon, 2013), technical and professional communicators are uniquely poised to address some of the power differentials in the system of the workplace, especially for women. Practitioners may be able to turn burgeoning activism into formal advocacy, as the women in this chapter do, to seek social justice within particular contexts.
Tactical and Strategic Communication

Tactical and strategic communication are central to understanding the tensions and myths of the traditional workplace that this dissertation explicates. While the workplace seems to be a steady institution, through the experiences of these female practitioners, we see that workplaces are in crisis to maintain a mythical notion of what it means to be traditional. Those in power employ strategic communication to contain this crisis and keep disruptive forces at bay while reifying the power structure. Strategic communication includes the culture of the organization, specific policies, and the ways in which employees are promoted or ignored. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) defined strategic communication “as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). They suggest that this type of communication “implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations” (p. 4).

However, I argue that strategic communication messages are also subtle, such as men making up most of the management structure or suits and ties being part of the dress code. Reicher and Levine (1994) supported this more nuanced understanding of strategic communication within organizations, suggesting, “Those with power ... take advantage of favourable [sic] power relations in order to give full expression to their social identities” (p. 512). They argued that strategic communication affects and is linked to social identity, and that “behaviour [sic] is an act of communication deployed to strategic ends ... [groups] serve a crucial communicative role which is essential in achieving self-definitions” (p. 515). Those participating in maintaining particular forms of strategic communication may not realize they
are participating; however, for those who are left out or invisible to the expectations of a traditional workplace, such communication excludes particular workers and reinforces organizational strategies. Black and Stone (2005) understood “privilege within the context of oppression” (p. 243). Those enacting organizational strategies have social privilege, or “entitlement, sanction, power, immunity, and advantage or right granted or conferred by the dominant group” (p. 245). Such privilege blinds them to the oppression of others, and they may not realize that not all members of the group are granted the same status.

Privileged groups or individuals then participate in strategies, which are “systems, plans of action, narratives, and designs created by institutions to influence, guide, and at worst manipulate human society” (Kimball, 2006, p. 71). De Certeau (1984) defined strategy as “the calculation (or manipulations) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power ... can be isolated ... As in management, every ‘strategic’ rationalization seeks ... the place of its own power and will” (pp. 35-36). Feenberg (2002) suggested that strategic communication is operational autonomy or “the power to make strategic choices among alternative rationalizations without regard for externalities, customary practice, workers’ preferences, or the impact of decisions on their households” (pp. 75-76). Those in power who are interested in keeping the workplace intact, without allowing disruptive forces to change it, engage in this strategic choice-making and rationalization.

However, those involved in disrupting traditional notions of the workplace respond through tactics. Tactical TPC is “the capability of the user to produce his or her own products from the detritus of the strategic, industrial world” (Kimball, 2006, p. 79). We see that “users become producers of documents and artifacts that subtly resist authority” (p. 82).
Kimball identified tactical communication as often extra-institutional in nature. While strategic communication occurs within organizations, tactical communication can be “influential in creating and shaping cultures,” and Kimball suggested that tactical communication occurs when a person might feel helpless in a dominant culture (p. 67). Feenberg (2002) called tactical communication “reactive autonomy” or “margin of maneuver,” which “may be reincorporated into strategies, sometimes in ways that restructure domination at a higher level, sometimes in ways that weaken its control” (pp. 84-85).

Because female technical communicators may be oppressed by dominant cultures within the workplace, tactical communication is a way of employing the practices within the field “beyond and between organizations” (p. 69). De Certeau (1984) called a tactic a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy ... It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’ [and] ... It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them ... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them ... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (pp. 36-37)

Tactics then are kairotic, and workers who do not fit the dominant power structure of a workplace might engage in such maneuvering. To do so, they must attune themselves to moments for tactical action and cracking the structure of the workplace in order to territorialize and reterritorialize the system. For technical and professional communicators, texts “produce a stable representation of shifting reality, [and] are among the tools used both to create common objects and to coordinate activity over time” (Winsor, 2007, p. 4). In other words, practitioners can use the tools available to them, especially documentation, in
order to effect social justice and join conversations in order to shift the narratives they are hearing and encountering.

“I Just Won’t Let Anybody Go Alone”

Virginia worked for a large nonprofit organization that is also a religious institution, and because of the patriarchal management structure, Virginia, as a woman, has faced situations that many women in the workplace no longer face to the same degree. Virginia was under 30 years old and had some 8 years of experience as an editor for a specific department within this organization, and her stories of sexism and harassment were some of the most serious I encountered during participant interviews.

Strategically, Virginia’s organization engages through policies and workplace culture to keep women in a submissive position to men in order to maintain patriarchy. Virginia has heard hiring managers talk about wanting to hire somebody “who didn’t have an expiration date,” meaning they were uninterested in married and/or pregnant women. Women are seen as a threat to the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of this traditional workplace, and their presence there disrupts the way this organization has always done business. Those in charge of hiring employees casually stated that certain types of workers have “expiration dates;” this strategic communication of the organizational culture elucidates which kinds of employees are acceptable and useful. Virginia heard this as a young employee, and when she later began dating her now-husband, she kept it a secret until their engagement was official. As discussed in Chapter 4, her engagement resulted in a large and important project being taken from her, but she stood her ground, claimed authority, and had the work reinstated.
As a result of her experiences, Virginia has engaged in regular tactical communication, when she sees cracks and openings, to modify and transform the myths of this particular workplace toward accommodating and accepting female employees. Virginia acted informally as an advocate for individual women in her department, by going to human resources (HR) with them or stepping in when she notices that particular situations are unfair. Through observations, or her tactical surveillance of those in power, Virginia noticed, “men are promoted on potential and women are promoted on past performance.” Favero and Heath (2012) noted that “structures (norms and policies) of the gendered workplace still prioritize work over family; men’s work and careers still take precedence over women’s work and careers ... These workplace practices traditionally privilege men and work and subordinate life and family” (pp. 334-335). Because Virginia knew that managers are uninterested in hiring those who might also play a principal role in family life, she saw the connection of this attitude to women’s promotion opportunities; they are viewed as having no real future once they start families.

Virginia was aware of the double standard that women must work harder than men to receive the same compensation in the organization. She noted frequently being the only woman in meetings. “If I’m a 22-year-old woman starting out here and I walk past meetings of leaders and all I ever see is suits and ties, then it sends a really clear message to me that [there is] no path forward here.” She recognized the subtle yet strategic communication of her workplace culture: that men hold positions of power while women do not. From her experience as a receiver and observer of such strategic communication, she has tactically presented that point of view, hypothetically, to male leaders. She apprised managers of her standpoint by asking them to imagine how that situation communicates to female
employees. Virginia is no longer 22 years old and just starting out, but she certainly remembers what it was like and she knows that it continues to be a pervasive problem for women.

She had become interested in advocating and reporting on these problems because of her personal experiences. Because her employer is a religious organization, they refused to cover birth control: “[T]hey wouldn’t cover it even with an explanation from my doctor ... [T]here are a number of women, lots of them who ... go to Planned Parenthood to get their birth control.” However, she could never bring this up in a meeting in which she argued against the policy, for such rhetoric would have shut down the conversation and closed the issue further. Yet she and many women are tactically using a crack in hierarchical control, the ability to go to Planned Parenthood, a move likely to be condemned by her organization. By strategically denying birth control and attempting to regulate women’s bodies, the organization has pushed its employees to engage in tactical uses of Planned Parenthood. However, the organization is likely unaware of this maneuvering. Such strategic communication, through denying birth control in its healthcare plan, has led to unintended consequences for the organization and the way in which it intended to control its female employees.

This organization also has gendered expectations for employees. In a performance review, Virginia was told to be more vulnerable. She took a few days to think about why that feedback bothered her and then returned to her manager ready to discuss it. She said, the feedback is “troubling to me because I know the men are never asked to be more vulnerable, and I don’t feel like it’s very fair for me to be asked to look dumber than I am in order to make other people comfortable.” She noted the power differentials present in her division,
which contains older male colleagues who have advanced degrees, and she felt she must be
able to prove her competence in order to be taken seriously and to be treated as a
professional: “I can’t do my work if people don’t take me seriously.” While she was troubled
by the feedback from her manager, a form of strategic communication meant to keep her
quiet and submissive, she used it as an opportunity to tactically speak up and to educate him
about her perspective. She made sure to bring up the issue of power differentials and she
gave him a glimpse of her point of view.

Virginia additionally used direct communication when she had an important project
taken from her after she got engaged, because her manager assumed that she would soon
leave the company to start a family. She approached this affront directly. She went to his
office and said, “I have the same 40 hours a week that anybody else here has, and I work a
lot of overtime ... [and] I have the training to do it.” She made it clear that the person they
had proposed to take over the project did not work as hard as she did and that she would
continue to put in more hours. Virginia essentially had to prove that she worked longer and
harder than other employees to get the same work done, and that she would continue to do
so although her personal circumstances had changed. She emphasized that it did not make
sense to switch the assignments. She wanted him to see her point of view as logical, not
emotional. Virginia had spent 2 years preparing for the project and wanted to see it through.

The work ended up being restored to her, but this was a stressful time for Virginia.
She took this issue a step further by demanding an apology from the manager. “I said, ‘Your
actions and your comments were completely inappropriate and have no place in a workplace
and you owe me an apology.’” He declined, but she used her voice to speak up and tell him
that his sexist attitude and actions toward her were not appropriate and would not be
tolerated, as he had additionally insinuated that she was taken off of the project because of the possibility of an affair between her and another coworker. She told him, “[I]n a professional environment that sort of comment can ruin a person, and for you to levy that kind of an accusation with no cause for concern nothing based in reality is irresponsible and reflects very poor management instinct and is just as a human being sort of unconscionable and you owe me an apology.” He refused to apologize, but she had said what she needed to say. Virginia explained that she acted for herself, but that “there were no women mentors to say to me, ‘This is a really big problem. You need to go talk to somebody about it.’” She did not have the guidance or the experience necessary to navigate this hierarchical, male-centered system, but she did what she could under the circumstances to claim agency and resist the unquestioned authority of this manager. She has since taken this attitude a step further within her organization, becoming an advocate for other female employees.

Her tactical advocacy has become more official, as Virginia used her TPC expertise to write a report detailing the offenses against women in the large organization. Virginia inserted herself tactically into the project when she heard about a woman, “Sherry,” who was gathering stories from women about what it was like to work for this organization. Sherry had a meeting scheduled with a senior executive of the organization, who had publicly made comments about family-friendly workplace policies and the organization’s commitment to supporting women and families. Sherry wanted to make him aware of the many crises occurring within his own organization, as his strategic comments did not represent the realities of the organization for women.

Virginia knew that such tactical communication required caution. Given the hostile nature of her workplace, subordination is often viewed suspiciously and can result in formal
discipline. Virginia emailed Sherry and said, “Are you for real? Are you legit? Are you being careful? And if you are, do you need help?” Virginia knew that stakes were high for any women who dared to challenge the patriarchal order of this organization so officially. She also knew that her expertise in TPC would benefit the cause because of her understanding of rhetoric and audience and her ability to document. She understood, as Rude (2008 claimed, “the field’s knowledge gives it the potential to contribute to social justice” (p. 267).

The two women moved forward, soliciting stories through social media in private Facebook groups and through networks, tactically seeking out the antenarrative (Boje, 2007), or prestory and fragmented, voices that needed to be heard. Virginia “recommended that we put together some materials that [Sherry] could leave with him, so that she has her conversation but then he has in his hands something that he can refer back to and remember.” Virginia used the stories they had collected to create a dossier on a number of different topics, including maternity leave, sexual harassment, intimidation, and sexism.

Virginia spent some 150 hours composing this document over 2 weeks:

I designed it all and got stock photography, and so each section laid out what the problem is and gave some stories from women who had experienced it to illustrate the problem. And then [it] talked about what possibilities are out there that [are] being done by other companies or countries or whatever to mitigate the problem and what specifically we could do ... to make it better. And then I had infographics, and the whole 9 yards.

While acting tactically, Virginia included forms of strategic communication to offer solutions to these problems and to allow the executive ways of seeing and engaging with the organizational cracks that would benefit both the women who are disenfranchised and the men in power who were unaware of the occurring crises. Virginia used TPC to convey this information to those in authority to make sure it reached the intended audience and that it
would not be ignored. The senior executive’s strategic communication would be cracked by presenting him with the antenarrative women’s voices of the crisis of his workplace.

In soliciting the women’s stories, Sherry and Virginia promised not to use the women’s names, which gave them the freedom to explain their experiences any way they wanted to without fear of reprisal. It has also prevented Virginia from allowing me to analyze a copy of the report because she felt uncomfortable sharing information with me that she promised the participants she would keep proprietary. However, the report, as she explained it to me, represents what Kimball (2006) described as sharing challenges and problems within a system and posing ideal narratives that illustrate how processes should work, could work, or did work (p. 73). She employed the strengths and purposes of TPC to narrate the system and culture of her workplace through the experiences and perceptions of female employees.

This documentation represents formal advocacy at work. Her communication was meant to address larger concerns for the whole community of women, in the thousands, who work at this large organization.

I learned a lot doing it, but I was also just appalled by the things that I read from women who work here. Just like intimidation of women in the workplace, terrible handling of sexual harassment, and putting ... a very junior woman alone in the room with her very senior male harasser and [HR] tell[ing] them to work it out. I was shaking in fury for most of the 2 weeks. It was really a lot to take in.

While engaging in this advocacy for other women, she became more aware of the institutionalization of the problem and just how pervasive it was for nearly every woman who had worked there or who had experienced some form of intimidation, harassment, or sexism.
While the results of this documented advocacy are ongoing, Virginia has seen some forward movement. The executive turned the dossier over to the managing director of another department. That man put together a focus group of employees in his department to discuss how work culture could be improved. However, Virginia was discouraged by the outcome, as “That group put together a document ... [that] accepted the premise that no woman would work if she had another option.” Nevertheless, the organization is talking about the need for more family-friendly policies, and a task force has been assigned to work with HR on policy recommendations. Virginia reported that “paid family leave [is] on the way as a result of all this.” Other policies are under review, but unfortunately, Sherry and another manager who got involved no longer work for the organization; progress may be stalled as a consequence.

When I asked Virginia if she considers herself an activist, she reframed her work as being “an advocate.” She believes activism is more public, and while her work has certainly had some public implications, she tends to work in the shadows and on the margins. She regularly speaks with “other women, both under my purview and not, about how to navigate different situations. And I talk regularly with my immediate supervisor and the managers up from there about problems that I see, especially gender-based problems, and I try to educate them about power differentials in the workplace.” She is dedicated to acting tactically, as she is fully aware of the role that power plays in her workplace for women.

Her tactical advocacy, while formalized through the report she wrote for the senior executive, is also informal, as she engages in conversations at opportune moments. She reported, “I find myself in that sort of a situation a lot, where I'll get feedback or someone will make a comment, and I find myself frequently in a position, saying, ‘Let’s talk about
that.” She mentioned the sharing of a gendered joke in a meeting, and she asked her male colleagues to stop and think about what they had said, taking into account that they were laughing at the “actual experience of half of the population.” She pointed out that it was only a joke if it made fun of women and would not be funny if it had been applied to men. She explained that such thinking was unfair and sexist.

This sort of work is invisible, and Virginia realized it:

I feel like I’m rarely a visible face, whether it’s because I want a man to make the point, I’m going to feed him his lines or whether it’s because somebody else has this in, and I’m going to give them all their information to go and talk to somebody in power, but I tend to be behind the scenes.

Her tactical advocacy reflects the very profession of TPC. The work professional communicators do is often invisible and translated and meant to inform users through the expertise of others (Neeley, 1992). Virginia uses her expertise as an advocate for users within TPC to advocate for women within her workplace. She does the research and the translation necessary for those in power or in positions to liaison with those in power to make sure that women’s issues are taken into account and that pertinent information is not forgotten or unknown. In other words, using communication “to amplify the agency of oppressed people” (Jones & Walton, in press). She is a technical and professional communicator of workplace culture, in addition to her formal work as an editor, identifying sites of conflict and making that information accessible to those who make decisions.

Her work is important, even if behind the scenes, because “if you come to them [HR] and you clearly don’t know what you’re entitled to or whatever, it’s much more likely to be brushed under the rug.” This is exactly why she has taken on the role of advocate, because her workplace is not safe for women. While she has taken steps to connect with
people in power, she has also “told all the women who work here [to] never go by
themselves to HR, and I'll go with them. They can take somebody else with them, but they
ought never to go by themselves ... I just won't let anybody go alone.”

“Be Patient, Bearing with One Another in Love”

Edith was a policy analyst and writer for a nonprofit organization focused on
providing services to low-income families and individuals, and she was responsible for
writing a report on the poverty in her state each year. The report, a form of TPC, is the
foundation of her advocacy work. She attended her state’s legislative sessions each year in
order to advocate for those affected by poverty and to build coalitions with other
organizations that do similar work. She had an up-to-date [State] Poverty Facts for the year
taped to her computer screen. She explained:

[W]hen I’m working with legislators, I can talk about poverty rates, food stamp
usage, families on welfare, et cetera ... We actually do some lobbying, [but] very little
of my job is actual lobbying. But there is a lot of educating and a lot of advocacy
based on the information that we get from that poverty report.

She additionally holds events to promote the work and raise awareness. Therefore, her TPC
work is the impetus for her advocacy and activism and is official and strategic within her
nonprofit organization.

A motivating factor for advocates is experience; an individual engaged with social
justice concerns has most likely experienced the problem or a form of it herself, as
demonstrated by the backgrounds and motivations of the women I interviewed. As explored
in Chapter 4, the women who had experienced competition with others or sexism became
mentors for younger women and learned through experience how to navigate and change
the system. They subsequently extended that knowledge to coworkers. Similarly, women engaged in social justice and advocacy concerns have often felt the brunt of unfair policies and therefore work to improve the situation for those still experiencing it. Edith explained:

I grew up rather poor, but the kind of poverty that I experienced was more situational, so that it was a crisis that led us into poverty. My father was quite sick with multiple sclerosis and my mom decided that rather than put him in a nursing home, she was going to take care of him at home. So that meant that we had a limited income from social security benefits. While we were poor financially, I still had two very middle class parents, so we were eating government cheese, but my grammar was still being corrected at the dinner table.

Edith, while having experienced the poverty that has prompted her to act, has also experienced privilege through education and class. She recognized this and checked her own privilege while engaging in this work, and she has opted to use her privilege to improve the situation for those who do not have the same advantages she did. This is an example of TPC outside of a corporate setting, an illustration of how TPC skills and competences can be used to act against oppression.

For Edith, this means engaging in TPC advocacy for the poor. This drive to use her work politically came because she realized that through policies and programs, “we could help small chunks of people, but you really couldn’t make a change on any kind of a high level. So if there was a policy that you were frustrated with or disagreed with, you just had to sort of push past that and do your job.” She decided to act by becoming involved in nonprofit work, by becoming an advocate at her state’s legislature, and by using her documentation to influence policy. She stated, “I’d like to see where these policies are actually being created and why. And seeing from the bottom how it affects people, now I kind of want to see from the top what are the reasons that the policies are created in the first place.” She described her current position as watching the “sausage-making,” or seeing how
laws are made, and such knowledge gives her the ability to write her reports tactically to
address her audience of lawmakers. TPC is connected to policy making, in all types of
contexts. Edith’s context and her tactics for gaining information show “the important
policy-making implications of new ways of understanding the internal dynamics of material
processes as well as suggest how social stratifications such as class affect and cycle through
apparently natural processes” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 18).

However, Edith’s work is less about making policy and more about shaping it. Her
communication does not necessarily dictate policies and procedures, but it does mold policy
makers’ decisions. She used her expertise to communicate tactically in the ways that will
bring long-term change to the poverty situation in her state. She has seen this sort of
communication at work on other issues:

One of the biggest issues in the legislature last year was what to do with healthcare
for people who are low income and uninsured. I think the fact that the low-income
advocates were so persistent—there were also a lot of people from the business
community—in really pushing for an expansion of the Medicaid program. But the
advocacy group, the low-income advocates, played a big part in that. We were really
trying to get the message out.

She realized that the influence of others through communication and persuasive report
writing and sharing personal stories is a way to influence those in power toward making and
changing policies for the greater good.

She specifically engaged in this through her writing of a poverty report (a strategic
document mandated by her nonprofit organization), which she produced via tactics, using
her own TPC techniques for improving the presentation. When Edith came to the job, she
had a copy of the previous year’s “official” report that she described as “graph salad.” It
lacked a consistent voice because of its collaborative nature with other agencies. She updated
the new report to be consistent, engaging as the only author. She fixed color inconsistencies for design and made graphs and tables. She engaged tactically and creatively with this strategic and official document in order to give it voice and purpose, by changing it from past iterations and making herself the only author. Yet as she described this report and its effects, she referred to the efforts as collaborative and networked by using the pronoun “we.” She included her coworkers and their larger, strategic organization in the production of the document and its purposes. However, she personally used tactics to make a difference, employing both traditional and nontraditional genres of TPC, by creating videos, pamphlets, and communicating through Twitter in order to reach her audience and understand her audience. Her work resists traditional notions of what it means to engage in strategic communication through systems of power, and her tactical work serves as a disruptive force to policy makers.

Consequently, part of this activism is game-playing and negotiating competing ideologies. As we know, “play theory provides a dimensional perspective, granting further understanding into social structures that explain which genres play a mediational influence within specific contexts and scenarios” (Christensen, Cootey, & Moeller, 2007, p. 1). The “players” involved in advocacy are aware of the genres, tactics, and strategies needed in order to make progress. An effective advocate and activist will be aware of modes of rhetoric, even if that includes engaging in many genres as a form of “game-playing,” as we see both Edith and Virginia engaging in strategic and tactical modes in order to bridge gaps and engage in the struggles they find meaningful.

As Edith noted, “When ideology steps in, logic steps out.” She knows that many legislators may vote for what they do not believe, to compromise or garner support from
other lawmakers. Edith said, “That’s hugely stressful. There’s not much you can do about it though.” She recognizes that politics play a major role in the type of advocacy she engages in and that she will not always be able to make a difference from her ideological standpoint; however, her work represents the idea that the personal is political, as politics are “an ongoing process of negotiating power relations” (Coole & Frost, p. 18). Therefore, if technical and professional communicators write documents that affect people personally, their work is inherently political. Blyler (2004) noted of researchers, “they must in a self-conscious way attempt to understand and to articulate the values and interests they as researchers bring to their tasks” (p. 272). Their research should “address questions that, first and foremost, their participants want to have answered” (p. 277). Similarly, the work practitioners do for users, especially work that is connected to advocacy, social justice, or politics, must take into account the contexts and needs of users. As Albers (2008) defined, “Information is not a commodity to be transferred from person to person. It is inherently value laden and the social and political framing of the source strongly influences the overall presentation” (p. 119).

One communication tactic is to put a human face on the statistics. Edith emphasized, “The legislature sometimes gets really hung up on costs of things, but we were continually trying to make sure that there was a human face on this.” She understood the importance of this tactic on every level, no matter what kind of advocacy is being done. This highlights the importance of an ethic of care, which Tronto (1987) summarized as being centered on “responsibility and relationships rather than rights and rules,” “tied to concrete circumstances,” and “best expressed ... as an activity, the ‘activity of care’” (p. 648). Such an appeal reminds those in power that actual people are affected by the decision-making.
Advocacy then becomes about putting humans front and center and making them real. It is about ensuring that those in power come down from their places of distance in order to see what is happening around them and view the standpoints of others.

Advocates are mediators in a power structure, ensuring that the voices of those with the least power are heard and that those in power are aware of those voices and understand the urgency of them. Writing and communication that mediates, especially tactically, often goes unrecognized, but it plays an important function. Neeley (1992) examined this in terms of female technical communicators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She wrote, “The history of the mediatrix reminds us that people who appear marginal or whom history has rendered invisible may be performing activities of crucial importance for the group as a whole” (p. 210). While Edith’s report was not featured on the evening news, nor has it made her rich and famous, it does make a difference to the many families in her community and state who need more attention and care from legislators.

One way of giving face and voice to families is through social media campaigns for her nonprofit’s causes. Edith understood that a video, available online, will reach more people and is easily transportable. She created a video “working on issues around earned income tax credit.” Her nonprofit organization has a tax specialist on staff, and they, along with a representative from another nonprofit organization, interviewed families who used the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, which provides free tax services, and posted it to YouTube. The video uses pathos, identifying families by names and places. These families put a human face to the program for families who need it by simply talking about their situations. All different ages, ethnicities, and situations are highlighted in an effort to reach diverse audiences.
Written materials act as supplements to videos. Edith created a full-color booklet with stories of specific families about how Medicaid or CHIP helped them. She was discerning with these stories, choosing those that best fit her organization’s strategic narrative. She wanted stories that pulled at heartstrings and featured employed parents, racial and ethnic diversity, and people across the state. She wanted the photography to be consistent, so she took the photos herself and had a graphic designer work on the layout. She traveled to meet all of the families and left certain details out because “to use it for lawmakers, you can’t reinforce the stereotypes they might have.” Her booklet focuses on the success of the program. She avoided using numbers and statistics and said, “Advocacy is about putting a face to the story, so people can identify and see themselves in those images.” She saw the success of this when one lawmaker identified with one of the stories, and he ended up retelling it at every rally he attended. To Edith, this was the first step to success. She knew her audience and appealed to them in a way that moved forward her nonprofit organization’s social justice agenda.

Edith’s audience awareness stems from her interactions with those who oppose advocacy. In fact, Edith is puzzled by some of the religious people she has met over the years who oppose “entitlement” programs, as her religious beliefs have led her to the opposite conclusion. In fact, she has a tattoo of the scripture Ephesians 4:2 on her arm, that reads “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” from the New International Version of The Holy Bible. She expounded, “It is such a strange political dichotomy to me ... I feel like my religious beliefs influence me toward more social justice issues.”
She is aware of some of the misconceptions of the poor, that they might be lazy or cheating the system. But she suggested, “There are jerks at every level. There are jerks in the upper class, there are jerks in the middle class, and there are certainly jerks in the lower class, but it is probably about the same distribution in every single population.” She explained that we like to demonize the poor and reward the rich, noting that we tend to ignore people cheating on their taxes to get more money. One seems to be more acceptable than the other, you know. If I claim that the crappy beat up jeans that I donated are worth 5,000 dollars, then I’m cheating. I’m cheating the system, and I’m getting more money back. It’s not different from somebody claiming something on their application to get more food stamps, except that they’re probably doing it because they’re in really dire straits.

She knew the people for whom she advocated, and she realized what she is up against in terms of cultural norms, expectations, and ideologies about class. This audience awareness, at all levels, helps her to accomplish her goals of social justice through TPC.

Edith strategized about her audience in other ways as well. She knew from her report that 38.1 percent of women who are single parents with children under 5 years old are in poverty (“Annual Report,” 2014, p. 20). She recognized that it is a problem, but she suggested,

You have to think about women because they are, by and large, the ones utilizing those programs, but you can’t assume that everybody who’s going to be using those programs are going to be single moms. You have to make room for single dads. You have to make room for relatives who have taken on those kids and who need help with the programs also. So one-size-fits-all programs are not a good idea for those reasons.

She was aware of her audience but also mindful of other possible audiences and users. She wrote to include them all, and she advocated for these differing groups as a result. She did not mention single mothers specifically unless the policy or issue is specific to that standpoint. “If it’s having to do with a program that serves parents of kids who are low
income, it’s single parents. So I try to be really careful with my wording on those things.”

She was sensitive to gender, class, sexuality, and other categorizations. “There are so many misconceptions about poverty and who’s there and why, so you have to be really, really careful about the words that you use when you’re talking. The words that you choose are so incredibly powerful.” Edith understood, as Rude (2008) reasoned, that “[l]anguage is a means of policy negotiation and of social transformation” (p. 267). Faber (2002a) similarly defined change as “inherently a discursive project ... [which] means that change is restricted by the structures of language and by the conventions of language use” (p. 25). Knowing which language to use in specific situations, especially when social services are on the line, is a skill that TPC practitioners are prepared for and should be using to engage in advocacy and activism. The words used to represent marginalized people are vital in their effect on decisions about people’s lives. These findings extend what Gutsell and Hulgin (2013) said about language playing a key role in constructing power and privilege for people with disabilities. Edith’s work acknowledged this concept in social justice practice.

Edith’s audience was lawmakers, as she distributed her reports to them. When she identified a problem—such as lack of education, lack of outreach, or too onerous of an application problem—she distributed information to lawmakers to encourage their own outreach. However, she realized that the problem is often budgetary, and she called the results of her campaign to distribute the materials “squishy.” It is “a really hard road to haul because of money. No measurable results. But working on these unpopular issues, you have to say, ‘This may not go anywhere but the conversation is worth having.’ We need to keep reminding people that we are doing a poor job of insuring kids.”
Edith also got a sense of her audience based on social media conversations that occur tactically outside of regular legislative sessions. When I observed her work for a day, we spent time at the state capitol attending an interim legislative session, where she noted that Twitter is particularly important. She monitored a hashtag related to her state’s politics, and it exposed the “private” and tactical conversations happening during sessions. Some of the representatives tweeted all day, and by monitoring these social media avenues, Edith could get a sense of where her audience is on certain issues, who has aligned with them, or what tactical communication is happening besides the strategic motions on the legislative floor. She noted that this functions as a way for the gallery to join the conversation, “especially when controversial. The gallery tweets instead of bursting out, because you have to be quiet.” So while those observing the session cannot necessarily use their voices, they can make their thoughts “visible” via public social media. Edith took advantage of this by using it to enhance her understanding of audience, the issues facing lawmakers, and the cracks that might be available to her in terms of entering conversations about poverty tactically.

In this advocacy work, Edith has noticed a changing of generations. There are different approaches to social justice, and she has seen a move from traditional activism to those who have gone through graduate school and tend to engage in more talking and community building. “There [are] varying degrees ... in advocacy about how it should be done. There are ones who are like we should go up and have a demonstration, and others are like me. I’m kind of like, ‘We look like crazy people when we do that!’” She suggested taking into consideration how actions related to advocacy would be viewed, especially coming from women. To her, the long game is important. “I’m not crazy about having to do it, but I’m
getting there.” She understood that dialogue, tactical communication, patience, and community building will effect change in the long run, even if at times it feels like she is moving backwards or making backroom deals. Part of this is being physically present at the state capitol. She did it “to be seen.” Anybody can watch the legislative sessions streaming online, but she felt it was important be physically present in order to make personal, face-to-face connections.

An important feature of communication among nonprofits is a coalition of advocates, and this coalition’s communication is often tactical, as it then must approach those in power to find cracks and breaks in which to insert their concerns. Edith said, “It won’t just ever be one advocate or one group pushing it. It has to be a big strong coalition of people, but it takes people being invested in that to make that happen so that’s probably where ... I see the most impact.” Coalitions are vital to making an impact politically and among those in power. Edith participated in and chaired meetings of nonprofit advocates and workers who share information with each other and strategize about how to approach the issues they are most invested in. While Edith focused on poverty, her colleagues focused on other social issues, such as housing, education, disabilities, and homelessness, among other things.

Edith chaired the Family Investment Coalition meeting, of which I observed one gathering. Advocates from all types of nonprofits congregated for lunch. Everybody signed a sheet with their name, email, and organization. The talk around the table centered on education policy, rallies, and a new superintendent who used to be a prosecutor. After a rally, the superintendent reportedly said that teachers are like whiny kids who did not get enough presents for Christmas. These advocates are aware of what those in high positions say and
do, and how their actions might coincide with such ideologies. Sharing such information is more than just gossiping; it is a way of researching their intended audience, those in power. Those in attendance shared the official ways in which their nonprofit partner organizations can strategically participate and bolster varied efforts. The meeting itself is strategic, but tactically, the group shared ideas about how to make their efforts visible at the upper levels of the legislature and state government. They do not have official access to policy making, but they can inform each other of the tactics that make it possible to influence those in power.

The advocates took turns discussing their current projects. One man focused on the earned income tax credit, and he partnered with Edith on the video she created about it. Another man shared his work on a campaign for healthcare, and he mentioned a budget advisory meeting that would be a good place for sharing insights. A woman jumped in with the information that the meeting has not been well attended in the last few years and that people should be there to support it. Another man gave a handout of upcoming events, at which these advocates can meet representatives and political candidates and other partner nonprofits to make connections. The next man received feedback from the others on giving workers access to retirement savings plans. One woman talked about the summer food program, in which the produce on their farm stands goes to good causes. Another woman mentioned a budget shortfall in a neighboring state, notifying the group that she and her team would look into with the intent of making sure to avoid it. This conversation is a give and take of tidbits of information that will allow the nonprofit communicators to act tactically when the time is right. They informed each other of situations, opportunities, and kairotic moments to act.
The group also discussed the situation of those in power. One woman noted that a U. S. senator for the state is difficult to contact, and she thinks there is a rift in his office and that information is not being shared. They discussed the ways in which this high-powered leader might be avoiding people or being protected by staff and that having a face-to-face meeting with him has been nearly impossible in the last few years. Such information, communicated among the various advocates, is important for those who must reach him. With this information, they became of aware of the need to reach him tactically, maneuvering around his office or appealing to a different authority on the matter.

All of the nonprofit representatives in this coalition meeting were willing to work together in order to achieve a whole fight against many social injustices. They had formed a community of support and networking. Some of the attendees asked each other to share flyers for particular events; they planned to spread the word for colleagues. Edith ended the meeting by updating everybody on the work at her nonprofit. She and a colleague mentioned the projects they were working on and how they were collaborating with other nonprofits. After this meeting, a separate health meeting for nonprofit advocates occurred in the same room. Edith stayed to listen for a few minutes for updates and then left.

While with Edith at the state capitol for a day, I saw the importance of a community of advocates. She spent time in her cubicle gathering stories and statistics to write reports and pamphlets, but she also engaged in networking and socialization in order to be apprised of her audience and various social issues. This part of her work has a community atmosphere, and it is necessary to accomplishing the social justice work of her TPC. She must tie her writing into public networks.
Overall, Edith used strategic and tactical forms of TPC for reaching the public and lawmakers about social justice issues. First and foremost are her reports and booklets, which can be distributed and contain information about the severity of the problems. Secondly, she met with other advocates and collaborates on campaigns. She lent her expertise and support to their causes and they supported her in turn. Often, their causes are related or similar, so they collaborated and created coalitions to make their voices stronger. Edith also used social media to widen the reach of her work. She did this in collaboration with other nonprofits as well, to support their work and to get more exposure for her nonprofit. While “official” communication through TPC is necessary and has a particular weight of influence that other forms of communication do not, tactical communicative genres are needed to bolster social justice advocacy. Edith depended on the informal conversation of social media and in the hallways of the state capitol in order to further strengthen her strategic communication. An organization may or may not ask an employee to monitor tweets as part of their job, but Edith did it anyway to assess her audience and effectively enter the social justice conversation in her state.

In connecting this to the workplace, we learn that traditional genres have power in tactical use, but that unofficial, unarticulated, and unrecognized forms of communication are equally as valuable to TPC, and must be consulted. This is especially important for understanding the myth of the traditional workplace, which depends on strategic communication to stay intact. However, those who wish to disrupt, maneuver, and reterritorialize the workplace and its environs have access to unofficial forms of communication that can be just as powerful and more informative about the actual situation of users. Nontraditional forms and genres of communication lend themselves to coalition
building, socializing, and supporting, all invisible work that must occur in order to enact change. The importance of such unofficial and tactical communication calls for the recognition of different and newer forms of TPC in training students, in research, and in recognizing the genres that affect our field’s work.

**Intersections of Advocacy and Activism with TPC**

What do we learn from these women in terms of how social advocacy and justice work intersect with TPC? First, that advocacy is already a “natural” part of TPC work, as practitioners are engaged in the work of mediating and accommodating and translating for users. Technical and professional communicators are positioned to use that understanding of audience and ability to accommodate an audience to advocate and make changes. Practitioners have the ability and the position to mediate between and among levels of power, meaning that TPC should be engaged in advocacy work at more visible and political levels. Given the influence built-in to such work, practitioners must be aware of political and social concerns and engage in documentation that takes such work into account. In addition, there is room for practitioners and the field to argue that our genres and knowledge of audiences and contexts and the significance of human-information interaction (Albers, 2008) are essential to advocacy and activist work. We must recognize that our communication is political, and we must also extend our field’s knowledge into fields that are inherently political or activist. There is room for TPC to “assist” beyond the fields in which we traditionally engage.

Second, because of practitioners’ expertise in language and rhetoric, they understand the importance of appealing to one’s audience effectively when political concerns are at
stake. Both Virginia and Edith engaged in this careful and tactical communication when confronting the problems of concern to them. They highlight the importance of using language and rhetoric that will appeal to those in power and the essentiality of knowing one’s audience and that audience’s preferences, especially when that audience holds most of the power. When advocating, those in power are usually those who must be persuaded to change or to see the situation from a different perspective. Technical and professional communicators, because of their training to become aware of rhetorical situations, but more particularly their awareness of how to influence an audience through rhetorical appeals, are particularly suited to advocacy work that requires this sort of expertise and careful consideration.

While we know that speaking up is important, in both large and small situations as demonstrated by the participants in Chapter 4, the most effective use of communication is in its documentation, as exemplified by both Virginia and Edith. Virginia tactically documented the problems for women in her workplace by strategically documenting them and making them visible to the hierarchy. Edith made sure to create reports and social media posts and videos that would last in terms of impact and reach. Thirdly, practitioners must use documentation to make advocacy and activism official. Virginia compiled a dossier on the problems within her workplace for women in order to give senior executives a concrete and tangible record of what was actually happening in the organization. She documented women’s voices and experiences. Women were willing to vocalize their concerns, but those words do not become official unless documented, and because practitioners are documentation experts, they can use those skills to document the voices of those who are disenfranchised or othered. Edith similarly made her work official by documenting the
poverty situation in her state as concrete evidence of why her work is important and why lawmakers should care. Those in power must have documentation in order to remember the issues being advocated for and in order to cite such information to others in power in order to work toward change.

In addition, such work and official documentation can affect larger numbers of people. Speaking up on a case-by-basis is important, but it does not enact large-scale change. Both Edith and Virginia noted that their documentation of the issues for which they advocated allowed them to reach larger audiences and to influence on a broad scale. Documentation can be easily shared and can become widespread in a way that word-of-mouth communication cannot. In addition, making public the problems faced in a particular situation is a way of “forcing” those in power to engage with the issue, for they may lose face or support if they ignore a large enough public effort. While such advocacy can backfire, as embarrassing those in power can lead to the closing of communication lines, it can also raise awareness and lead to larger numbers of people becoming engaged in advocacy and exerting pressure where it is needed most.

Lastly, forming a coalition of advocates is key to performing this sort of work. While technical and professional communicators are often characterized as “lone” workers, this does not necessarily reflect reality. Again, we see the traditional notion of the workplace being replaced with the realities of the system, that collaboration is necessary and essential. Technical and professional communicators have the ability to interact with and interview subject matter experts, meaning that coalition-building, especially when it comes to documenting social or political issues in an activist effort, is not foreign to their work. Practitioners are always networked and situated, and such positioning and the skills of TPC
lend themselves well to activism and social justice. Bowdon (2004) summed up the exigence for such work: “The complicated world in which we live and write and teach demands nothing less of technical communication educators and practitioners than our willingness to be civically engaged ... [to] contribute to public understandings of complex issues” (p. 325). The field has always been in a position to influence social matters and policies, but not all of us have been talking about it and engaging in it like Edith and Virginia.
CHAPTER 6
RETTERRITORIALIZING WORKSPACES: ENTREPRENEURIAL
PODCASTING AS SITUATED NETWORKING, CONNECTED
MEDIATION, AND CONTEXTUALIZED
PROFESSIONALISM

Why Do Women Give Up Traditional Jobs?

Based on the data of 39 interviews with female practitioners, women referenced the following stress factors for leaving their workplaces for nontraditional situations:

- long periods of time away from home,
- lack of time with children,
- no desire to deal with coworker personalities or office gossip/politics,
- being closer to family,
- following a husband’s job geographically, and
- flexibility to make their own schedules and work with preferred clients.

While many of the women who participated have accepted, pushed back, or even advocated because of such issues, some women have opted to leave the system of the workplace completely by engaging in entrepreneurialism. They are “calling new attention to how people, texts, tasks, and technologies are grouped in ways that enable action” (Pigg, 2014, p. 71). Symbolic-analytic workers experience constant shifts in the means, opportunities, spaces, and expertise needed to perform work. As Pigg (2014) recognized, “Locations and technologies that would have been considered personal in the past are central to contemporary work life for many people” (p. 69).
The connection between the personal and the public is demonstrated in this chapter’s case study of Haven, who left her TPC job at a large west coast technology company to start a knitting podcast. Podcasting—with its accessible, verbal, and entertaining format—offers affordances for reaching audiences, enabling action, and performing work in nontraditional workplaces. Haven continues her TPC work from home through podcasting, work that I researched through a phone interview and a 2-day on-site observation. She creates the podcast with her mother, Harper, about knitting. The two have recorded and released 346 weekly episodes at the time of our interview, have some 15,000 listeners a week, and recently remodeled Haven’s home garage (across the street from her mother’s home) into a recording studio. I have previously established other such innovative communicative techniques, such as mommy blogging, as professional (Petersen, 2014), and we know that “microenterprise has long been promoted as an answer to women’s work-life dilemmas” (Matchar, 2013, p. 92). In this chapter, I will examine the intersection of domesticity and TPC as an innovation to symbolic-analytic work in nontraditional workplaces.

**Constraints of the Traditional Workplace**

Given the recognized issues that affect women in the workplace and reports on continued problems and inequities, it is not surprising that women would find ways to innovate in order to continue to engage in work while avoiding the dictates of organizations. A symbolic-analytic characterization, according to Johnson-Eilola (1996), allows workers “to identify, rearrange, circulate, abstract, and broker information” (p. 255). Nontraditional symbolic-analytic work requires what de Certeau (1984) called *bricolage*, or “poetic ways of ‘making do’” (p. xv) and “mixtures of rituals and makeshifts” (p. xvi). This is a way that
workers build identity from all techniques and forms available. Women have left traditional workplaces for many reasons, and the difficulties they face in the labor market certainly contribute to their decision to leave or find other ways of satisfying their desire to contribute in their respective fields.

Workplace cultures raise many concerns, as outlined in Chapter 1. Scholars and workers have recognized a need to reform workplace culture, including recommendations for “paid and longer family leaves, corporate child care centers, and other changes in government and organizational practices and policies” (Liu & Buzzanell, 2004, p. 323). While we know from the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that women make up over 50 percent of practitioners in TPC, they may also be the gender minority in their workplaces (Weise, 2014; Marcus, 2015). Because of the varied tensions and problems within traditional workplaces, nontraditional workplaces are a viable option for many, who innovate as entrepreneurs or independent contractors. TPC scholars recognize the home as a site of work (Durack, 1997), and historical instantiations of this work reveal the reluctance of hierarchies and organizations to recognize women’s contributions, even when official or documented (Hallenbeck, 2012; Haller, 1997; Sauer, 1993). Concerning contemporary innovations, how are women engaged in symbolic-analytic work from nontraditional workplaces with newer technologies? And how does such engagement change the notion of the traditional workplace while giving women voice and space to participate?

**Innovation and Maneuvering**

Spinuzzi (2003) gave insight into the importance and relevance of entrepreneurial enterprises and genres. He found that workers create genres when faced with difficulties at
work. Spinuzzi advocated for accommodating workers’ innovations rather than resisting them and suggested, “workers do not have to be reactionary. They can be proactive” (p. 218). The women in this case study innovate because they recognized an intersection between what they are passionate about (knitting) and what they are concerned about in their nonwork lives (children; money). They use podcasting within a community of nontraditional workers to innovate the delivery of TPC and the performance of symbolic-analytic work. Haven is an independent practitioner within the knitting industry, who works from home and uses the time her daughter is in preschool to focus on podcasting technical information about knitting to her users. She performs this work jointly with her mother, has a set schedule, and her husband often steps in to help if that schedule is disrupted by unexpected responsibilities or changes. Haven is also able to include her daughter in her work when necessary because she is in the workplace of the home. “Two weeks ago, we didn’t get our recording done while she was at preschool, so she very quietly after lunch played with her toys for 10, 15 minutes while we finished up.”

However, this arrangement is not ideal. When I observed Haven’s work for several hours over 2 days, her daughter interrupted 144 times. Working from home independently is a flexible option for women, but women also elect to use daycare as well to avoid constant interruptions. However, as Haven noted in her situation,

When we were running the math on what it costs to put two kids in daycare, not that that was what we wanted to do, but I was like, it’s more than my salary ... [I]t doesn’t make financial sense to work all day long to not make enough money to send our kids to daycare. Like that’s not a good value.

Haven is sold on the positive aspects of working from home, especially her entrepreneurial way. She cannot afford the daycare, even with a full-time job at a large technology company.
This case study first will describe and analyze the workplace that Haven and Harper have created for themselves, and second suggest how the nontraditional workplace should inform traditional workplaces. Extra-institutional engagements give us a sense of the inclusiveness and exciting nature of the work happening in the fringes and the forward momentum of the field of TPC as a whole.

**Situated Networking**

A nontraditional workplace from a symbolic-analytic perspective is networked and situated. Haven and Harper enact this by reaching across the knitting community, through their podcast, conferences, shops, blogs, and social media. Their work is part of a larger assemblage of knitters and knitting professionals, and they recognize their work as positioned within a larger system of communicators and workers. They know the people who run yarn shops, they attend conferences, they have status as experts in the field, and they have a sense of the history of the field. When prepping for the podcast, Harper explained a type of yarn to me. Haven chimed in with “They do hand-painted yarn. They were one of the first ones.” She knows who has done what, when, and why, and she is able to communicate that to her listeners. In addition, Haven expressed irritation when new podcasters fail to reach out to those already established within the community.

While Haven and Harper have their own expertise to share, they recognize podcasting as a form of communal knowledge, and they tap this knowledge as part of their transmission of information to their users. They engage such users and other experts and professionals through social media, by promoting hashtags and giveaways and including segments from other podcasts. They call this section “Purloined,” which is a play on the
knitting “purl stitch” and the original definition of lifting something that is not one’s own. They drop many names on the air, suggest that others should visit these sites or podcasts, and connect with other experts in person at knitting events. Haven explained, “[W]e steal from other podcasts that are good, and it gives them additional exposure.” This backfired with one podcaster, who was angry with them for using her material. Haven explained to her that if she did not want the exposure from their larger podcast, they would stop promoting her work.

However, promoting others’ knowledge is usually well received and seen as a way of building community. This promotion of knowledge extends beyond knitting, to those in the community who may have other expertise that is connected marginally to their main focus. During the episode I observed, Haven mentioned a familiar name in the industry that had a new podcast called *What’s the Buzz*. “It’s the first episode. [It] was about pollination and bees. It’s about bugs because she’s an entomologist, and we listened to it, and it’s really lovely to hear how she’s grown as a podcaster.” Harper pointed out that there was no knitting content, but Haven connected it to moths and the possibility of that connecting to the work that she and her users do. This is a way of reaching beyond the borders of her particular expertise and making connections to subject matter experts in other fields.

These women are podcasting as part of a larger network, and they recognize the work of others in the networked and situated assemblage of podcasters and knitters (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Furthermore, these podcasters navigate the work by becoming familiar with and integrating the norms of the existing community. Haven and Harper know the rules and expectations of connecting with other knitters and communicators. This community involvement and responsibility extends to the well-being of those within the
community. On the podcast, they mentioned another knitting professional who is ill with cancer and noted that this woman’s illness and subsequent break from her work is “a huge loss to the knitting community. You can read the blog in her own words, so she can talk about what’s been going on.” They demonstrate an ethic of care by mentioning those among them who are afflicted and might need some emotional support through social media channels and the network of the larger community.

When attending the events of and networking within the community, Haven and Harper promote efforts to benefit those outside of the knitting circles. At annual yarn conventions, they collect preemie hats as donations from their listeners for local hospitals. They encourage small bits of leftover yarn to be made into these hats or socks, instead of being discarded. As Harper explained during the podcast, “[T]ossing out perfectly good yarn is sacrilegious. So what do you do with the leftovers? Well you can knit a preemie hat in an afternoon, in an hour or two. And our local hospitals are always happy to have hand-knit nice things for the babies.” When they are not collecting the hats for local hospitals, they encourage listeners to donate to their own hospitals. From these community-oriented projects and publicity, Haven reported, “a couple of thousand hats got collected between the different podcasters.” In addition, during the podcast I observed, they reminded listeners of Halos of Hope, a campaign to knit hats for cancer patients. “Knitting just one hat can make a difference to a cancer patient, and if you don’t have time to knit a hat, just 1 dollar will ship three hats.” Haven encouraged listeners to find change at the bottom of their purses to spare, especially if cancer has touched their own lives, to give to the cause. Not only do the women promote activism and community involvement, but other knitting podcasts do the same, and the assemblage of nontraditional workplaces use this social action and awareness
as an opportunity to promote friendly competition and increase the community involvement of their listeners and themselves.

The connected aspect of podcasting and social media promotion means that conflict does occur with other workers. Haven had complained on the podcast about the color scheme of a cowl she was knitting from a particular designer. The network of this nontraditional workplace meant that Haven’s words would affect that designer and perhaps prevent listeners from engaging in the same project. However, this networking meant that Haven knew the importance of apologizing for mistakes when necessary. Haven admitted on the podcast I observed,

I had some very intense feelings about this cowl when I started it because it wasn’t the kit I intended to buy. I’d been sold the wrong kit, which happens and is kind of a bummer, but the more I work on it, I actually really like it now. So I need to apologize because when you’re wrong it is right to apologize. So I want to apologize.

She goes on to specifically name those to whom she owes apology and makes sure to repair the relationship that may have been strained due to her dislike of the item in the first place.

Their symbolic-analytic work may also reach outside of the network, to the fringes of those who may belong by listening or following social media, but who may not have their own outlet for broadcasting experiences or engagements with the work. Harper noted that their ability to provide community for somebody who has no knitting group is one of the most important aspects of their nontraditional work. Because community is an important aspect of knitting and podcasting, those who are isolated from other knitters might find it difficult to continue improving their skills. Both Harper and Haven emphasized that knitting alone is a tragedy and that the social aspect of knitting can make a big difference. Harper
demonstrated this by asking me to imagine that I had nobody with whom to talk about books.

Wouldn’t that be upsetting? So if you’re a knitter, if you love knitting, and you find out there are other people who like to do this, it’s ‘Oh, I found my people!’ And sometimes we’re the people who are the people for somebody who is stuck out in the middle of nowhere and doesn’t know any other knitters.

This demonstrates their awareness of audience and the concern and care they have for that imagined audience (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). They also promoted several events, both local and out-of-state, for knitters and spinners to meet, socialize, and swap items and knowledge. The two attend these events and report about them on the podcast as well, connecting those users, who were unable to attend, to the knowledge gained through that meeting. As Paretti, McNair, and Holloway-Attaway (2007) contended, “[E]ven when much of the work occurs at a distance, face-to-face communication, or something as close to it as possible, can be central to creating the social and professional context that makes distributed collaboration possible” (p. 332). Haven and Harper realize the contexts of their audience and the networking ability and responsibility they have for connecting listeners to these more concrete networks and meet-ups. They attempt to alleviate such circumstances by providing support, information, and community through the podcast.

**Connected Mediation**

Connections and networking benefit Haven and Harper; they received “a package with this skein of yarn ... [as] a custom color wave for us,” including a pattern from a well-known designer and skin care items. The women used the opportunity to test usability, pass discounts to their listeners, and encourage others to connect on social media to ask
questions and to continue the conversation within the community. Such interaction among distributed, nontraditional workplaces leads to personalized instructions and connected mediation.

For example, Haven and Harper mediate the products they believe in through reviews, and they only run ads for companies that they have tested and tried. In one ad for a yarn producer, Haven read on air, “[This company] produces unique and luxurious hand spun yarns that are crafted in a socially responsible way.” Social responsibility is important to Haven and Harper, and it is likely one of the reasons they allowed this company to purchase advertising space for their podcast, which is overall about community, social responsibility, and being honest to users. Haven recounted, “I had a publisher who was paying for ad space who was like, ‘You guys panned my book.’ And I was like, ‘It wasn’t a good book. Publish better books.’” She has power as a communicator within her nontraditional workplace; she holds companies accountable for their products. She is determined to protect her users from poor products and has the ability to publicly hold companies accountable for their products.

Moreover, such mediation extends into the women’s personal lives, beyond the marketplace in which women are often expected to be consumers. Haven and Harper have encouraged their users to do something nice for themselves, such as knitting a drawer full of socks or sweaters for themselves. Haven noted, “we’re encouraging people to knit an entire chest full of sweaters for themselves that they’ll wear and to consider what you’ll wear everyday and if you’ll get use out of them.” While the aim isn’t necessarily an anti-capitalist one, although Haven liked that idea—she described herself as “crunchy” and her mother as a “hippie”—it is meant to encourage women to take care of themselves. The encouragement is an example of the meditational nature of TPC and the way that nontraditional workplaces
can serve larger audiences as mediators of technologies and techniques to users. Such mediation is an enactment of the ethic of care, which is grounded “in the daily experiences and moral problems of real people in their everyday lives” (Tronto, 1987, p. 648). Haven and Harper enact this ethic of care through knitting and their idea that “everyone should have a drawer.” It is a way of encouraging women to put themselves first, because they often do not (Langan, 2012), and a way of realizing that nice knitting is something that can and should be accessible to everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, or circumstances.

This care for the audience extends into the type of content from the networked industries they are willing to promote. Occasionally, the show is supplemented by what they call a “director’s cut,” which consists of an interview with another professional in the field. However, Haven stated, “a lot of the interviews with us are dreadful and they’re infomercials because the people who want to be interviewed want to ... promote their thing, heavy-handedly, and it’s not interesting, and what’s the value in that?” She is aware of her audience’s disinterest in such content, and has refused to air interviews that do not present value to her users. In one particular instance, she interviewed a woman who had created knitting comic books. This woman admitted to creating them because “knitters will buy anything.” Haven cut the interview short and refused to expose her users to somebody only interested in exploiting them for monetary gain. Haven mediates the marketplace through an awareness of audience and her ethic of caring.

Such mediation connects users to designers and experts, who in turn develop a sense of why particular practices or products will appeal to that networked community. In reviewing a book for the upcoming podcast, the women had a sense of why the book may or may not appeal to their audience. Haven noted, “Bad photography will also kill a book and
you can see like the patterns are good but the photography is dreadful.” Harper mentioned proportions, and explained, “fringe is God awful. And fringe eats up yarn.” Manufacturers of yarn are interested in such patterns to sell more yarn, but Harper knew that such marketing would not be in the best interests of her users. She pointed out, from a user’s perspective, “fringe is the first thing to go and make your thing ratty ... look how this looks so pretty draped on her leg. You walk three steps and it’s going to hang between your legs like a tail.” Her comments are both practical and concerned with design. She understands her audience and their expectations, and she looked at the shawl patterns practically. Harper noticed the practical problems with a long shawl that will get stuck between one’s legs while walking and the problem with too much fringe, as it is expensive and nice for yarn manufacturers to sell, but not practical for users and hard to maintain. Harper’s eye in reviewing this book is one of a shrewd expert and user turned mediator, as she is concerned with the practical considerations of the knitting patterns presented in the book. We know “that practice creates both knowledge and value and that the value created comprehends the good of the community in which the practice has a history” (Miller, 1989, p. 69). However, such honesty in their mediation within the community has led to some conflict. Yet, Harper proudly said, “I think we are the only show that doesn’t shill.”

They are aware that many of their listeners do not have the luxury of investing in the yarn and supplies needed for knitting. Again, they are mediating products and consumerism by working to make their audience aware of the best values and practices within the community. Haven explained,

I think the issue is that everyone else is worried about hurting feelings, and that’s not really my concern. There are so few people who make money in the industry from knitting and so many people who spend money in the industry that I think it’s
disrespectful ... [Y]ou have to have concern for other people's money. Because we have people who are ... single moms, who have three or four kids and terrible circumstances and they don’t have more than like a hundred dollars a year to spend on themselves. So they listen because they know that we won’t sell them something that we don’t believe in.

Haven is invested in her community of users as much as she is the community of experts, and she attempts to protect and look out for the interests of those users. She knows who they are from interacting with them and she realizes that their circumstances do not always make it possible for them to buy cheap or poorly constructed materials. Part of her mediation and social responsibility is to see behind the marketing and advertising attempts and to make sure her users are not being duped. She realizes that knitting is a popular niche and that “there’s a lot of people knitting and they’re trying to cash in on people knitting right now. So if you have an idea that’s okay, there’s a publisher that will publish you.” However, Haven and Harper are not symbolic-analytic workers who will recommend “garbage” for money.

The marketplace is not the only way that these women act as mediators. Haven and Harper use the platform of the podcast to translate and explain difficult terminology for their users. Haven, when explaining how she had inserted a zipper into one of her knitted cardigans, said to her listeners during my observation:

Those of you who are not familiar with zipper technology and terminology, a dual separating zipper has two zipper pulls, and so you can have it zipped all the way up and have a zipper at both ends, or you can have it zipped from the top to your belly button if you want to, or perhaps if you have a growing midsection, which is useful.

This is a TPC technique, sharing difficult or unfamiliar terms simultaneously to a lay audience and also with an audience of experts. In addition, Haven mentioned the use of such a zipper particularly referring to a “growing midsection” or pregnancy, as she is expecting a
baby soon. Her report on this particular part of knitting and sewing related to a woman’s body, and took into account the circumstances for which her audience might use such a technology.

Connected mediation also requires that Haven and Harper take into account the skill level of their users and give them suggestions for trying new techniques. In the episode I observed, Harper specifically recognized that listeners may want to try sewing a zipper into a hand-knit item but might be hesitant. She said, “So my suggestion would be take some scraps that, you know, you have laying around, some old swatches, and buy a cheap zipper and practice on that. Develop your technique do your practice thing, not on your precious freshly finished hand-knitted garment.” Haven added, “I also think doing it on a baby sweater is a good idea, because undoing sewing on knitting is not a big deal if you’re not using a sewing machine.” These suggestions come from their experiences, Haven with her own baby’s sweaters, and Harper from taking sewing classes as part of her childhood education in Europe. She reminded listeners that “it helps you master the technique and your hand-knitting is safe from you.” Their experiences inform their mediation of the technology to the users, and that connects them with those they reach out to through the nontraditional workplace.

This experience as mediation must also be translated into practice. The women conduct usability tests through their knitting, and they report on the techniques and advice from other experts in terms of how well it translates into practice. Haven promised to try a technique for a couture button band on a sweater, “where you take little bites and then I backstitch across the side label part and I take little bites again,” and she tells listeners she will post pictures of it to social media to report the results. The heuristic evaluation by an
expert occurs through Haven’s own knitting and finish-sewing for her daughter’s sweater, and the report comes in the form of social media, where the audience can comment and weigh in and even contribute to Haven’s techniques for other users. It becomes a community of connected mediation in which the women learn from each other through their practice of knitting and the communication and connection of networking.

**Flexible and Creative Genres**

The entrepreneurialism of podcasting has led to the creation and innovation of flexible genres. This includes a contemporary version of the “sisterly editorial voice,” which “often used the rhetoric of intimate female relations ... [and] assumed equal and personal relationship between editor and reader” (Okker, 1995, p. 23). Additional emergent genres of Haven and Harper’s work is the inclusion of everyday life and family within work product and three kinds of documentation: handwritten, official (on the website), and extra-institutional (on social media).

A familiar and sisterly tone in TPC was discussed in Tebeaux’s (1999) study of women in the seventeenth century; an important quality of women’s technical writing is “the sense that they are talking with their readers rather than simply providing objective, succinct information” (p. 113). Haven and Harper accomplish this on the podcast by talking with each other and imagining themselves talking to their audience. They impart folksy wisdom, give suggestions to listeners, and answer listener questions submitted through a large and popular online knitting forum. Haven and Harper know that they impart knowledge as experts to their users. In order to do this most effectively, since they understand who their
This familiar tone is best represented in the segment of the podcast called “Mother Knows Best.” Harper and Haven answer questions from listeners and impart wisdom and life advice. In the podcast recording I observed, they were asked about how to network and mingle with others at knitting events. Haven said, “not everyone is outgoing and not everyone is comfortable talking to new people, but my advice is to just pretend. Just pretend that you’re okay with talking to new people. Pretend that you’re comfortable, and it’ll get more normal.” She also reminisced that when attending these conferences and festivals, a large part of their time is spent standing in line. She found, during this time, “you may as well make a friend, and you never know where those friendships will take you.” Harper summed up the segment by saying, “Talk to a stranger.”

One of Harper’s most disarming and charming tactics is humor, and she pretends to make mistakes with names constantly in order to identify with her audience in a humorous way. Haven mentioned a knitting personality named Chris, and Harper interrupted with, “Chris Hemsworth?” She did this several times during my 2-day visit, inserting celebrity names disarmingly into the conversation, and she does it to be humorous, to identify with the younger generation, and to show that she can identify with popular culture outside of her knitting expertise.

Part of this familiar tone means including family life and family members within the work product and workspace. For example, Haven sometimes includes her 3-year-old daughter on the podcast, but she realized that “the listeners like little bits of [my daughter]. There are some podcasters who put a lot of their kids in, and it’s not always [valuable].” She
included her daughter during an episode around Christmas time with them reading *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* together. Harper recommended that this was appropriate “because a lot of them are listening at bedtime.” Such work product displays authenticity and creates identification, as Haven left in her own yawning while reading the book, “because it’s authentic. It’s a bedtime story. Like this is part of my process.” She is authoritative about the fact that her workplace is her home, and that her work involves her family, and she makes sure that it is genuine and the tone represents the reality of her life.

Because the podcast is auditory, Haven and Harper have created corresponding documentation. Harper explained,

[W]e talk about our knitting and then we mention a book, we mention a technique, we mention somebody, a personality, and if you’re listening to a podcast it’s very likely that you’re out walking, or during your commute, or while you’re scrubbing your kitchen. It’s a woman’s thing, and you don’t want to stop and take notes. So what we do is we after we’ve recorded, I listen to the show and take show notes and every time we mention something, there’s a link. I put a link in the notes, and after you’ve listened to the show, you can go back and click on the link and go to the site or the person or whatever has been mentioned.

She saw this as one of her most important responsibilities when it comes to her role in podcasting, and it represents her awareness of audience, her ability to document, and her ethic of care for her users.

Haven and Harper document their own work by hand, a genre they have created to reform notions of the traditional workplace. It is an emergent and tactical genre, meant only for them to inform the work they do from the nontraditional workplace. They invented this genre to empower themselves in their workspace, and it makes visible the necessary research and preparation of podcasting. Specifically, the two women keep notebooks with jottings and outlines for the show in order to transmit the oral information with ease and to support
Harper's writing of the official documentation for the website. This system, while low tech, is purposeful, as Haven and Harper only want to write outlines for the shows, so that their conversations about knitting on the aired show come across as genuine and that they are happening spontaneously for the first time. Haven does not want the content to be stale. She explained that the notebooks they keep, large zipped vinyl binders with three rings, loose paper, and pockets, do not travel.

This stays here. And we have a few different notebooks because we’ve outgrown them so every year we get a new notebook. So we keep in these ones ... our contact with the publishers, so I can contact people directly if they need something. And [it] just has the outline of what we do and tells like I write at the top who’s advertising with us that week so I can read it at the top of the show without having to be on my computer.

As I observed their creation of these notes the evening before recording the podcast, they did not talk about specific content with each other, but they did consult on whether or not they had content for the segments. Haven asked questions about each segment, and Harper would affirm that she had something to say during that part of the show.

While talking on the show certainly transmits information, oral information is not always the best form of technical communication. To enhance the oral nature of the podcast, Have and Harper use “official” documentation of the podcast, posting it on their website. They chunk the information into segments, use “show notes” or instructions and links, and include tutorials. It is a documentation of their work and genres meant to reach audiences outside of the podcast or to continue the instruction that occurred on the podcast.

Through social media documentation, the women present tools and techniques through video tutorials, one specifically about how to change RSS feeds, which related to the issue of hosting their many podcast episodes and the technical side of producing and storing
all of those files. They had noticed that a lot of podcasts, because of a hosting site, shut down without warning, and the podcasters could not move their shows. Haven solved this problem by explaining how to update one part of this, and she realized that “free only is free for so long. I’ve been familiar with free Internet stuff long enough to know that it doesn’t last. And people won’t pay for a service if they don’t have to.” Not only does her work help listeners and users of her podcast; she extends her knowledge to inform others engaging in this entrepreneurial work.

**Contextualized Professionalism**

Professionalism and its identities are most often considered to reside institutionally, a consideration that often marginalizes by gender. I previously argued that extra-institutional forms of TPC occur online and in social media (Petersen, 2014), meaning that such workspaces are sites of professional values and practices. As Harper noted, “A professional has been defined by how men do things for so long. [However,] the status is there and the community. I think we are fairly well known.” She understands that what she and her daughter do is not as valued as paid, public, and masculine work, but she also leaves open the possibility for recognizing their professionalism through what they have achieved personally and through their recognition within a community of other knitters and communicators. This is contextualized professionalism, in which they enact professional identities and values within the norms and expectations of their knitting, podcasting, and online communities.

Specifically, Haven is adamant about enacting a professionalism that does not include swearing. Harper said “God” while they recorded the podcast that I observed, and
Haven immediately stopped the recording, went back, and instructed Harper to say it again without “God.” When I asked Haven why this was important to her, she explained:

I think it’s really crass to listen to someone swearing and it’s when you have it recorded. It’s not like a conversation where you say it and you’re done. It’s there forever. And when I went to school for journalism, somebody wrote a piece about a cooperatively owned strip club in [city] where they have health benefits and stuff, which is super great, but the article was written in a way where it was gross. And the intention wasn’t to be gross. The intention was to be shocking, but it was just vulgar. Like there’s a line between writing something that’s shocking to people and just being gross ... I think is reserved for some very extreme circumstances, you know. Like I don’t swear at work either. So it’s a professionalism thing.

The ways in which the women recorded and conducted themselves “on air” was central to their understanding and enactment of professionalism. Their intentions behind the rules show a concern for audience, context, and ethics, hallmarks of professionals (Faber, 2002b).

Haven and Harper self-consciously enacted and situated such professionalism. They cited their conduct as professional. Harper noted that some podcasters conduct research while recording, leaving those gaps and silences in the podcast for listeners to endure. Haven commented, “Oh it’s so irritating. Like, ‘Please hold while I look this thing up, even though I can hit pause and you are listening very likely while you drive or mop your house or scoop dog poop.’ There’s a line .... [and] we’re more professional than a lot of people.” This exemplifies the values they maintain in order to be professionals, and also ties into their awareness of audience and their consideration for that audience. They have imagined to whom they are speaking and what they might be doing. They value the time of their listeners/users, and they contextualize their professionalism against that backdrop and the practices of other podcasters.

Such professionalism means that the façade can come off and these podcasters can present themselves authentically, even when making mistakes. In fact, their professional
ethos depends on their willingness to admit mistakes and share those with their audience. “When Knitting Attacks” is a segment that Haven and Harper use to identify with users by talking about the mistakes they have made while knitting that week, and ultimately present themselves as imperfect users navigating a difficult technology along with their user-listeners. For example, Haven, during the show, said, “the fifth rule of knitting is read the directions all the way through ... but if I actually followed our own knitting rules how would we podcast?” She both dispenses advice and admits her own failings at following it at the same time. She realizes that even she and her mother, experts when it comes to knitting, make mistakes, and that leads to this being the most popular segment. Haven explained that people like the segment because “it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been knitting, you’ll still mess up. And it makes people feel a lot better about themselves.” Sharing mistakes and roadblocks when engaging in technological work is a way of identifying with a user, gaining their trust, and ultimately building a relationship built on mutual experience. Mistakes can be a professional value; it is overlooked in the traditional workplace because of a concern for capital and hierarchy.

Harper shared a “knitting attack” when the yarn for her socks turned her hands green. While this segment is funny and presents a way of identifying with all audience members, beginners or not, Haven used it as an opportunity to impart technical knowledge. “[W]e are definitely going to give this [yarn] a citric acid soak before it goes anywhere,” as a citric acid soak will ensure that the color stays in yarn for wearing and washing. This is a practical consideration of the work these women do, and being honest about problems with a technology can lead to teaching moments for users and the ability to suggest work-arounds
or fixes when a user might encounter their own roadblock. It is contextualized professionalism.

**Nontraditional Workplaces as the Margin of Maneuver**

Because of this professionalism and the situated networking, connected mediation, and flexible genres, the entrepreneurial podcast is a prime site for maneuvering on the margins (Feenberg, 2002). The women anticipate the innovation and modification probable within patterns, suggest ways for users to engage within the community, and demonstrate innovative ways of communicating information from experts and designers to users. Official documentation is accommodated to the needs of the entrepreneurs and the users.

Through this maneuvering, how does Haven and Harper’s work innovate and teach us about the nontraditional workplace? They are more interested in and connected to their audience, their ethics, and the way their information fits into a community, by recognizing other experts, rather than building themselves up into celebrities. The medium of a podcast allows work to be performed flexibly, virtually, and within particular contexts as a useful new way of educating users, transmitting information and values, and connecting with audiences.

Podcasting is an innovative form of nontraditional entrepreneurial work, and Haven and Harper’s work demonstrates how podcasting is another way of communicating complex information to users. As Albers (2008) explicated,

> technical communication is about creating communication that properly conform to human behavior in complex situations. Technical communication does not operate within a clean, simple world ... Now and in the future, a goal of everyone involved with communicating information must be to move away from presenting text to generating information which leads to knowledge. (p. 122)
Haven and Harper’s ability to communicate within a community, through their mistakes and with users in mind, demonstrate the hallmarks of professionalism within technical and professional communication and give traditional practitioners new ideas about how to implement social media technologies into the field. While these women have applied their expertise and technical communication skills to knitting, the form they use can be translated across disciplines and shows how important it is for users to feel connected with and valued by those responsible for teaching and guiding them through technological processes.

Further research could be done on the knitting community and other podcasting communities, as podcasting and other new media technologies enhance practitioners’ work and the engagement of users. Audiences have become increasingly complex in their expectations for communication. Meeting users where they are interested makes sense when sharing communicating technically and professionally with them. Users must be included as part of a network, in which hierarchies are flat and designers/experts interact regularly with each other and with their audiences. Genres can and should be creative and flexible, especially from nontraditional workplaces. Traditional spaces would benefit from allowing creativity and innovation from their workers in terms of how records are kept, information is disseminated, and projects are produced. Spinuzzi (2015) observed, “bureaucratic hierarchies simply don’t cut it. They’re too rigid, too inflexible, too focused on protocol, too unconnected and clumsy. They don’t respond well to rapid change. They don’t innovate well” (p. 3). In order to engage in effective symbolic-analytic work across networks, new work teams must be able to cross boundaries and embrace flexibility and change.

This sort of work is demonstrated by Haven and Harper, and their use of documentation and genres to fit their needs as communicators is a maneuver that all workers
are capable of and should have open to them, even within traditional structures. Traditional workplaces are changing because of technologies, expanded notions of where the workplace is, and worker innovations. Nontraditional workplaces are leading the way in these innovations, as they may operate without hierarchies and employ knowledge and techniques that work best for them as professionals and best for their audiences as parts of larger communities.
CHAPTER 7

THE WEB OF WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES: RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

Introduction

I have theorized that a woman’s experience in the workplace is a process of being inducted into a technological, hierarchical, and often male-dominated system. My research uncovers this situation and outlines the forces that contribute to the crisis of the workplace from the perspective of female TPC practitioners. I presented the misconceptions and difficulties they face in traditional, bureaucratic workplaces, how they have acted to claim authority and agency within such systems and how this experience can lead to activism and advocacy for some women. Lastly, women may opt to leave the traditional workplace in favor of all-edge adhocracies, freelancing opportunities, or contract work. This allows for less structured and more innovative ways of communicating about technologies, particularly technologies and processes they find more applicable to their lives as women. Women still must negotiate this complex, networked, and often “male” notion of the traditional workplace, and they must consequently reterritorialize it based on their needs and experiences.

Women’s experiences in the workplace are often oppressive, negotiated, networked, and reterritorialized. If it ever really existed in the first place, the notion of the “traditional workplace” is continually in a moment of crisis for it to it position women and other subordinate workers. The discipline and docility of women’s bodies in the workplace reveal the many crises experienced within organizations and workplaces because of power struggles
related to gender. My data suggests that in order for the lingering myth of the traditional workplace to end, organizations and institutions must restructure and change, and they are already changing due to the interactional autonomy and accomplishments of its workers. Women in TPC have been reacting through tactical means to subvert the power plays of their organizations or managers and to fill the cracks of the traditional workplace structure.

I have highlighted many ways that women interact with the traditional (and nontraditional) workplace; however, I hesitate to characterize these interactions as a process. They are not linear, and women navigate these experiences in varied and creative ways over time. Generally, my research in this dissertation reveals women’s interactions with the traditional workplace to be a navigable, experiential web of finding ways to pursue careers and apply skills, manage difficulties within and without the traditional workplace, and ultimately act tactically and kairotically to do so. More specifically, there are several recommendations this research evokes.

**Recommendations for Teaching**

TPC programs should be teaching students about navigating workplaces. First, male and female students must be aware of gender oppression and privilege. They must realize which problems persist for women, which affect men as well, and be able to think critically about them. Such preparatory thinking can and should lead to gradual shifts in the interpersonal relationships between male and female employees and allies across gender lines that will be in a position and a frame of mind to continue to press for change. The traditional workplace can grow and renew, leading to more all-edge adhocracies and better situations for females. Such work will take time, and the impact of such education may only
be measurable over long periods of time; however, cultures can and do change because of language and discourse (Faber, 2002a, p. 29). Faber stated, “contests of image and contests of change are really contests of power” (p. 35). Given the work already occurring among women to claim power in workplaces through social interaction and discourse, continuing this project within academic programs makes sense and will continue to fuel the reterritorialization of the traditional workplace.

Second, students would benefit from courses on salary negotiation, sexual harassment, and an awareness of how the traditional workplace views and reacts to female biology. Participants highlighted salary negotiations as a major concern, and many of them found ways to improve their salary situations. Furthermore, sexual harassment continues to be a problem in the workplace. This can be addressed by speaking up in individual situations, but all of these concerns can be navigated by using interpretations and constructions, language and social interaction, orientation and design abilities, and voice to interpret and reclaim power. If students are made aware of it as a problem, its effects on both men and women, and the demoralizing aspect of it from particular standpoints, they may be more likely to resist cultures that accept it and recognize it when it happens to them or others. They will have the awareness and the tools necessary for speaking up, preventing it, or managing it through a position of authority.

Alice’s thoughts and experiences with harassment highlight the great need to address it in our teaching and research. She has not experienced blatant sexual advances, but she is constantly bombarded by inappropriate comments, and as a young woman who just graduated from college and had been taught about the gains and values of women’s studies, she is confused. She said:
I just don’t know how to respond to them when they happen. And it’s usually a joke. And that’s the problem, I think, because it’s usually something said in a joke ... I just don’t know how to respond. It’s so weird when you’re in this environment, full of men, and they fling these jokes around about things that I would consider inappropriate. And they expect you to laugh, and you don’t want to not laugh because you don’t want to make everyone uncomfortable, because this is your work environment. You have to work with these people at the same time it’s like oh, I feel bad inside.

She is crying for help. She would have benefitted from units and lessons within TPC courses, such as a capstone, that addressed toxic work environments, harassment, and ways that she could productively deal with and answer these uncomfortable situations. Instead, she took women’s studies courses that theorized about these issues and presented many of them as having already been dealt with by second wave feminists. She has an awareness of women’s problems historically, but no actual tools for moving that work forward in the twenty-first century workplace. She is disillusioned, after only a year or so as a TPC practitioner. We need practical ways to deal with these concerns instead of being told what should ideally happen in the workplace. When that ideal is not real, how can workers engage in these environments in agential and productive ways?

Third, given the demographics of TPC practitioners, students in TPC programs and as English majors may be mostly women, who will likely enter male-dominated workplaces. They need to be prepared. We can address this by including a unit in each technical communication course, where appropriate, that addresses gender concerns. For example, in my editing courses during the last year, we have made a point of talking about gendered and biased language and paying attention to what The Chicago Manual of Style (2010) and other sources recommend. Chicago presents advice for maintaining credibility, gender bias, other biases, techniques for achieving gender neutrality, and the editor’s responsibility in such
situations (pp. 301-302). My students were unaware of the nuances of gendered language, and expressed surprise but commitment to using terms such as “he or she” rather than assuming that male pronouns are universal. Exposing students to these ideas not only teaches them acceptable norms, but it raises such concerns in their consciousness. Because young women (and likely those in other minorities) suffer the most of this sort of treatment—sexual harassment, unfair policies, difficult managers, low salaries, devaluation, etc.—we have a responsibility to make them aware and train them in college programs how to deal with these issues so they cannot be taken advantage of when starting out, especially if there is a lack of mentors. We can skip the first few webbed and networked interactions of the traditional workplace experience (misconceptions, feminizations, power structures, and hierarchies) and allow female students to enter at the interactional accomplishment level, where they are already prepared to orient themselves to a context and then claim social interaction and authority by negotiating power from the beginning.

Lastly, women and men across fields can engage in an ethic of care. Most concerning to me were the stories women told of being annoyed with their pregnant or nursing colleagues. An ethic of care (as described in Chapters 5 and 6) would look like women watching out for and helping other women. An ethic of care is also an organizational need, and it would mean that traditional and nontraditional workplaces alike stopped treating women like men and embraced the multiple roles, identities, responsibilities, and contexts of its workers. Again, such work can be done in our curricula; we can enact an ethic of caring in our classrooms by including students in creating a care guide or set of ethics for the classroom. As caring professors we can make sure students realize how vital an ethic of care can and should be to the culture of workplaces by extending our discussions of it to future
work experiences. The workplace would benefit from what I call empathetic user design, which considers lived experience to be a form of authority; it considers the benefits of personal connection and “has the potential to sustain relationships and practice caring among users within a community” (Petersen, 2016). In other words, workplaces and those who enter them must be more aware of how humans are affected by the policies and procedures that are maintained with only the interests of men or capital in mind.

**Social Justice Techniques**

The case studies of Virginia and Edith illuminate some of the best practices for engaging in social justice work through TPC. We must recognize that discourse and documentation are political, and we must also extend TPC’s knowledge into fields that are inherently political or poised to be activist, such as women’s studies, political science, environmental studies and humanities, education, and sociology. There is room for TPC to “assist” beyond the fields in which we traditionally engage. Based on what Virginia and Edith highlighted in terms of social justice, we can build from their ideas and hypothesize other ways of making activism and advocacy visible.

In general, practitioners must use documentation to make advocacy and activism visible. These might take the form of social media, like Geraldine (“I’m fairly involved in social media. I’m usually on the top the top 50 list of most influential technical communicators ... based off of Twitter”); listservs, like Sandra’s networking initiative to connect practitioners across her company; or podcasts, as seen with the work that Haven and Harper do in the knitting community. Participant Louisa created a t-shirt with a computer language on it to get the attention of her coworkers, and Pearl made a formal
PowerPoint presentation for her colleagues. Speaking up through documentation is an effective way to claim agency in social interactions, and a more effective and lasting use of discourse is in its documentation and permanence, as exemplified by both Virginia and Edith. Virginia compiled a researched report on the problems within her workplace for women in order to give senior executives a concrete and tangible record of what was actually happening. She documented voices that were not normally heard and experiences that were not usually seen or understood. Women’s words do not become official unless documented, and because practitioners are documentation experts, they can use those skills to document the voices of those who are marginalized. Edith similarly made her work official by documenting the poverty situation in her state as concrete evidence of nonprofit programs as important and why lawmakers should care. Those in power must have documentation in order to remember the issues being advocated for and in order to cite such information to others within hierarchies.

Documentation can affect larger numbers of people. Speaking up on a case-by-basis is important, but it may not enact immediate or large-scale change. Both Edith and Virginia noted that their documentation of the issues for which they advocated allowed them to reach larger audiences and to influence on a broad scale. Documentation can be easily shared and can become widespread in a way that word-of-mouth communication cannot. However, such “official” documentation creates questions about what should be documented. Further research might address the nuanced and complex negotiation involved with social justice work that becomes “official” and therefore possibly as bureaucratic and oppressive as the structures it attempts to expose.
Furthermore, documentation of silent or distressing issues might not get official recognition, not even from HR. Maneuverable documentation, as we saw with Louisa and Pearl, might be more appropriate in particular situations. (An example of one possible documentation pathway is visualized in Figure 7.1.) Such documentation can be developed in teaching social justice techniques to students; students should be identifying their own social justice concerns and awareness and documenting them in creative and unique ways. We can more effectively allow students to practice it and disseminate their social justice documentation by requiring a practical task that allows for creativity and passion in completing it. Ideas include live tweeting (or using another social media platform) of a student-led protest on campus; writing a blog post or editorial for a newspaper, using Storify to curate activities surrounding a particular issue, collecting and writing a report on social media activism that is delivered to the head of a department or organization; creating an online magazine (Stephens, 2016), podcast, or zine; or publishing their concerns in a research article with a professor. For example, my undergraduate research methods students this semester are investigating the fairness of YouTube copyright claims for narrators and examining volunteer recognition in nonprofit organizations. Both projects are publishable and will impact a larger consortium of digital activists and nonprofit organizations. Digital media platforms and awareness of social issues make for endless possibilities in teaching, collaborating, and disseminating information.
Figure 7.1 Possible documentation pathways: Alternatives to HR
Finally, from Virginia and Edith we learned that forming a coalition of advocates is key to performing social justice work. TPC practitioners have the opportunity and expertise to interact with and interview subject matter experts, meaning that coalition-building, especially when it comes to documenting social or political issues in an activist effort, is not foreign to them. Practitioners are always networked and situated, and such positioning and the skills of TPC lend themselves well to activism and social justice. The field has always been in a position to influence social matters and policies, and practitioners and researchers can do so effectively by building networks and coalitions. We can and should encourage our students to do the same by tasking them to identify organizations that could benefit from their expertise and working within groups to diversify their abilities and awareness.

**Following the Lead of Nontraditional Workplaces**

Similarly, a networked community is essential to workspaces and places that avoid hierarchization and are emerging as adhocracies within the knowledge work economy. The case study of podcasting demonstrated professionalism and situated networking, connected mediation, and flexible genres; such entrepreneurial work is an effective way of maneuvering around and beyond the traditional workplace. Haven and Harper anticipated the innovation and modification for their users, connected users and experts within a community, and demonstrated innovative and friendly ways of communicating information from experts to users. Official documentation is accommodated to the needs of the entrepreneurs and the users.

A community-minded approach means they are connected to their audience, aware of ethics, and magnanimous with other experts. In particular, the podcast platform allows
work to be performed flexibly, virtually, and within particular contexts as a useful new way of educating users, transmitting information and values, and connecting with audiences. Podcasting is an innovative form of nontraditional entrepreneurial work, and Haven and Harper’s work demonstrates how podcasting is another way of communicating complex information to users. Their work demonstrates the hallmarks of professionalism in TPC and should encourage traditional organizations and other practitioners to explore new ideas about how to implement social media technologies. While Haven and Harper focus on knitting, the form they use can be translated across disciplines and shows how important it is for users to feel connected with and valued by those responsible for teaching and guiding them through technological processes.

Audiences have become increasingly complex in their expectations for communication. Users must be included as part of knowledge work connections, as hierarchies are flattening and experts can easily interact with each other and with audiences. Genres can and should be creative and flexible, especially from nontraditional workplaces. Traditional spaces would benefit from allowing creativity and innovation from their workers in terms of how records are kept, information is disseminated, and projects are produced. In order to engage in effective symbolic-analytic work across networks, new work teams must be able to cross boundaries and embrace flexibility and change. Traditional workplaces are changing because of technologies, expanded notions of where the workplace is, and worker innovations. Nontraditional workplaces are leading the way in these innovations, as they operate without hierarchies and employ knowledge and techniques that work best for them as professionals and best for their audiences as parts of larger communities.
Conclusion

Overall, TPC as a field involves understanding human interaction and the crossing of boundaries with technologies, rhetoric, research, and design. Women participate in this as much as men do, if not more, and their engagement should be equally valued and included. Recognizing women’s ability to participate, without problem or special dispensation, means that “feminized” does not have negative connotations and that it does not place our field in a “lower” or unsatisfactory position. Instead, it gives breadth and depth to TPC in understanding our capabilities and the ability of all human beings to participate.

Women are moving the workplace forward and opening spaces for change amidst the tensions and myths of the traditional workplace. They face many pressures, but their work and their positions are pivotal and disruptive, poised to address the issues through interactional accomplishment, extra-institutional work, social justice advocacy, and networked adhocracies. Women in TPC are part of an expanding knowledge economy, all-edge adhocracies, and unique and networked organizations, not marginal to them. Women are at the forefront of embracing new networks and technologies and are the turning point for change within traditional workplaces in need of rehabilitation and restructuring.
REFERENCES


McQuade, A. (2012, April 10). The war on women wages on. And no, I’m not talking about caterpillars. *Emily’s List*. Retrieved from http://emilyslist.org/blog/The_War_on_Women_wages_on_And_no_Im_not_talking_about_caterpillars


Appendix A

Participant Questionnaire
Participant Questionnaire

Name:
Age:
Education Level:
Job Title:
Company:
Marital Status:
Race/Ethnicity:
Household Income:
Salary:
Appendix B

Semistructured Interview Questions
Semistructured Interview Questions

Demographic Information

Why did you choose your field and how did you get into this type of work?

What self-confidence or satisfaction do you gain from your work?

Why is your work important to you?

What kinds of stress do you experience because of work? What are the causes of this stress?

Do you enjoy your work? Why or why not?

What makes you “professional”?

Workplace Culture

What kinds of organizational decisions do you make?

What is your working relationship with your manager(s)? Coworkers?

Do you feel valued at work?

Do you manage any projects or employees? What concerns or successes have you had doing this?

What are some of the conflicts you’ve faced at work? How do you handle conflict?

Do you work hard? Harder than other employees? What are the results of this?

What are some misconceptions about your work?

Have you been treated differently than your colleagues? “Do you believe gender has anything to do with this differential treatment? Why or why not?

Have you ever felt you were unfairly treated in a promotion or hiring process?
Have you been involved in any policy-making or policy-writing regarding women at your workplace? How would you rewrite/reword policies currently in place if you had the opportunity to?

Have you ever thought about leaving your job because of gender-related problems?

Do you think that women’s contributions are perceived differently at your workplace?

Do you have any concerns about your workplace? Gender concerns?

Gender and Sexual Harassment

Have you ever received any unwelcome sexual advances? What happened? How did you deal with it?

If she hasn’t personally, does she know of anyone who has? What is her sense of how prevalent this is?

How did your company handle the incident(s)? How was it resolved?

Have you had any sexual harassment training? Does your company offer training?

Have you ever felt bullied or in danger at work?

Unpaid Labor/Pay Gap

If you are comfortable sharing, what is your salary? Do you know how it compares to other employees’?

What kind of work do you perform that isn’t compensated or part of your job description?
Role Expectations

How are you expected to behave at work?

How do you handle emotions at work? How do emotions affect your work?

Do you feel the pressure of any expectations, particularly tied to your gender?

What is your social role with coworkers? As in, do you have friendships with coworkers outside of work?

Appearance

How do you dress for work? How much time/energy do you spend on preparing yourself to look professional/appropriate for work?

Is there a dress code at your work? How do you enact or resist it?

What role does your age play in your career? How do others respond to your age (or perceived age) at work?

What does a professional look like? (Fitness? Body language? Emotional displays?)

Professional Development/Mentoring

What options for professional development do you have? What prevents you from taking advantage of them?

What kind of support would you like to receive from your workplace?

Who are your role models/mentors at work? Outside of work? How did you gain these mentors?

What kind of networking do you do?

Which professional organizations do you participate in? What are the benefits of these to you?
Do you associate with any groups geared toward women and/or minorities in your field?

Work-Life Balance

What kinds of support do you receive from your partner?

What parts of your life must be balanced with work responsibilities?

How do you balance your work and family life?

Does technology help you to balance home and work life?

What is your schedule? Can you control it? Can you describe a typical day or week?

What are some of the work-family policies at your workplace? How have they affected you?

Do you feel these policies are widely used? By whom? How are people who use these policies perceived? What prevents you from using these policies?

Education

How did your education prepare you for the workplace?

How did your education prepare you for gender concerns in the workplace?

Motherhood/Maternity

If you are not a mother, are you comfortable discussing the reasons for that?

What are your experiences with maternity leave? What were your expectations? What actually happened? How do you feel (or what do you know) about possible future maternity leave?

Who negotiated your maternity leave?
If you breastfed, what kind of support have you received from your company for breastfeeding?

How has your work affected breastfeeding, if applicable?

Do you work full or part time? Why?

How does your work affect you in ways as a mother that it doesn’t affect nonmothers?

How does motherhood/maternity affect your work?
CURRICULUM VITAE

EMILY JANUARY PETERSEN
271 East 1500 South
Kaysville, UT 84037
801.682.6128
emily.j.petersen@aggiemail.usu.edu

BIOGRAPHY

Emily January Petersen is one of three recipients of the 2016 national graduate research award from the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing for her dissertation research. Additionally, she received one of only two research fellowships in the Department of English at Utah State University in Technical Communication and Rhetoric. She has experience teaching composition, technical writing, editing, research/methods, and women and gender studies courses. Her research focuses on professional identities from a feminist perspective, examining how women act as professional communicators through social media and historically, both in public spheres and in the workplace of the home. She is interested in how women enact identity as users of technological systems, such as the workplace. How have women participated as professional communicators historically? How do women claim professional spaces through technology? She addresses these questions qualitatively using content analysis, interviews, observations, and archival research. Her work has appeared in the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, Communication Design Quarterly, the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, Intercom, and conference proceedings. She will begin work as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of English at Brigham Young University in July 2016.

EDUCATION

Ph.D. • Theory and Practice of Professional Communication
Utah State University, Department of English, Logan, UT
Graduated May 2016
Certificate: Women and Gender Studies (April 2014)

M.A. English • Literature and Composition
Weber State University, Ogden, UT
Graduated April 2010
B.A. English • emphasis in Editing and Technical Writing
Brigham Young University, Provo, UT
Graduated April 2001
Minor: Humanities
Language Requirement: Spanish

RESEARCH

Journals


Petersen, E. J. (2016). Empathetic user design: Understanding and living the reality of an audience. *Communication Design Quarterly 4*(2), 23-36. (Special Issue: Online Networks, Social Media, and Communication Design)


Petersen, E. J. (2011). Race, gender, and imposed identities in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand.* *Journal of South Texas English Studies, 3*(1).

Conference Proceedings


Hayhoe Fellow Award Winners


Industry Publications


National/International Conference Presentations

Petersen, E. J. (accepted for October 2016). Reterritorializing workspaces: Entrepreneurial podcasting as situated networking, connected mediation, and contextualized professionalism. ProComm, IEEE International Professional Communication Conference, Houston, TX.

Petersen, E. J. (11 June 2016). Mother’s work: Organizing Mormon motherhood in the early twentieth century. Mormon History Association, Snowbird, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (6 April 2016). “Reasonably bright girls”: Theorizing women’s agency in technological systems of power. Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), Houston, TX.

Petersen, E. J. (1 April 2016). Using antenarrative to uncover systems of power in mid-twentieth century policies on marriage and maternity at IBM. European Social Science History Conference, Valencia, Spain.

Petersen, E. J. (9 January 2016). The state of female practitioners in technical and professional communication. Modern Language Association, Austin, TX.


Hayhoe Fellow Award Winners

Petersen, E. J. (6 June 2015). Looking for career-woman models in the 1930s: Virginia Hanson’s correspondence with Margaret Sanger and Clare Boothe Luce. Mormon History Association, Provo, UT.

Helen Z. Papanikolas Award Winner, Best Graduate Student Paper on Utah Women’s History

Petersen, E. J. (27 September 2014). Women, religion, and professional communication: Communication design for the Female Relief Society, 1842–1920. Special Interest Group on Design of Communication (SIGDOC), Colorado Springs, CO.

Petersen, E. J. (24 April 2014). ‘Invent this, o ye men’: The female inventor of the dishwasher and communication. European Social Science History Conference, Vienna, Austria.


Regional Conference Presentations


Petersen, E. J. (3 March 2016). Beyond biography: Using technical and professional documentation to contextualize Mormon women’s lives. Church History Symposium, Salt Lake City and Provo, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (12 April 2014). The accidental professional communicator: Technical folklore in a police department. Western States Folklore Society, Logan, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (10 October 2013). Varying routes and routines through cluster criticism. Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Vancouver, WA.
Petersen, E. J. (12 April 2013). Redefining the workplace: Professionalizing motherhood through blogging. Utah State University Graduate Research Symposium, Logan, UT. **Oral Presentation Award Winner** in Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

Petersen, E. J. (2 November 2012). Race, gender, and imposed identities in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. Brigham Young University Women’s Studies Conference, Provo, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (13 April 2012). Ambivalence towards sexual freedom and loss of faith in *A Farewell to Arms*. Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters, Logan, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (8 March 2012). Flinging dirt in Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*. Humanities Education and Research Association, Salt Lake City, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (8 October 2009). Incipient feminism in Dorothy Whipple’s *The Priory*. Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Snowbird, UT. **Nominee: Charles Davis Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Presentation**

Petersen, E. J. (9 August 2008). I love you no matter what. Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, UT.

Petersen, E. J. (3 March 2001). Beauty pains: Tips, tricks, and slips of pageant hopefuls. Folklore Society of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

**Invited Presentations/Appearances**

Petersen, E. J., Clarke, C., & Strein, R. (24 September 2014). Lessons learned in the archives from the Women’s Discourses Project. Women Historian’s Conversation Group, Salt Lake City, UT.


Rogers, S., Petersen, E. J., & Ludlow, S. (29 February 2012). Roundtable discussion of citation project–inspired English 1010. Composition Program Workshop, Weber State University, Ogden, UT.

Rogers, S., Petersen, E. J., & Ludlow, S. (2 November 2011). Modifying your classes in response to citation project findings. Composition Program Workshop, Weber State University, Ogden, UT.
Workshops

Participant, Feminist Digital Scholars Workshop
Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (8 June–14 June 2015)

Attendee, Research Methods Workshop: “Analyzing Multimodal Data” by Anne Frances Wysocki
Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Las Vegas, NV (12 March 2013)
Scholarship recipient

Awards

Graduate Research Award for dissertation project
$750 award, inclusion on national conference panel
Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Houston, TX, 6 April 2016

Presidential Doctoral Research Fellowship
$45,000
$7,500 stipend/full-tuition scholarship per semester for three years
Utah State University, August 2012–May 2015

Helen Z. Papanikolas Award Winner for Best Student Paper on Utah Women’s History
$100 award
Utah Division of State History, 1 October 2015

Hayhoe Fellow Award Winner, Best Graduate Student Paper
$180 registration waiver
IEEE International Professional Communication Conference, Limerick, Ireland, 13 July 2015

Graduate Researcher of the Year, Department of English
Utah State University, 2013–2014

Oral Presentation Award Winner, Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
$300 travel grant
Graduate Research Symposium, Utah State University, 12 April 2013

Research Methods Workshop Scholarship Recipient
$200 travel grant
Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Las Vegas, NV, 12 March 2013
**Nominee, Outstanding Student**
Weber State University, Davis Campus, March 2010

**Nominee, Charles Davis Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Presentation**
Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Conference, October 2009

**Graduate Student Teaching Assistant** (one of four in the program; instructor of record)
$20,000
$5,000 salary/full-tuition scholarship per semester for two years
Weber State University, 2008–2010

**TEACHING**

**Utah State University**, Logan, UT
ENGL 3080: Introduction to Technical Writing for Nonmajors (1 section; 2013)
WGS 1010: Introduction to Women and Gender Studies (1 section; 2015)
WGS 4900/6900: Girls’ Studies (1 section online; 2015)
ENGL 3450: Methods and Research in Professional and Technical Communication (1 section; 2016)
ENGL 4400: Professional Editing (2 sections; 2015 and 2016)
WGS 4910/6910: Feminist Theories (1 section online, 2015)
WGS 4920/6920: Feminist Research Methods (1 section online; 2016)

**Guest Lecturer**, Utah State University; Logan, UT (Spring 2015)
ENGL 4410: Document Design and Graphics (2 class periods)

ENGL 1010: Introductory College Writing (14 sections)
ENGL 2010: Intermediate College Writing (2 sections)

**Adjunct Instructor** (2010–2012)
English Department, Weber State University, Ogden, UT (ENGL 1010 & 2010)

**Graduate Student Teaching Assistant**, instructor of record (2008–2010)
English Department, Weber State University, Ogden, UT (ENGL 1010 & 2010)

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Research Assistant/Publications Intern, Women’s Discourses Project** (July 2013–August 2015)
LDS Church History Library and Archives, Salt Lake City, UT
Executive Director, Kaysville-Fruit Heights Scholarship Pageant (2006–2010)
  Kaysville/Fruit Heights, UT
  Oversaw fundraising and production of yearly community event
  Mentored young women at local and state levels
  Trained participants in resume writing and interviewing skills

Associate Editor (December 2002–December 2004; on-call December 2004–August 2008)
  LDS Church Security Department, Salt Lake City, UT
  Researched, wrote, and proofread summary of worldwide security incidents
  Supervised assistant editor

Proofreader (January 2001–April 2001)
  Independent Study, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT
  Copyedited university and high-school courses for publication

Writing Tutor (January 2007–April 2009)
  Developmental English Learning Center/Writing Center, Weber State University, Ogden, UT
  Tutored English 0955 and 1010/2010 students
  Received Master Tutor Certification from College Reading and Learning Association (April 2009)

Books Edited


Book Researched


SERVICE

Panel Organizer/Presenter, The Practice of Mormon Mothering (11 June 2016)
  Mormon History Association Conference, Snowbird, UT
Peer Reviewer (February 2016)
SIGDOC Student Research Competition, Arlington, VA

Volunteer Member of Local Host Committee (2 October 2015)
Council on Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication Annual Conference, Logan, UT

Panel Organizer/Presenter, Workers and Identity: Histories of Women in the Workplace (April 2016)
European Social Science History Conference, Valencia, Spain

Review Coordinator (July 2015–August 2015)
Program Committee, Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, Logan, UT

Search Committee Graduate Student Representative (September 2014–February 2015)
Utah State University, Department of English, Logan, UT

Panel Moderator, Folklore, Workers, and Identity (April 2014)
Western States Folklore Society, Logan, UT

Social Media Liaison (April 2013–April 2014)
Utah State University, Department of English, Graduate Student Facebook Page

Panel Organizer/Moderator, Power Relationships and Human Connections (April 2013)
Utah State University, Department of English Undergraduate Symposium

Conference Programming Committee Volunteer (October 2012)
Association of Teachers of Technical Writing

Ensign magazine, Salt Lake City, UT
Copyediting of two major editions a year

Memberships
Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW)
Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition (CFSHRC)
Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC)
Modern Language Association (MLA)
IEEE Professional Communication Society (ProComm)
Mormon History Association (MHA)
Special Interest Group on the Design of Communication (SIGDOC)
Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI)