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A Feminist Critique of Intercollegiate Debate

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This critique seeks to examine the current practices and mainstream attitudes in the field of intercollegiate debate to determine whether or not they show evidence of being patriarchal. Foss argues that a patriarchal society consists of relationships that "exist in all institutions and social practices" in which men attempt to dominate women. These values are instilled in society, and thus we view them as normal and tend to "perpetuate them" (1996, 166). If practices in the field of debate are found to be patriarchal, then these values and ideas are being perpetuated, perhaps unwittingly, by those in the community. The goal of this examination is to help empower people within the context of intercollegiate debate. Bartanen contends that debate can uniquely empower students in that:

> . . . the debate community can incorporate masculine and feminine ways of knowing and speaking. By understanding better how women and men students from a variety of backgrounds learn and reason and make decisions, we can modify our teaching practices and reform our debating norms to be more amenable to the development of authentic student voices. (Bartanen, 1995, 12)

This essay will proceed by explaining the methodology used, reporting the results obtained, reframing the results as double binds, and concluding with a discussion of possible solutions for the empowerment of the debate community.

METHODOLOGY

The first step in this critique is to define how gender is constructed in debate. How is rhetoric used to define the roles of men and women in the activity? Are there certain opinions, whether spoken or unspoken, about how women and men should behave? Is the viewpoint that debate offers the audience one of masculine or feminine understanding? Is there an attempt being made to leave women powerless? Are women being forced to adopt a masculine mind set in order to identify with and be included in the activity (see Foss, 1996, 170-171)?

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The next step is to determine whether this definition of gender in intercollegiate debate supports patriarchy or challenges it. If our activity upholds a system or mind set that leads to the oppression of women, how does our rhetoric maintain this domination? If our field serves to challenge patriarchy, how does our rhetoric aid in the transformation of this oppression?

In order to determine whether or not certain aspects of debate are patriarchal, we have chosen to engage in participatory field research as a female debater and male coach. We will report our results in narrative form. While the names are fictional, the events are not. The events were confirmed by personal observation or by interviews with the actual parties involved. Interspersed with this narrative will be a review of the literature which tests and ultimately confirms our personal observations.

If the field of debate perpetuates a patriarchal atmosphere in which men dominate, women are excluded or marginalized, and sexual harassment runs rampant, then there is an overwhelming need to transform the activity into one in which all voices, regardless of gender, are empowered. Feminist critiques offer unique ways in which to transform the "world" of debate. This transformation would begin in the classroom, where women would be included and empowered to step forward and take an active role in the process. It would continue at tournaments, where this approach would be accepted by and even encouraged by coaches, judges, and competitors. Crenshaw states that debate is an "educational laboratory" and that feminist approaches offer "the possibility of real societal transformation" (1993, 78).

RESULTS

The van rolled along and Mary sat by herself, thinking about the upcoming tournament. She had stayed up until three in the morning plotting strategies with her partner Sam. They discussed the teams that would be competing and the cases that they were running. Now came the toughest part--the mental preparation. Her performance at the tournament could hinge on whether or not she psyched herself up before the rounds began. Mary had always looked to herself for the task. She had learned long ago that there wasn't anyone that she could look to for help. A lot of the male debaters were able to look to one another or their coaches for support but she had never felt like a part of this network. Most of the successful debaters and the majority of the coaches on the circuit were men and Mary longed for a female mentor that she could depend on for advice and comfort. Her coach was a wonderful instructor, but she could never confide in him or turn to him for support. As the van rolled to a stop in front of the tournament, she grabbed her backpack. There really wasn't any use in crying over spilled milk. She stepped out of the van and helped Sam unload their tubs of evidence.

The idea that certain debate practices oppress women is not new, almost thirty years ago, Wayne Hensley stated that women were often separated from men due to the "belief that the male is generally superior to the female in forensic endeavors" (1968, 235). Logue conducted various studies to determine the participation rates of women in both regional and national CEDA tournaments. She found that only one-third of the participants at the regional level and only one-fourth of the debaters at the national level were women (1986, 64, 67). These numbers were not representative of the female college population, which was 49 percent of all students (69). An explanation for this lack of representation could be that the activity itself is patriarchal. Logue cites the male dominance of the field as a reason why women do not participate on an equal basis (71-72). Stepp states that 85 percent of the winners of CEDA national tournaments have been males. She also maintains that men have comprised 66 percent of CEDA competitors and have won 80 percent of the speaker awards (1996, 118). Underrepresentation occurs not only in competition, but in coaching as well (Pettus and Danielson, 1994, 52).

Mary enters the room prepared for her first round. They were debating on the negative. She felt confident that they could beat the case. In the first negative constructive Sam runs an ecofeminism position that Mary has researched and constructed. It is one of their favorite positions. Her opponents run generic "feminism bad" arguments. Mary has taken several women's studies classes and has studied the author that they are quoting. She knows that the author does not assume ecofeminism in her writing. Mary argues this fact in her speeches and explains that the entire feminist movement cannot be condensed into one unified paradigm. The affirmative team argues that "feminism is feminism" and there is no delineation. After the round the critic votes against her and Sam on the ecofeminism position. He explains his decision by saying that he believes the generic feminism evidence applies to the ecofeminist arguments. Mary is extremely frustrated after the round and seriously questions whether or not she should ever run the ecofeminist position again.

Ironically, the analysis and argumentation that debaters use in rounds concerning feminism can be used to entrench patriarchy. The current style of argumentation about feminism being employed by countless debaters condenses the many, varied feminist factions into one unified, harmonious group (Crenshaw, 1993; Tuman, 1993; and Rowland, 1993). This oversimplification of the issues results in the marginalization of women because those voices that fall outside of the mainstream thought in the feminist movement are left out and ignored. Tuman contends that overreliance on evidence contributes to this reductionism (85). The tendency to use "cards" as a crutch causes misunderstandings and misapplications in rounds and

can reduce the complex subject of feminism to simplistic, overclaimed, or erroneous statements. A debater may read evidence from radical feminists advocating the overthrow of all men in government, while the opposing team may be arguing that liberal feminists want equality for all people. Although these are two different positions, debaters tend to hear the word "feminist" and assume that the philosophies are all the same. Rowland argues that this narrowing of the multidimensional scope of feminism occurs because it is currently strategically beneficial for debaters to do so (81).

Mary tries to snap out of her funk after the last round while awaiting the pairings for the next round. She spots her coach across the room and he calls out encouragingly, "Did you whip them in the last round?" "No," she tells him, "we lost on the ecofeminism position." "Really? I'm surprised, usually you decimate everyone with that critique. Don't worry. You'll pick up the next round." She spots Sue, one of her friends from debate camp, and walks over to check on her progress. "Hey! How's it going? Did you win the last round?" "Oh yeah," Sue tells her, "we totally annihilated them. It wasn't pretty." Sam runs over to them and asks, "Did you hear about the team from Texas State? They totally blew Washington Tech out of the water!" He shows her the postings for the next round. "Oh great, we're hitting Jack and Dan. Let's go talk strategy."

Knutson suggests that the underrepresentation of women in debate is due to the reliance of the structure of debate on the metaphor that "Argument is War" (1996). She cites several examples:

> During and between rounds the metaphor is clear. "That aff case was totally *indefensible*". "We were completely *destroyed*. The *positions we took* were *obliterated*". "Do you think you *won* or *lost* that round? You were *right on target* with the topicality argument. You *shot down* every objection". "I really hate that *rapid fire* delivery." " I couldn't vote for the neg after the aff *captured so much ground*." (1996, 33-34)

Others have concurred that debate is often seen as "combat" and that arguments are used as "weapons" (Frank, 1993, 81-82). Knutson (1996, 35-38) argues that the exclusive nature of the war metaphor makes it difficult for women to identify with and be included in this form of rhetoric which is so prevalent in the debate community.

As Mary journeyed to her next round, she overheard two male debaters angrily castigating their previous round's judge. "Yeah, we were totally hosed in that round. We might as well have bent over and made it a lot easier for the judge. Talk about getting raped." She shook her head disgustedly and entered the room for her next round.

Another example of patriarchal practices is the use of sexual metaphors in the rhetoric of many in the debate community. It would be impossible for us to count the number of times that we have heard that an argument "sucks" or "blows" or that a debater "got screwed" in a round. These expressions are dangerous because they revolve around males and their experiences at the expense of and the exclusion of women. We have heard debaters tell one another to "bend over and take it." Another example of this is when debaters claim to have been "raped" by the other team or the judge. This is using language to trivialize and to make light of something that is horrific and demeaning.

She arrived in time to hear the opposing team's coach joking with the critic for her round, "Look, Jack and Dan have worked hard to beat this team. Don't just vote for her because she has a nice ass." Laughter broke out among the four men in the room. Mary's jaw dropped open and she froze in humiliation as a ***previous scene*** *flashed before her eyes. It was her first year debating on the college circuit and she felt every inch the novice debater that she was. She and her partner, Jane, had just reached their first outround. She was extremely nervous and shaking like a leaf. She walked out into the hall to help quench the dryness in her throat. She bent over to take a drink and as she straightened she noticed one of the judges for her round standing behind her. She smiled and attempted to move around him, but he blocked her path. "Look, I can make this round simple, if you really want my ballot then you'll have to work for it. Perhaps you can come by and visit me tonight." He leered at her mockingly and her first instinct was to laugh. He couldn't possibly be serious. "You're kidding, aren't you?" He sneered for a moment longer and then his expression became solemn. "Why, of course I was. Get a sense of humor." He brushed past her and Mary was left alone feeling confused and bewildered. The round went horribly and Mary felt intimidated by the stony expressions from the judge. After the round she felt betrayed and isolated and it took her awhile to again become excited about debating. She blamed herself for the incident and she longed for someone to confide in. She never told anyone about what happened. Now, the same feelings of insecurity and guilt overwhelmed Mary as she stood in the doorway.*

Stepp, Simmerly, and Logue concluded in their 1994 study that sexual harassment is a problem in intercollegiate debate (39). Gender harassment (which would include some of the sexual metaphors that we mentioned above) and sexual imposition, two of the five levels of sexual harassment tested, were found to occur in significantly higher frequencies in the debate community than on college campuses (38-39).

After the last round Mary feels somewhat confident about her performance at the tournament. All but one of the judges disclosed their decisions and she knows that she and Sam have won either three or four rounds. Their chances of making it into the outrounds are reasonably good. After dinner the team travels back to the hotel to discover which teams advanced. Mary eagerly pores over the list but she and Sam do not appear. She dejectedly tells her partner and they both wonder what happened. The next day at the awards assembly Sam is named the fifth place speaker. She and Sam look at their ballots and realize that their record was 4-2 and that they missed making it into the outrounds by two speaker points. This is not the first time that she and Sam have been this close and she wonders if the situation will ever change. Mary is dismayed at the ballot from her fourth round. Her speaker points were noticeably lower than the male debaters and the judge chided her for her "bitchiness" during the round.

Bruschke and Johnson found a significant difference based on gender in the amounts of speaker points received, which could result in a woman losing up to six speaker positions in a tournament (1994, 168-169). This might not appear significant but it could make the difference between a woman receiving the first place speaker award at a tournament and not placing in the top five. More importantly, the lost points could be the deciding factor in whether or not her team "breaks" into the outrounds of a tournament. Although questions have been raised regarding Bruschke and Johnson's study (see Shelton, 1996), they answer the criticisms by noting that: "Our primary conclusion is that gender bias 'relationships are complex, depend on a variety of factors, and may not reveal themselves in any single collection of eight rounds. That does not make them any less real.' We stand by that conclusion and consider it unchallenged" (1996, 22).

DEBATE AND DOUBLE BINDS

In her book, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues that women suffer from a variety of catch-22's or double standards that block their path to success. Society often puts women into no-win situations that are hard to escape.

Three of the six double binds that Jamieson describes seem to especially apply to the field of intercollegiate debate: the womb/brain bind, the femininity/competence bind, and the silence/shame bind.

Jamieson defines the womb/brain bind as a situation in which "women could use their brains only at the expense of their uteruses" (1995, 16). Women are thrown into a standard that dictates that intelligence and sexuality are mutually exclusive: those with beauty and sex appeal must be dumb and those with brains must be sexless. Women in debate are forced into this bind when subjected to common statements such as "All the pretty women are in individual events, not debate." Another, more vicious occurrence of the womb/brain bind in debate is the vast amount of sexual harassment that occurs. As with "Mary's encounter," women that are harassed have their sexuality questioned along with their intelligence.

The femininity/competence bind is defined as "requiring both femininity and competence of women in the public sphere, and then defining femininity in a way that excludes competence, the bind creates unrealizable expectations" (1995, 18). In a debate, as with any public speaking forum, a speaker is judged competent when she takes on such "masculine" qualities as aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and dynamism. When women attempt to adopt these characteristics, however, they are regarded as unfeminine. It is the very qualities defining competence that women try to embrace and, in so doing, are criticized. Women in debate are often chastised by both men and women for seeming too aggressive and unfeminine.

The silence/shame double bind is defined as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that "condemns women for failing to do something they are forbidden to do" (Jamieson, 1995, 17). Women find it difficult to speak out and have their voices equally respected and adhered to, yet society seems perplexed by the notion that women aren't as vocal as men. This bind is seen through the underrepresentation of women in all levels of debate. The small percentages of women that make it to the upper echelons of debate are regarded as exceptions to the rule. In the narrative, Mary feels alienated from the debate community because of her need for a female role model. She can't understand why there are not more women in the activity.

SOLUTIONS

"If everyone everywhere woke up tomorrow assuming that men and women ought to be treated in the same way in the same situations, a lot would change. Teachers would call on girls as often as boys. Women would earn the same salaries as men with comparable degrees. Ken would have joined Barbie in claiming that 'math is tough'--or neither would have uttered the phrase."

--Kathleen Hall Jamieson

Numerous scholars have called for changes in the structure and outlook of the activity, for example, Bartanen (1995, 6-12), Bjork and Trapp (1994, 34-35), Crenshaw, (1993, 78), Frank (1993, 83), Knutson (1996, 38-40), and Logue (1986, 72-73). Jamieson offers eight solutions that can help break the cycle of the double binds. We see six of them as especially useful in the field of intercollegiate debate.

The first solution is what she terms reframing. "Reframing invites an audience to view a set of options from a different perspective and confront the fact that the options offered are false . . ." (1995, 190). Reframing enables us to see the double binds placed on women for what they are. Scholarly critiques and in-round arguments that publicly recognize double binds in debate can aid in reframing our outlook on the activity.

The second tool in breaking the binds is that of recovering the history of women's lives and achievements (Jamieson, 1995, 191). Recovery enables us to value the societal contributions of women as well as men. The recognition of present and past women debaters, such as Ann Richards and Janet Reno, can help future female competitors to identify with and feel empowered by their success. Forensic organizations should take a more active role in recovering the history of women in debate. For example, one of the forensic journals could publish a series of articles featuring this history.

Reclaiming the language for women is the next step in destroying the double binds. Jamieson states that "the power to name is the power to create and define" (1995, 192). The labeling of communication styles and characteristics as "masculine" and "feminine" can lead to the creation of double binds. In her article entitled "Because We Don't Like It: A Feminist Non-Participant's View of Cross-Examination Debate Association Debate," Beattie asserts that men and women both think and communicate differently. She draws the assumption that women just don't like debate because of these presumed differences (1996, 102-104). Beattie's labeling of debate creates a false dichotomy and perpetuates the femininity/competence bind. We have to move away from this stereotyping in order to ensure the future participation of women. Both men and women should view communication styles as appropriate or inappropriate for a given situation--not as "masculine" or "feminine."

Jamieson suggests recasting language to change a perception of handicaps or limitations into qualifications. Cold, hard logic is valued in debates at the expense of emotions and feelings. Showing one's emotional side in a debate is often viewed as a handicap. However, Gilligan argues that women often stress responsibilities and relationships in making decisions (1982). This "ethic of care" could be applied to the debate context if our language was recast to value this aspect of being human. This emphasis on people and connections could help bring a fresh approach to the activity and bring new perspectives to both debaters and judges.

Rewriting, or changing rhetoric from within, is the next method for breaking the binds (Jamieson, 1995, 194). Debaters and judges should continue to work towards the elimination of sexist language in debates. Changing a popular and patriarchal piece of rhetoric into one that is inclusive of women is another example of rewriting rhetoric. For instance, Stepp notes that the Cross Examination Debate Association has authored a vision statement targeting greater diversity (1996, 118-119). Forensic organizations should review their constitutions for elements which support patriarchy and rewrite the offending portions.

Jamieson offers the use of recounting, or storytelling, as a tool for a woman to use as she "moves into a place traditionally identified as male territory, she can use narrative--more effectively than other available means of persuasion--to explain who she is, why she belongs there, and what principles define her" (1995, 195). Through the use of narrative, women in debate can portray their reasons for participating in the activity. They can also discount the femininity/competence bind which states that they're doing it to be more like men. In her response to Beattie's article, Baisinger recounts her positive experiences with debate, although she admits that other's experiences may not be as supportive, "I loved the actual debating process . . . and I still miss spending time with and debating with my partner" (1996, 109).

It should be emphasized that the responsibility for implementing the strategies of reframing, recovering, reclaiming, recasting, rewriting, and recounting does not belong to women alone. Men, too, must take action to move the debate community away from practices which perpetuate patriarchy. Hopefully, this essay has sparked people's interest in creating a new "world" of debate.

The van rolled along and Mary was thinking about the upcoming tournament. She stayed up until three in the morning the night before plotting strategies with her partner, Sam. They discussed the teams that would be competing and the cases that they were running. Now came the toughest part--the mental preparation. Her performance at the tournament could hinge on whether or not she psyched herself up before the rounds began. Fortunately, Mary could look to others for support and advice. Since the beginning of her debate career she had formed friendships with and discovered mentors in a countless number of females on the intercollegiate debate circuit. She was proud of the rich heritage of women in debate. She looked forward to her debates because of the supportive, albeit competitive, rapport. As she debated each round at the tournament, she was amazed at the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual diversity of her opponents. Everyone wanted to win the rounds that they debated, but they also felt as if they were working together in search of the best possible solution for the resolution of the issues in the round. Mary never felt pressured to take on some type of "masculine" persona or speaking style and that she was respected

for her own style and ideas. During her third round, she engaged in one of the most enlightening and intriguing debates on feminism she had ever encountered. She and Sam advocated an ecofeminist position and her opponents responded with arguments supporting radical feminism. The debate evolved into a discussion about which approach was best for the environment. The critic thanked them after the round for educating her on these two different factions and the reasons behind their ideologies. She and Sam ended up winning four out of six rounds and they made it into the outrounds. They eventually won third place at the tournament and Mary was named one of the top five speakers. Mary left the tournament elated, not only at her victory with Sam, but at the sense of pride and empowerment that the debate community had given her.

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