

This article revisits the relationship between feminist and bureaucratic organization. Much feminist critique has denounced bureaucratic impersonality and proposed the reunion of professional and personal. Yet, little is known of what happens when actual organization members merge "private" matters with "public" life. This article turns to feminist practice as a way to enhance feminist organization theory and, thus, to enrich organizational communication studies with pragmatic alternatives to gendered organization. The author reports an ethnographic study of one feminist organization's efforts to personalize work relations, which ironically reproduced the division of public and private. The case challenges feminist assumptions about the role of emotionality and sexuality in empowering "professional" relationships and extends an alternative, provisional form of theorizing about feminist practice.

EMPOWERING "PROFESSIONAL" RELATIONSHIPS Organizational Communication Meets Feminist Practice

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Organizational scholars have long debated the relationship between feminism and "traditional," bureaucratic organization. At least two distinct, interdisciplinary bodies of scholarship host the controversy: feminist critiques of mainstream organization and studies of feminist organization practice. Although affiliated in interest, these lines of research seldom intersect (for an exception, see P. Y. Martin, 1993). Scholars in the former tradition frequently theorize feminist organizing principles as an alternative to the masculinist character of bureaucratic workplaces (e.g., Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Meanwhile, authors in the latter research area often depict paralyzing contradictions that plague feminist practice (e.g., Murray, 1988; Pahl, 1985; Ristock, 1990). Given the disparity, the apparent, persistent silence between both traditions is puzzling and problematic. Published organizational communication scholarship

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offers much feminist critique and few accounts of feminist organization (for exceptions, see Bate & Taylor, 1988), but recent calls urge the study of feminist practice to complement the current theoretical emphasis (e.g., Fine, 1993). This article responds to such invitations, engaging dialogue between potentially kindred scholarly traditions.

I investigate a key claim at the cusp of both research areas. Across disciplined traditions, feminist scholars concur on a fundamental flaw of bureaucracy: impersonality. Stressing the gendered consequences, many critics indict the separation of public, professional, and rational from private, personal, and emotional (e.g., Ferguson, 1984; Glennon, 1979; Mills & Chiaramonte, 1991). Organizational communication scholars have played a particularly pivotal role in theorizing ways to repair the rift between these dimensions of human experience (e.g., Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Feminist organizations extend such critique and theory into action. To date, we know little of what happens when members blend "private" concerns with the world of production. Scattered empirical studies suggest mixed reviews of success and struggle (Gayle, 1994; J. Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Morgen, 1994). We have yet to systematically explore feminist efforts to personalize the professional or consider the consequences of feminist practice for organizational communication theory.

This article enacts dialogue between feminist organization critique, theory, and practice, with particular regard to "professional" relationships. I offer a detailed ethnographic account of one feminist organization's attempt to merge public and private toward empowerment. My analysis relates the arduous process through which members eventually developed and formalized rules to prohibit close relationships among members. Thus, in the name of empowerment, members ironically reproduced and intensified the division of personal and professional. Rather than denounce member practice for falling short of feminist ideals, I consider how the case challenges current assumptions about the relationship between feminism and bureaucracy and, specifically, the role of emotionality and sexuality in work relations. My analysis enhances organizational communication studies by advancing the develop-

ment of practical, empowering alternatives to "traditional" gendered organization. Below, I build a conceptual foundation for my study by sketching "the feminist case against bureaucracy" (Ferguson, 1984).

COMMENCING DIALOGUE: "PUBLIC" AND "PRIVATE" MATTERS IN BUREAUCRATIC AND FEMINIST ORGANIZATION

FEMINIST CLAIMS AGAINST BUREAUCRACY: TWO RESEARCH TRADITIONS

After much debate, feminist scholars remain divided in their stance toward bureaucracy. In this controversy, *bureaucracy* denotes a classical organization paradigm with enduring influence on the design and practice of many contemporary workplaces. More precisely, the term refers to institutions characterized by hierarchy of authority, division of labor, technical qualifications for hiring and promotion, formalized rules and procedures for behavior, and/or impersonal relationships (Hall, 1963; P. Y. Martin, 1987; Scott, 1981). The first half of the article briefly outlines two research traditions that address bureaucracy: (a) feminist critiques of mainstream organization and (b) studies of feminist organization practice. In the second half, I recount how both traditions treat a particular bureaucratic form: impersonal, position-based relations.

Feminist critique. Feminist reactions to bureaucracy may be characterized along a continuum. Some authors embrace a comparatively mild critique, overtly or implicitly maintaining the compatibility of bureaucratic forms with feminist principles (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1992; Kanter, 1977; Powell, 1993; Sekaran & Leong, 1991). These scholars are generally aligned with a liberal feminist stance, which tends to emphasize women's advancement in terms of status quo arrangements and depict sexist practices as occurring within neutral organization structures (Calás & Smircich, 1996; Mayer, 1995; Natalie, Papa, & Graham, 1994). Other

critics depict bureaucracy as inimical to a feminist stance. In a renowned treatise, Ferguson (1984) contends that bureaucracy feminizes managers, workers, and clients with hierarchies and rigid rules that enforce subordination, dependence, and powerlessness. Acker (1990) extends this position, explaining how bureaucracy privileges the conditions of many men's lives and, thus, reproduces gendered inequality. More than a metaphor for bureaucratic relations, gender is a central component of corporate control and domination (Grant & Tancred, 1992; Morgan, 1996). This view is typically aligned with radical feminist perspectives, which question dominant organizational forms and expose their gendered bases (Calás & Smircich, 1996; Mayer, 1995; Natalie et al., 1994).

Much recent feminist organizational communication scholarship reflects a more radical feminist bent. Abundant research exposes the gendered yet seemingly neutral norms of interaction that constitute contemporary workplace relations. Although many of these authors do not directly address bureaucracy, most investigate or presume organizations with (at least some) bureaucratic features. For example, scholars have indicted masculinist norms of expression, decision making, leadership, self-promotion, and humor (e.g., Ashcraft, 1999; Marshall, 1993; B. O. Murphy & Zorn, 1996); resulting double binds for women or contradictory expectations for femininity and "normal" organizational behavior (Jamieson, 1995; Wood & Conrad, 1983); the normalization of sexual harassment (Strine, 1992; B. Taylor & Conrad, 1992); and, as I elaborate below, the strict separation of private and public spheres (Mills & Chiaramonte, 1991; Mumby, 1993). Recent research documents resistance to bureaucratic conditions (Bell & Forbes, 1994; A. G. Murphy, 1998; Trethewey, 1997). However, few published organizational communication studies have explored what it looks like to actually organize differently (for exceptions, see Bate & Taylor, 1998; Pacanowsky, 1988). Although several authors promote principles of feminist organization, these tend to be treated in vague and optimistic, if not idealized, terms (e.g., Buzzanell, 1995; Lorber, 1994; Marshall, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Meanwhile, empirical accounts of feminist practice paint a less rosy image.

Feminist practice. A second, interdisciplinary research tradition directly engages feminist organizing yet rarely surfaces in organizational communication studies (for exceptions, see Lont, 1988; Seccombe-Eastland, 1988; A. Taylor, 1988; Wyatt, 1988). Many debate what counts as "feminist" organization, and distinguishing criteria depend on the feminist perspective one assumes (P. Y. Martin, 1990; Mayer, 1995). In general, many scholars concur that feminist practice confronts the gendered nature of "traditional," bureaucratic organization with alternative, gender-conscious patterns and practices that enact empowerment ideology (Acker, 1995; Ianello, 1992; J. Martin et al., 1998; Morgen, 1994; Rodriguez, 1988). With its focus on organizational forms (e.g., rather than mission or sex composition of membership/leadership as sole criteria), this definition reflects radical feminist assumptions (Calás & Smircich, 1996; Mayer, 1995; Natalie et al., 1994). Like feminist critiques, however, the radical, counterbureaucratic bent of this tradition is manifest in varying degrees of strength. Authors at one end of the continuum advocate a purist view, espousing egalitarianism through collective or democratic systems (Ahrens, 1980; Ferguson, 1987; Pahl, 1985; Peterson & Bond, 1985; Rodriguez, 1988). In contrast, more recent work proposes a pluralist position that pursues empowerment through a hybrid of structures and strategies, including some bureaucratic forms (Eisenstein, 1995; Gottfried & Weiss, 1994; P. Y. Martin, 1987; Riger, 1994; A. Taylor, 1988). Despite this current development, antagonism toward bureaucracy runs high among theorists of feminist organization. Simultaneously, most confess the difficulty of sustaining feminist forms in practice. Abundant empirical research documents the emergence of bureaucracy in response to such pressures as funding, community relations, growth, efficiency, and informal hierarchy (e.g., Ferraro, 1981, 1983; Freeman, 1972-1973; Lont, 1988; Morgen, 1988, 1990; Murray, 1988; Newman, 1980; Pahl, 1985; Reinelt, 1994; Ristock, 1990). Thus, studies of feminist practice stress a fundamental contradiction between the ideals of feminist empowerment ideology and the demands of everyday practice (Seccombe-Eastland, 1988) and tend to emphasize how this

tension eventually erodes the integrity of feminist organization (P. Y. Martin, 1990).

Pluralist theorists have begun to critique the pervasive, although often implicit, pessimism for idealizing theory at the expense of practice (Gottfried & Weiss, 1994; P. Y. Martin, 1990; Mayer, 1995). These scholars ask a crucial question: Rather than reprove feminist communities for falling short of feminist ideals, why not question "pure" models of feminist organization and develop theories that foster empowering practice? Its concern for feasibility notwithstanding, pluralist theory takes radical feminist critique and its interest in alternative organizational forms as a starting point and, therefore, should not be mistaken for liberal feminism in a new disguise. The pluralist shift invites us to move beyond fixation with particular structures and procedures (e.g., do members maintain minimal hierarchy and consensual decision making?) to investigate processes and outcomes (e.g., how do members cope with the pressures they experience?). Despite the transformative potential of this shift, pluralist perspectives have enjoyed little empirical application, much less in communication studies (Mayer, 1995). Organizational communication scholars are uniquely equipped for such research.

From a communication perspective, feminist organizations may be conceptualized as "alternative discourse communities" that develop counterdiscourses of gender, power, and organizing amid cultural and material constraints (Fraser, 1989, 1993; Maguire & Mohtar, 1994; Mumby, 1996). This model rejects the relatively bleak view implied by extant studies of feminist practice. It reframes the ideology-practice contradiction as a situated web of dilemmas experienced by concrete organization members and navigated discursively and materially toward various ends. Counterdiscourses are not predetermined; they emerge as members engage practical tensions and improvise tactics that enable both empowerment and productivity. This provisional model depicts feminist practice as a site of innovation; it highlights local, emergent "solutions" through which members manage contradiction. As such, it revives the relationship between feminist theory and practice and complements current efforts to develop contradiction-centered perspectives on

organizational life (e.g., Hatch, 1997; Putnam, 1986; Trethewey, 1999).

The connection between theory and practice can also be enriched in another sense. Although they appear to be likely counterparts, the research traditions reviewed here seldom address one another. Feminist critics lend scant attention to findings from feminist practice, and scholars of feminist practice rarely consider implications for mainstream organization or feminist critiques thereof (Calás & Smircich, 1996; for an exception, see P. Y. Martin, 1993). To build intersections between parallel lines of research, I review how both traditions treat one bureaucratic feature: impersonality.

CONVERGING CLAIMS: IMPERSONAL, POSITION-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

Several elements of bureaucracy suggest its detached character. Bureaucratic systems depersonalize the exercise of power through "legal-rational authority" that legitimates supervisory influence by linking the organization's chain of command to its exhaustive system of rules (Weber, 1964, 1969). In its quest for rationality, bureaucracy bans emotional and personal factors from decision making (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Pringle, 1989; Simon, 1976). With its impersonality, bureaucracy aims to exclude irrelevant influences on hiring and promotion, to eliminate arbitrary applications of penalty and reward (Perrow, 1990). Without doubt, organization theory and practice fail to realize the impersonal ideal. Human relations and resource theorists continue to urge cohesive bonds, self-disclosure, and an emotionally supportive climate among employees to build morale and strengthen performance (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Organizations also capitalize on emotional labor, or the required expression and suppression of specified emotions in the service of productivity (Hochschild, 1983, 1990; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). And even ostensibly asexual, nonemotional managerial networks may reflect homosocial intimacy and desire (Roper, 1996). In short, personal matters routinely seep into bureaucracies (e.g., Blau & Meyer,

1971). Nonetheless, that the personal is perceived as intruding confirms its persistent division from "professional" concerns (Pringle, 1989).

Feminist organization scholars have developed important critiques of bureaucratic impersonality that interrogate the public-private dichotomy in mainstream organization theory and practice. Dominant discourse defines the public arena as the legitimate site of production and politics; the same discourse aligns emotion, intimacy, sexuality, reproduction, family, and domestic issues with the private realm, the concern of women (Mills & Chiaramonte, 1991; Morgen, 1983; Mumby, 1993). As part of public life, bureaucracies pursue rationality, defined in opposition to the emotional, sexual, and personal; hence, bureaucracy privileges a particular form of masculinity based on the devaluation and exclusion of women and femininities (Ferguson, 1984; Pringle, 1989). For example, Acker (1990) explains that job hierarchies deny the complexity of emotional, nurturing work (e.g., secretarial, child care), defining difficulty in terms of rational, analytical, and managerial—in a word, *professional*—tasks. Acker also exposes the tacit image of the ideal bureaucratic worker: one who exists primarily for work, whose sexuality, emotions, and capacity for procreation remain invisible. Because women—and the private obligations and labors of love ascribed to them—often contrast this profile, they appear apart from legitimate production, ill-suited for valued positions (Mills & Chiaramonte, 1991). In short, many feminists concur that the public-private dichotomy yields a rationale for gender discrimination (e.g., Glennon, 1979; Jaggar, 1989). It naturalizes women's organizational inequality, absolves "public" organizations of responsibility for "private" problems, and impedes collective resistance by stressing individual solutions (J. Martin, 1990).

Guided by this logic, members of feminist organizations often assume the difficult task of revising organizational practice to harmonize private and public selves (V. Taylor, 1995). For instance, they may incorporate such private concerns as sexuality, family, and personal needs as valid subjects of organizational discourse and responsibility; they also tend to prioritize personal, emotional connections among members (Morgen, 1994). Mumby and Put-

nam (1992) provide the most prominent, extensive articulation of the latter trend. These authors theorize "bounded emotionality" as a feminist organizing pattern that reclaims marginalized elements of work experience, including "nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness, and interrelatedness" (p. 474). Bounded emotionality integrates public and private identities and cultivates community by encouraging the expression of spontaneous, emergent "work feelings" among members (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). To facilitate task accomplishment, emotional expression is "bounded" by the development of "feeling rules" that foster interrelatedness yet meet individual and relational needs and limitations. The preservation of such a system requires tolerance for ambiguity and a heterarchy of—or contextually, relationally dependent preference for—goals and values.

As this discussion suggests, feminist organizing contests the bureaucratic ideal of impersonal, instrumental personnel relations. Hence, feminist workplaces often serve as a social center for members (Morgen, 1994). Morgen (1994) identifies several factors that encourage this phenomenon. For example, feminist organizations tend to institutionalize frequent self-disclosure and collective discussion of feelings (e.g., bounded emotionality). Members may also experience intense levels of identification with and commitment to the organization's mission and values. Finally, Morgen explains that feminist communities frequently offer a political and personal haven to lesbian women, who may view the organization as a valuable social network. This acknowledgment remains one of few allusions to sexuality in feminist communities.

Although most feminists welcome the integration of the emotional and personal with work, they adopt a different stance toward another "private" matter—sexuality. Albeit for distinct reasons, feminist and bureaucratic thought have ironically yielded similar advice: desexualize the workplace (Gherardi, 1995). For bureaucratic theorists and practitioners, sexuality interferes with task efficiency, creates the potential for partiality, and spurs legal headaches. In contrast, feminist theorists tend to accentuate the coercive elements of sexuality at work, such that organizational desire seems entangled with domination based on it (Gherardi, 1995;

Pringle, 1989). The focus on sexual harassment in feminist studies of workplace sexuality provides one example (e.g., Clair, 1993, 1994, 1998; DiTomaso, 1989; Gutek, 1989; MacKinnon, 1979). In addition, several scholars uncover the normalization of men's bodies and reproductive functions in bureaucratic structures and discourse (Acker, 1990; J. Martin, 1990). Others link modern corporations to "hegemonic masculinity," a culturally and historically variable form of male heterosexual sexuality fixed on dominance over women and other masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1993). Many scholars explain that hegemonic masculinity symbolically represents and legitimates the bureaucratic model of "power over" that obligates subordinate to please superior (e.g., Acker, 1990; Connell, 1987; Ferguson, 1984; Pringle, 1989). Because hegemonic masculinity defines, subordinates, and/or neglects women's pleasure, organizational sexuality entails oppressive gender relations (e.g., Collinson & Collinson, 1989). Without doubt, these vital analyses enrich our understanding of workplace sexuality. Given their almost exclusive focus on the abusive sides of organizational sexuality, it is not surprising that feminists seek a limited mix of sexuality and work: to politicize coercive sexuality as an organizational and societal problem and to desexualize work relations.

However, recent feminist scholarship offers some reason to step beyond an exclusively negative view of sexuality, even in bureaucratic institutions (Burrell, 1992). Pringle (1989) asks scholars to consider the varied ways women experience workplace sexuality, to ask "which pleasures, if any, might threaten masculinity or disrupt rationality" (p. 177). Likewise, Gherardi (1995) depicts organizations as sites of interrelated power and pleasure; she urges feminist theory that accounts for coercive sexuality yet admits that we seek "erotic gratification in our work, that organizations inhabit our sexual imaginations, and that we use organizations to fulfill our sexual fantasies" (p. 60). Such calls remain largely unanswered; consequently, we know little of potential links between organization, sexuality, and (women's) pleasure. However, given their alleged rejection of hegemonic masculinity and embrace of multiple sexualities, feminist organizations offer a plausible starting point for alternative accounts of sexuality, power, and organizing.

To date, few scholars have examined the feminist practice of personal, emotion-based organizational relations. In her analysis of a public relations firm and a hair salon, Gayle (1994) reports empirical evidence of bounded emotionality at work. J. Martin et al.'s (1998) study of The Body Shop provides some support for the viability of bounded emotionality in a large, for-profit context. Concurrently, the authors illustrate how pressure to conform to such a system may undermine its ideals; they conclude that bounded emotionality may coexist with emotional labor. Morgen's (1994) analysis of a feminist health care agency also offers a glimpse of the strain, pain, and deep divisions that may accompany personalized personnel relations. To extend these few, mixed findings—and to examine how feminist theory may be more responsive to them—I turn to the case of SAFE.

METHOD

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

SAFE is an explicitly feminist organization devoted to survivors of domestic violence. Founded in the early 1970s, SAFE serves a twofold mission: to provide shelter, counseling, and advocacy to battered women and their children and to halt domestic violence through community education and networking. To meet these goals, the agency is divided into four programs: shelter services (e.g., emergency housing and needs), outreach services (e.g., walk-in counseling and support groups, transitional housing), educational services (e.g., volunteer and community programs), and resource development (e.g., funding, administrative activities). These programs are dispersed among three locations. The Outreach building, SAFE's headquarters, serves as the site of most formal meetings. A neighboring town hosts a satellite facility known as the Tri-City office, and the location of SAFE's shelter remains relatively confidential. With an annual budget of roughly \$740,000, SAFE serves more than 1,200 women and children and speaks to some 8,000 community members each year. A fluctuating popula-

tion of nearly 25 staff, 10 interns, and 115 volunteers performs this work. Although most members are White and middle class, substantial variation exists in education level, occupational experience, marital status, and lifestyle and/or sexual orientation.

SAFE is widely known for its success and "radical" bent. A prominent national committee recently selected the agency as an exemplary alternative domestic violence program. In addition to talented, earnest personnel, SAFE members attribute their success to an empowering, feminist culture, carefully crafted and faithfully preserved. Participants depict SAFE as a community by and for women—feminist in its rejection of corporate forms of power, feminist in its commitment to female leadership, diverse membership (i.e., in terms of sexual orientation, age, class, and education), and the synergy of public and private selves. Like many social service agencies, however, SAFE's structure reflects a clear hierarchy. In particular, SAFE's executive director and the directors of the shelter and education programs are officially referred to as "supervisory staff," sarcastically known as "the big three" or "the higher-ups." Supervised by "the big three," remaining staff are called "line staff" and share in the supervision of intern and volunteer members. Even this brief overview reveals seeds of tensions at play in SAFE life.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Data collection. During 1995 through 1997, I conducted approximately 300 hours of research, including more than 230 hours of participant observation and 60 interview hours. I participated in and observed SAFE interaction in several forums. For example, I trained as a volunteer, worked routine shifts at the shelter, and joined monthly volunteer support meetings. I also observed more than 50 hours of staff meetings and attended SAFE social functions. I recorded my observations in more than 700 pages of detailed field notes. In addition to participant observation, I interviewed 41 SAFE members, including 18 staff, 4 interns, and 19 volunteers. Based on initial observations, I developed a schedule of

open-ended interview questions that probed perceptions of the philosophy, structure, and practice of empowering relationships at SAFE. Interview sessions averaged 90 minutes each and ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Thirty-four sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. Based on respondent request, I reconstructed 7 from detailed notes. I attempted to interview all staff present during my first year of research, and I used convenience and snowball sampling strategies to select volunteer and intern respondents (Lindlof, 1995). For this article, I emphasized data collected among staff.²

As this account suggests, my role changed with field setting. For instance, I gathered volunteer data from a complete participant perspective, whereas my role in staff meetings fit that of immersed observer. Such ongoing shifts engendered a unique perspective on SAFE life—outsider and insider, expert and subordinate, and researcher and participant at once. This dual stance reflects a feminist preference for research conducted through active participation, not aloof observation (Fine, 1993; Mies, 1983, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; B. Taylor & Trujillo, in press); it supports a feminist view of all researchers as situated, implicated participants, not autonomous, objective observers (Calás & Smircich, 1992; Kauffman, 1992). Moreover, my dual consciousness at SAFE enacted participatory research, which enabled a critical perspective grounded in member practice and firsthand experience (Heron & Reason, 1997; Mumby, 1988).

Data analysis. To conduct data analysis, I sought a coherent model to facilitate an empirical application of my view of feminist organizations: “alternative discourse communities” that develop counterdiscourses of gender, organization, and power in response to local tensions (Fraser, 1989, 1993; Mumby, 1996). Craig and Tracy’s (1995) grounded practical theory (GPT) endeavors to blend empirical observation with normative and pragmatic concerns, to develop a critical, theoretical stance rooted in communication practice. Of particular relevance to feminist organizing, GPT highlights contradiction (yet avoids deterministic analyses of its local forms) and accentuates member practice.

GPT entails the reconstruction of member practice at three levels. First, the “problem” level requires the researcher to identify and describe situated dilemmas as experienced by participants. For this article, I narrowed my analysis to a conspicuous dilemma of “ethical” relationship boundaries that embroiled members in extensive, intensive deliberation. To detail the local logic of the dilemma, I repeatedly compared interview transcripts and field notes with my account until I could explain seemingly incongruous data (e.g., conflicting views of “appropriate” relationships). Second, the “technical” level asks the scholar to specify the strategies participants employed to manage dilemmas. Because SAFE members managed the boundaries dilemma overtly, this analytic level entailed reconstructing the evolution of their formal boundaries policy. Third, the “philosophical” level involves the explication and critique of the situated ideals, or philosophical positions, implied by member tactics. I derived SAFE’s implicit ideal of organizational relationships in two steps: I probed my account of the policy tactic for embedded assumptions about empowering work relations; I then collapsed these tacit assumptions into normative premises that comprise the implicit ideal to which members subscribed. This level of GPT reflects a form of meta-analysis that exposes “alternative discourses” and enables a critical standpoint grounded in member practice. In general, I observed an inductive, iterative process of data analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1998; Lindlof, 1995).

RESULTS

The following research questions guided my study: How does the public-private relationship manifest at SAFE, and what related dilemmas, if any, do members encounter (problem level)? How do members experience and manage dilemmas (technical level)? What situated ideals are implied by member practice (philosophical level)? Below, I describe SAFE’s dilemma of “ethical” boundaries, recount how members managed it by developing a formal policy that banned intimate relationships, and con-

sider seven premises that constitute SAFE's tacit philosophy of empowering impersonality.

**PROBLEM LEVEL: SAFE'S DILEMMA
OF "ETHICAL" RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES**

SAFE participants depicted the organization as a wholistic community that wove together the professional and personal lives of its members in various ways. Consistent with Morgen's (1994) account, the organization served as a social center, providing a network for many lesbian members. As one participant explained, "Let's put it this way . . . 50% of our staff is lesbian, and that's a high percentage of a workplace. . . . So I feel like it sort of lends itself to a dating scene." Members also praised SAFE for considering personal and family needs as organizational obligations. Others touted SAFE's unique union of emotion and work. For example, formal meetings routinely commenced with the ritual of "checking in," during which members voluntarily shared personal information to set the tone for business talk.

But SAFE's most ambitious effort to personalize the professional was a painstaking plan to harmonize "private expressive and public instrumental selves" (Glennon, 1979, p. 18). SAFE subscribed to an explicit system that institutionalized the value of emotion and personal sharing in everyday work interaction: ethical communication. In short, "ethical communication" entailed a set of reciprocal individual and organizational responsibilities and rights. It required each member to know and express herself authentically to the group, who must make room for her voice. It denounced silenced emotion or suppressed disagreement, demanding prompt, open attention to differences. Ethical communication was designed to foster disclosure and dialogue and, thus, minimize subtle "power blocs" and indirect, divisive, or manipulative interaction. Because it bound all members to its premises, participants perceived ethical communication as the key to empowerment across SAFE's formal hierarchy. Most members hailed the system as the foundation of the SAFE community, its feminist capstone. Formal principles for communicating ethically enjoyed a prominent place in SAFE's training manual; volunteer and staff trainees repeatedly rehearsed

their application. During my research, I observed the persistent, self-conscious reflection through which members measured actual practice against these premises.

In theoretical terms, ethical communication comprised a local manifestation of bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). It evoked feeling rules that pushed members to engage the responses of self and other. For example, the system demanded extensive disclosure of work feelings and individual agendas. Its first formal principle declared that "open communication is ethical," urging members to reflect on, express, hear, and weigh personal responses and needs. Other formal tenets required participants to "encourage members to raise opposing views," to "always name" conflict, and to deal with dissent "as directly as possible." To uphold such feeling rules, ethical communication established a collective burden, enhanced for supervisors, to model the system for newer or aberrant members. Through ethical communication, members sought a feminist community that would foster interrelatedness yet thrive on "tolerance of ambiguity." They claimed that the system enabled SAFE to blend feeling with work yet eschew the dangers of dramatized conflict—to equitably, productively balance personal needs, work demands, and difference.

Ironically, ethical communication complicated the already complex meeting of personal and professional. Preoccupied with self-disclosure, it encouraged the formation of intimate relationships. Simultaneously, it promoted skepticism of all close connections. One formal principle of communicating ethically captures the point: "Because personal relationships affect the group as a whole, they are not necessarily private. . . . They are a source of affiliation, power, and conflict." In other words, ethical communication subjected interpersonal relationships to organizational scrutiny. Because intimacy could breed cliques, the system required members to preserve some interpersonal distance to prevent power alliances. Participants referred to this mandate as the need to maintain proper boundaries.

The latent tension among ethical communication tenets was reflected in the disparate accounts of SAFE relations offered during my initial research. For example, one participant described the ful-

filling friendships she had formed with other staff, one of whom had recently become her roommate.

I think it's really nice that I have friends on the staff that I can process with, you know, that [my roommate] and I can talk about work for half an hour at night, and then we can let it go. Whereas I think, where I was living before, I was living with someone who didn't work with me, who wasn't even in the field. . . . She didn't really understand.

In contrast, another respondent explained the lesson she gleaned following her initial surprise that few SAFE members hung out together.

I would say that I've learned more about boundaries here than I have anywhere else. . . . I realize sometimes that I don't have a lot of close relationships here. . . . I don't know, I've noticed a lot that [the education director], for instance, doesn't socialize with her supervisees really at all. Part of it could be that hierarchical separation, but I tend to read it more as just keeping a clean relationship with your supervisors and supervisees by maintaining a little bit of distance, maybe. . . . I don't know, but I think about this a lot. It feels kind of funny some times.

This member read the lack of close relationships at SAFE as the maintenance of ethical relationship boundaries. As the former account suggests, not all participants agreed. During my first year of research, I repeatedly noted what appeared to be mounting discord about appropriate work relations.

In sum, the dilemma of ethical boundaries asked members to walk a fine line between close relationships and power alliances at SAFE. The tenuous distinction ironically stemmed from SAFE's careful efforts to merge professional with personal. On one hand, ethical communication invited the growth of close relationships with its edict of personal sharing. Conversely, it instilled suspicion, if not fear, of close relationships, depicting any interpersonal connection as potential fodder for divisive, coercive alliances. As a result, members struggled to discern and enact appropriate relationship boundaries. Nearly one year into the project, the tension exploded in a hot dispute of dating at SAFE.

TECHNICAL LEVEL: SAFE DATING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES POLICY

The storm gathers. In a span of less than 6 months, three romantic relationships developed between staff and volunteer members. Each staff member involved revealed her relationship to her staff supervisor. In subsequent interviews with me, 2 reported anxiety about their supervisors' response. Their nebulous fears of supervisory concern soon struck solid ground. Following various meetings with one or both members from each couple, the "big-three" directors convened all three couples together. One participant in this meeting laughingly recalled it as a "weird" event "where we weren't even quite sure why we were all there . . . if we were going to be disciplined, or one of us asked to leave, or what." The private meeting reportedly concluded with consensus that the issue of dating at SAFE should be taken before the entire staff. But the consensus was qualified. On reflection, one participant offered the instance as an example of "a definite slip of ethical communication. . . . It did feel like it was secretive." Another member criticized the mystery that enveloped the meeting; yet another suspected that the supervisors had somehow "ganged up" on the couples, although not deliberately.

At a staff meeting in the spring of 1996, the executive director raised the general topic of SAFE dating. She asked the group to consider appropriate relationship boundaries, beginning with those between staff and clients. As I had ceased regular observation of staff meetings by this time, I did not attend this gathering. In a few interview sessions that followed the meeting, respondents asked if I could shed any insight on the origin of "the dating issue." One member contacted me to suggest I attend subsequent meetings on the subject. Given the wave of confusion, concern, and intrigue that followed the first meeting, I followed her advice. I began by obtaining the official record of the meeting I had missed. The staff had generated a tentative list of boundaries between staff and client members, reported in Table 1. In general, the list deemed sexual and intimate relationships with current or former clientele "unacceptable" and delineated exceptional conditions under which friendship might be approved. The remaining question set a future

TABLE 1: Original Boundaries for Staff-Client Relationships at SAFE

In the first meeting that addressed relationship boundaries, the SAFE staff established the following guidelines for staff-client relationships:

1. Intimate/sexual relationships with current or former agency clientele is not acceptable. As a staff member, you are in a position of authority, in a position to exert power over an agency client.
2. Friendships with current agency clientele is unacceptable. Friendship infers an equal, two-way, reciprocal relationship wherein each is having needs met by the other.
3. We must make every effort to recognize and not act on personal biases. Preferential treatment of agency clientele is not acceptable. Our paramount concern is that no barriers be put in the way of a woman accessing services, should she need them.
4. Should someone we know request agency services, we will not, ourselves, serve her. Every attempt will be made to turn provision of services over to another helping organization in the area or, depending on the circumstances, to someone else within the agency. The possibility of community perception that an impropriety has occurred is a factor that must be taken into consideration.
5. Developing a friendship with a former client is not acceptable unless or except for if each of the following conditions have been met: (a) that the nature of the relationship has changed (i.e., coworkers, colleagues); (b) and that an extended period of time has past; (c) and that the individuals involved have had an extensive conversation clarifying how the relationship has changed, including exploration of power dynamics, motives, maintaining boundaries; and (d) that there has been a discussion of the issue with our supervisor to gain perspective. It is our responsibility as staff members to hold the boundary, and it is a tremendous responsibility. Each of us should have the right to choose which information and how much we might want to share with someone. This is not the case when a staff member and former client form a friendship. Control should be given to the former client to determine the depth of the friendship that may be developed. Friendship is not the same as an acquaintance relationship.

agenda: How might these boundaries translate into relations among staff and between staff and volunteers? The question began to arouse acute anxiety among staff; many described the staff-client discussion as decidedly "easy" compared to what lay ahead. As they anticipated the follow-up meeting, a soft buzz of interest transformed into a clamor of concern for the quality of work life at SAFE.

A second meeting. At the scheduled meeting nearly 2 months later, the executive director suggested that the group address two topics: staff-volunteer and staff-staff relations. She divided the staff into two for the sake of efficiency, and I was assigned to the staff-

staff group. The following question initiated our discussion: How does power fit into our relationships? Quickly, the group concluded that close staff relationships posed little threat of power abuse, provided they formed among peers. This initial marking identified legitimate power as most relevant, sufficient to render close relationships suspect or even off limits. Thereafter, members uniformly distinguished between supervisor-line staff and peer staff relations, the former necessarily tainted by power imbalance.

One participant balked at this conclusion, complaining that an intimate relationship between any two staff would cause her discomfort. In response, the group began to generate "a list of possible weirdnesses" that could accompany close relations among staff. This move shifted the discussion from internal relationship dynamics (i.e., interpersonal consequences) to member perceptions of a relationship (i.e., organizational consequences). As the list congealed, it identified such worries as the potential for aloof, defensive cliques and preferential treatment, as well as the fear that venting to one partner would leak to the other. One member insisted that "weirdnesses" would be minimized if the couple simply practiced ethical communication. Initially, the group expressed wholehearted agreement, but another participant invoked a past experience to illustrate how "unhealthy" it is to "have everything tied up" in one place. "It's just a bad way to go," she concluded. Jokingly, a participant recorded this verbatim quote on the list. But with this comment, members began to construe the meeting of work and personal lives as "unhealthy." Alarmed, one participant quipped, "Wait, so basically, are we saying that intimate relationships are a big no?" Although hesitant to speak a "definite no," members painted all close connections suspect. The risk of covert alliance was too high, and the integrity of any particular couple was no match for coworker perceptions.

At various points in the discussion, a few members had questioned the group's tacit definition of *intimacy* or *closeness* as romantic and, specifically, sexual. Invariably, the issue had been quickly abandoned. But now, several declared that friendships deserved similar scrutiny. A few participants visibly bristled. If the burdens of communicating ethically in the case of closeness were

merely clarified, surely the staff could be trusted to uphold them: "I mean, how do you say to people that work doesn't mix with friendship? The reality is that it does to some extent. You can't stop that." These members warned the group not to undermine SAFE's current system for merging work with feeling and managing relational difficulties: ethical communication.

The caution went unheeded. As participants determined that ethical communication was no match for intimacy, the conversation took a definitive turn. Members invoked the emotionally difficult nature of SAFE work as another valid reason to discourage close relationships and encourage outside support. In the words of one participant, "It's already tough to deal with this work and to avoid dealing with it by venting judgmentally, and that would be especially tough to avoid" in the case of intimacy. Others concurred that if members allowed close relationships to collide with work, they would surely suffocate. One member summarized the emerging consensus.

I don't think it would be that bad to just say no about this. After all, the reality is that you can't and really shouldn't date everyone you meet. Some people are just off limits, and if it's really that important to you, you could get a new job.

The group toyed with the merits of an explicit policy to mitigate potential problems. As they considered what kinds of connections should be prohibited, they gradually avowed that to ban one form of close relationship was to ban all.

In a sudden turn, members rushed to weigh the consequences of a formal policy for their daily work lives. Case by case, they consoled each other that their own relationships fit within the developing guidelines. As the exchange of comfort subsided, one participant proposed that the group seemed ready to forbid close supervisor-line staff relationships and advise caution about those among peer staff. Another member asked the group to remember "that you are going to inevitably connect better with some than others; you shouldn't have to feel bad about that." Others objected that this caveat simply confirmed the inevitability of "weirdnesses." As a lack of consensus resurfaced, participants appeared uneasy and

restless. The tension was relieved when the executive director interrupted to announce that it was time for joint discussion. The group quickly concluded that some relationships should be excluded, although they could not yet agree on the precise relational types at stake.

When the staff reconvened, each group presented its findings. The staff-volunteer group concluded that member relationships should never detract from SAFE's primary mission. Moreover, staff could not control how they were perceived; they mentored volunteers, which indicated "an automatic power imbalance." Thus, staff members could *build* relationships with volunteers but could not *socialize* with them; the former entailed work-centered connections, the latter personal and emotional links that extend beyond the bounds of work. Almost immediately, the distinction between building relationships and socializing gained clout among the staff. Next, the spokeswoman for the staff-staff group explained the "list of possible weirdnesses," using 2 participants as an illustration. After repeated reference to their hypothetical union, the two engaged in a small, mock kiss, much to the amusement of the staff. Through laughter, the executive director asked, "Do you think they have conversations like this at IBM?" Uproarious laughter ensued. As it subsided, another participant cited the discussion as an example of "how its okay to say things here that really wouldn't be okay in most jobs." For members, the very act of critically probing organizational relationships meant "doing" feminist organizing.

Following both presentations, the executive director moved to conclude the meeting. But a final curve disturbed the apparent harmony. One member asked if volunteers should be included in subsequent talk of SAFE boundaries. When members wavered, she retorted, "What if I respond to that—their opinions should be just as valid as ours on this issue. Why not?" The executive director immediately intervened.

Well, one is a pragmatic issue. It's pretty tough to get consensus from more than 100 people, and what we're really doing here is defining our responsibilities as staff in relation to the groups around us. I think it is okay for us to do that alone. We do have more author-

ity; that's the reality. And it is our responsibility to know the boundaries of that and set some guidelines or an example as to what's appropriate. I think that's our responsibility along with that authority.

On hearing this rationale, several members praised the maturity of the staff's willingness to inspect its own boundaries. In the words of one, "This is a frightening conversation to have. That we're having it reflects the power of this organization." The executive director affirmed the discussion as a sign of growth, thanked all participants for their hard work, and dismissed the meeting.

And a third. A substantial stir followed the second meeting, and the dilemma of ethical boundaries reached an acute phase. The staff began to polarize into advocates and opponents of a formal boundaries policy. Although a few claimed indifference, most agreed on one thing: SAFE relations were becoming increasingly awkward. As 1 participant noted, "I've already been feeling weird about calling people that I'd considered close friends," and many members seem to be "hesitating about things that used to just feel natural." As participants prepared for the next scheduled discussion, anxiety, confusion, and passion soared high.

At a third meeting more than a month later, the executive director gingerly broached the topic of relationship boundaries. Because the subject struck "close to home," she feared that fear might obstruct progress. She asked all participants to reflect on and share with the group their concerns about the discussion. Talk of "scary things" converged on three major themes: (a) ambiguity of the dialogue thus far (e.g., "Why are we even having this discussion?" "What about specific relationships in this room?"), (b) incompatibility between ethical communication and a boundaries policy (e.g., "It sounds like we don't trust our own process"), and (c) consequences and logistics of a formal boundaries policy (e.g., "I think our sense of community might be inhibited," "Wouldn't a policy encourage some pretending or dishonesty?"). With these concerns condensed on an easel, the group shifted to an even greater challenge: "What we can do to assure ourselves."

During the time-consuming debate that ensued, several safety nets for a boundaries policy gradually found their way onto the easel. For example, several staff gently chided the higher-ups for the mysterious tone of discussion thus far and asked that "history" and specifics be "provided up front" in future staff debates. Other members requested "not to create concrete rules but open guidelines" and asked for ample time to reach a resolution. However, soon after, the group agreed "to give ourselves time," my field notes describe the discussion as increasingly hurried. The executive director began to lump "scary things" together and link them to already named "assurances," while nods around the room assented.

The discussion turned to if and how the staff-client guidelines generated during the first meeting (see Table 1) applied to staff-volunteer relations. Initial talk weighed whether supervisors always "have power over" volunteers. Participants answered with an increasingly definitive "yes," citing numerous sources of imbalance in "the nature of the jobs": paid status, representation in decision making, and levels of responsibility and accountability. A few members chimed in that length of commitment, rather than position status, correlated with power asymmetry; others introduced varying levels of danger. These distinctions failed to stick, as the group concurred that power abuse plagues all staff-volunteer relations "because there's always potential." As the meeting reached conclusion, SAFE's administrative assistant, a new member, hesitantly cautioned that staff-volunteer relations seemed to entail a "totally different kind of power" than those between staff and clients. The group emphatically disagreed, citing ever-present perceptions of power as the abiding similarity. Given time constraints, the executive director scheduled further discussion of guidelines for the all-staff retreat during the following month.

Finally, a formal relationship boundaries policy. Nearly 5 months had passed since the original staff discussion; more than a year had followed the initial formation of couples. In early fall 1996, the staff committed to a formal policy for relationship boundaries. Due to academic and personal constraints, I did not attend the 2-day, out-of-town staff retreat designed to address sev-

TABLE 2: Final Boundaries Policy for All Relationships at SAFE

In the last meeting that addressed relationship boundaries, the SAFE staff formalized the following guidelines for forming relationships within the organization:

1. Sexual relationships are not okay. Several dangers accompany sexual relationships at all levels and thus justify this guideline. Because these dangers are increased by nonpeer links (i.e., between supervisors and supervisees, including supervisor-staff and staff-volunteer relations), the guideline holds particularly strong for nonpeer relations. With this boundary, we seek to avoid the following specific dangers:
 - being in a position to exert power over, coercion, or undue influence;
 - having the ability to meet personal needs at the expense of another, to exploit or reduce another's freedom of choice;
 - threatening each woman's right to learn, grow, become empowered, and reach her full potential freely;
 - perceiving any of the above;
 - impairing or clouding of personal judgment;
 - threatening our right to certain forms of privacy, to select who knows what about you; and
 - forming "cliques, triangles, or power blocs" that foster feelings of being judged, devalued, "not as fun as," isolated.
2. All staff members are responsible to "keep relationships professional in the working environment," because many of the above dangers potentially apply to all close relationships. In particular, we discourage socializing at all levels and advise that all friendships proceed only with extreme caution. Caution is enhanced for nonpeer friendships. We choose to err on the side of caution for numerous reasons. First, we value inclusivity. Second, we recognize that relationships can change from peer to nonpeer (e.g., promotion or informal hierarchies). Finally, although work may facilitate quick bonding, it is dangerous to limit our friendships to people within the agency.
3. If we experience or perceive the development of a questionable relationship, we are responsible to check in with our supervisor and "get clear about boundaries." We believe that we are all always accountable to the agency and our supervisors.
4. As a qualification to these boundaries, we acknowledge that we need room to build relationships that allow us to "process what comes up about work."

eral issues, including the policy. Participants reported that the boundaries policy was established, with little debate, by early afternoon on the first day of the retreat. Summarized in Table 2, the policy unequivocally banned all sexual relationships and urged only *professional* relations among coworkers. It strongly discouraged socializing, advising friendships to "proceed with extreme caution." Any "iffy" relationships required immediate debriefing with a supervisor. The executive director explained the policy to me during an interview session.

I think the general consensus was that it's our responsibility as an organization, and each of us as individuals within the organization, to be extremely sensitive to any imbalance or perception of imbalance of power within the relationships. And that basically both romantic relationships, sexual relationships, and friendships between staff members, between supervisory staff and line staff . . . volunteer and staff, and certainly clients and staff is inappropriate. And that there is a difference between friendship and collegial-looking relationships . . . that we can enjoy each other tremendously and feel affection for one another and care about each other and care about what's going on in each other's lives. But more than likely, we are not each other's closest confidant. We're not the people that we hang out with on weekends. We don't select three of the people that we like the best in the agency and build friendship relationships with those people outside . . . which might be one of the red flags. If you begin to feel like you don't want somebody to come along when you're going some place with a group of staff members, then more than likely, it's inappropriate because this is a working environment where everyone needs to feel welcome. So it took a really long time to get there, but . . .

A few conditions that followed the policy's development merit mention. First, ambiguity about existing relationships ran high long after the retreat. One of the couples and the volunteer partner of a second couple eventually left SAFE, although they offered other official reasons for their departure. The remaining couple and others who feared their friendships suspect agreed to continue "processing" with supervisors until some resonance with SAFE boundaries could be reached. Second, the policy never found its way on paper during the remainder of my study, which extended nearly 9 months past the final boundaries meeting. Intention aside, the delay allowed the dust to settle and time to sort through current relationships; yet, it also increased uncertainty and lack of closure. Third, a few members claimed dissatisfaction with the policy; their dissent is aired in what follows. Finally, several participants expressed discomfort with the decision-making process during interviews or informal conversation; their reflections motivated another analysis of SAFE enactments of power (Ashcraft, 1998). Below, I reconstruct the philosophy of organizational relationships implied by SAFE practice.

**PHILOSOPHICAL LEVEL: SAFE'S IMPLICIT IDEAL
OF EMPOWERING "PROFESSIONAL" RELATIONSHIPS**

This section describes seven premises that constitute SAFE's philosophy of depersonalizing the professional. To clarify, I derived these premises from SAFE practice; I mean to evince, not to endorse, them. I begin with tacit member assumptions about the nature of organizational relations, shifting to their consequent prescriptions for empowering feminist community.

Formal hierarchy is an essential, incontestable feature of effective organizing; resistance to legitimate power is virtually futile. From its inception, the staff discussion depicted supervisors as incontestable in at least two ways: first, as a vital, inevitable fixture of work life and, second, as virtually immune to resistance. As such, they normalized legitimate power or influence based on formal position (e.g., Pfeffer, 1992; Raven, 1993), and rendered subordinate members relatively defenseless against it. As the debate unfolded, the omnipotence of formal hierarchy remained uncontested, from the quick consensus about latent power abuse in all supervisor-line staff relations to the conclusion that no volunteer could ever be a staff's equal. Neglecting the granted condition of structural authority (e.g., Giddens, 1979, 1984; Mumby & Stohl, 1991), the staff accepted the "reality" of formal hierarchy, the fragility of empowerment in its wake, and their resulting charge to abate its coercive potential.

The potential for power abuse is dramatically increased when legitimate power commingles with informal power; alliances arising from intimate member relationships constitute the most disempowering form of informal power. In contrast to many empirical accounts of feminist practice, SAFE members exhibited acute collective consciousness about informal power (e.g., Freeman, 1972-1973; Mansbridge, 1973; Ristock, 1990; Rodriguez, 1988). Ethical communication sensitized members to subtle forms of power, and the boundary debate isolated an especially potent form: emergent "cliques, triangles, and power blocs." Pfeffer (1992) describes informal coalitions, which often emerge from exchanges of favors and/or friendship networks, as a key resource for power in modern organizations. SAFE members emphatically denounced this source

of influence as “unethical.” Initially, they named close cross-hierarchical relationships the culprit, but the issue of others’ perceptions extended blame to intimate peer relationships. Time and again, participants deemed all close member relationships the breeding ground for power coalitions, or the perception thereof.

Intimate relationships in organizational settings can be classified into discrete types based on more or less risk of informal alliance and, thus, power abuse. Based on their sweeping suspicion of informal cliques as the latent potential of all personal relationships, members constructed a classification system that graded the danger inherent to various relationship types. By differentiating between *socializing* and *building relationships*, they began to sever personal, emotional connections from professional relations. As this distinction anchored, all socializing relationships came under suspicion. Of these, romantic and/or sexual relationships fared the worst. Table 2 specifies SAFE’s view of the unique hazards that render these the most dangerous of liaisons. Second to sexual relationships, friendships were deemed ripe for power abuse. The definition of friendship offered in the original staff-client guidelines—“an equal, two-way, reciprocal relationship wherein each is having needs met by the other” (see Table 1)—later fell prey to potential perceptions of foul power play. Notably, sexual relationships and friendships were the only categories of intimacy acknowledged by the boundaries debate.

Because all intimate relationships pose a threat to empowering organization, meaningful empowerment requires work-centered relationships. The staff equated an empowering workplace with an inclusive environment that values all members equally. Consider how the policy decried an organizational culture that devalues some members as “not as fun as” others, how it leaned “to the side of caution” because “we value inclusivity” (see Table 2). Moreover, the staff implied that empowering organization depends on the emotional health and safety of workers. From the second meeting, members depicted close relations at work as “unhealthy” and “suffocating,” compounded by the intense emotional nature of SAFE work. Only work-centered relationships posed little risk. After all, “we need room” to “process what comes up about work.” Follow-

ing the final meeting, several members confided their dissent: "Who are they to say that you can't live with a friend? . . . I just think it's garbage." Such views were neither voiced nor reflected in the final "consensus," which maintained that close relationships always endanger empowerment due to the potential, perception, and/or potential perception of power abuse. For members, this premise did not deny the empowering character of feminist organizing, because intimate relationships may be averted.

Relationship formation involves individual consciousness and choice; it is not a natural, inevitable process. As the debate unfurled, participants increasingly demanded and revered relational will power. Initially, members questioned the capacity for choice and restraint in relationship formation (e.g., "How do you say to people that work doesn't mix with friendship?"). But a view of intimacy as a matter of conscious choice surfaced in the original staff-client guidelines (see Table 1) and took hold in the second meeting (e.g., "The reality is that you can't and really shouldn't date everyone you meet. Some people are just off limits."). This assumption purified as the boundaries drama developed. The executive director later explained to me why budding relationships could and should be snuffed in their infancy.

It's not outside of our control, and that was a lot of the conversations. Like, "Well, you just fall in love with somebody, and you just got to do it." It's like, "No, you don't!" You know, we make choices about whom we choose to socialize with and how we choose to socialize with them. And so, the hope would be that people are conscious of that. That it doesn't get to the point where they've developed this tremendous friendship or deep regard for each other and then have to do something about it.

This highly rationalized view of relationship formation advocated squelching interpersonal attraction or choosing not to feel or act on it. Thus, it denied the strength of informal power based on such personal factors as appearance, charisma, or communicative skill (e.g., Mansbridge, 1973; Pfeffer, 1992; Raven, 1993). The consequences for SAFE's blend of personal and professional lives comes into sharp relief.

Feminist organizing necessarily forbids all intimate relationships and, thus, preserves empowerment by protecting the community from potential power abuse. At a glance, the relationship policy may seem to assist ethical communication by clarifying boundaries. Yet arguably, the policy undermined the system, disabling its capacity to merge professional with personal and to manage power abuse on a case-by-case basis. In the words of one participant,

My relationships at [SAFE] are so important to me. I have some very close friends here, and these people are like family to me. That's really why I keep working here a lot of times. . . . I wanted this whole thing to not turn out like a bunch of rules that govern how we deal with each other. . . . I'd like to see more trust around an issue like this. . . . I've learned a lot about ethical communication and what that means for my own actions and choices, and that's how [SAFE has] trained me to be.

Similarly, another member mused,

It's tough to verbalize. I almost don't understand why it has to be some kind of formal policy. I mean, if you really have ethical communication, why do you have to have some kind of formal statement about this? I think it's pretty unfortunate to say that you can't have certain relationships. I'm sorry, but it's gonna happen. . . . I think we need to be very careful not to oppress our own people in this organization. We're so caught up in, "Well, there'll be a power and control struggle with a staff and volunteer." And that could be true, and it might not be true. You might have a volunteer that's just totally psyched about their [sic] life, and this is something they do, volunteer. But you know, they're not here to like be under this other person. I think some of that's just taking our philosophy and putting it on all these relationships, which I think is wrong.

Question: Our philosophy of . . . ?

That power and control is something that you always have to really be paranoid about.

These poignant accounts criticized the policy for presuming a universal potential for power abuse in all close relationships. Indeed, the boundaries policy countered SAFE's quest to personalize the professional; it reproduced and intensified the split of public from

private. Perhaps even more ironic, SAFE reached this conclusion through profoundly personal, emotional discourse.

It is empowering to formalize rules for relationship formation. SAFE's construction of a boundaries policy implied the empowering capacity of formalization (Perrow, 1990). Participants claimed that the policy established "loose guidelines" for forming relationships, helping members to protect themselves. As specific boundaries emerged, they agreed to develop only flexible, living guidelines. But at some point, this pledge seemed to fall by the wayside. After such an arduous group process, they would not likely revisit SAFE boundaries in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, several participants cheered the policy as evidence of their mature, feminist community. Such celebration is particularly curious in light of the striking similarity between SAFE's boundaries policy and the bureaucratic ideal of professional relations as impersonal, desexualized, and work-centered (Hall, 1963; P. Y. Martin, 1987; Pringle, 1989).

My analysis suggests that SAFE's solution to the dilemma of ethical boundaries remained riddled with imperfection. Members naturalized and enhanced the strength of formal hierarchy. They demonized informal coalitions, linking these to organizational sexuality. And in a move that arguably institutionalized paranoia, they ratified a sweeping expulsion of all intimate relationships from professional life. In vivid color, the saga of SAFE boundaries depicts a struggle that speaks to organizational communication scholars from various perspectives: how to personalize the professional, yet enact empowerment.

DISCUSSION: CONTINUING DIALOGUE

At the outset of this article, I opened a dialogue about bureaucratic impersonality between two corresponding lines of inquiry: feminist critiques of mainstream organization and studies of feminist organization practice. Here, I continue that dialogue by discussing how feminist theory and the SAFE case inform one another relative to the relationship between public and private. My primary

purpose is to enhance organizational communication scholarship by assisting in the development of practical, empowering, gender-conscious alternatives to traditional organizational relationships.

To begin, SAFE's ideal of empowering professional relations appears at odds with both feminist critiques of mainstream organization and theories of feminist practice. Despite SAFE's careful efforts to blend private and public lives, mounting tension between formal hierarchy, quasi-egalitarianism, copious emotional expression, and fear of power abuse erupted into the intense and painful drama of ethical relationship boundaries. With the formal boundaries policy, SAFE ironically etched a wider chasm between the public and private than do most mainstream workplaces. Because members reproduced and intensified traditional bureaucratic impersonality, it is tempting to denounce their practice through the lens of feminist theory. Indeed, feminist theory hones our understanding of the ways in which the boundaries policy endangered member empowerment. For example, it artificially divided interrelated dimensions of human experience (J. Martin, 1990; Morgen, 1983; Mumby, 1993). It defined *professional* relationships in rational terms that denied the sexual, emotional, and personal (Ferguson, 1984; Pringle, 1989); it countered other SAFE efforts (e.g., ethical communication) to build an expressive, caring community (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). It evoked emotional labor, obliging members to actively suppress feelings of attraction and closeness for the organizational good (Hochschild, 1983, 1990; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). It asked members to achieve what many experienced as an unreasonable level of rationality in relationship formation. And although many close relationships may not realize abusive potential, the policy denied all close connections in fear of a few. Thus, SAFE appeared to reject contextually grounded solutions in favor of abstract, universal rules (Marshall, 1993; Steiner, 1989).

Although I concur with these critiques, there is much more to make of SAFE practice than its failure to live up to feminist theory. Abundant research already documents and deplors such apparent defeats (e.g., Murray, 1988; Pahl, 1985; Ristock, 1990), and a one-sided analysis would not reflect my own experience at SAFE. Dur-

ing my research, I was privileged to observe and participate in countless moments of innovative, empowering organization. Alongside these, the boundaries saga seems most out of character. I remain haunted by a question that beset me while I watched the birth of SAFE's boundaries: How could this happen in a feminist community whose members so overtly and vigilantly set out to accomplish the opposite? Moreover, to resurrect another layer of irony mentioned earlier, how could this happen through such deeply personal, emotional, self-reflexive discourse? Although admittedly speculative, a few answers deserve consideration.

In part, the boundaries debate appeared driven by a consuming fear of power abuse, augmented by SAFE's mission, ideology, and ethical communication system. As a participant in the gut-wrenching work engendered by domestic violence, I can vouch for the distrust it develops. It takes few bruised, disfigured bodies and deadened spirits to develop a keen eye, sharp tongue, and fierce loathing for the consequences of coercive power. Add to this a collective feminist consciousness on the lookout for inequitable gender relations. Amid these conditions, ethical communication's focus on the organizational effects of power seemed almost too much to bear. The boundaries debate relieved some of this pressure, however confused or coercive the process. These reflections suggest that what counts as empowering is likely contextual and, thus, warrants local negotiation. More specifically, the work of an organization may influence the structures and practices that members will find most enabling.

Another partial answer involves the inegalitarian habits of members situated in patriarchal, bureaucratic, capitalist cultures. Many of us have learned to view hierarchy as natural and efficient, to quarantine our public and private experience. In this sense, SAFE practice reflects Stohl's (1995) paradox of control, in which members of "empowering" organizations internalize "traditional" control mechanisms and create tighter controls through ostensibly participative efforts (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994). Likewise, scholars of feminist practice commonly cite engrained cultural customs as a key obstacle to sustaining pure feminist forms in practice (e.g., Ianello, 1992; Rothschild-Whitt & Whitt, 1986). Without dis-

crediting this answer, I want to consider its potential side effect. That is, it can shelter feminist theory from critical scrutiny by invoking dominant culture as a scapegoat. In other words, this valid logic can also obscure how the purest of feminist forms (e.g., egalitarian collectives), even if they could be sustained in practice, are riddled with imperfection. I do not mean to single out feminist organization with this critique; certainly, most organizational forms encounter failures, contradictions, and discrepancies between theory and practice (Benson, 1977; Kanter & Zurcher, 1973). Nor do I mean to suggest that all imperfections are equivalent. For its own justification, the current article rests on feminist censure of bureaucratic hypocrisies and the ensuing quest for alternatives. Rather, a key contribution of SAFE practice is that it dismantles dichotomies that pervade feminist critique and theories of feminist organization: bureaucratic/oppressive versus feminist/empowering (P. Y. Martin, 1987; Reinelt, 1995). The SAFE case demonstrates how feminist ideology (e.g., emotional, self-reflexive relations) may also oppress, how bureaucratic ideology (e.g., formalization, impersonal relations) may also empower (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Perrow, 1990). This argument parallels current organizational communication theory concerning self-contained opposites, or the simultaneous presence of domination and resistance (e.g., Clair, 1998; Mumby, 1997).

But for a moment, let us suppose that it is appropriate to indict elements of Western culture as the primary culprit. At the risk of reifying that culture and its omnipotence, I propose that because it appears to establish significant constraints on the present and likely near future, it is worthwhile to consider what meaningful empowerment can look like amid those constraints. Specifically, organizational communication scholars can build pluralist (or provisional, hybrid) feminist theories of pragmatically feasible empowerment that facilitate an interactive relationship between theory and practice (e.g., Gottfried & Weiss, 1994; Mayer, 1995). My analysis elaborated pluralist perspectives with a conceptual and empirical model that grants the imperfections of feminist practice without castigation (Craig & Tracy, 1995; Fraser, 1989, 1993; Mumby, 1996). Beyond the study of feminist organization, the model

applied here offers a mode of critical investigation "less preoccupied with grand theorizing" and "more prepared to learn from, and contribute to, localized theoretical and practical concerns" (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 440). Such theorizing would be especially responsive to the needs of organizations that seek social change yet cannot fully embrace antibureaucratic, countercapitalist ideals and practices.

To clarify, pluralist feminist theory cannot be reduced to liberal feminist theory dressed up in a different package. Rather than offer addenda that accept or presume dominant organizational forms, pluralist theory centers on the organizational form itself. It takes radical feminist concerns as a point of departure but follows an alternative path to radical theorizing. For example, studies of feminist practice tend to reflect a radical feminist stance (Acker, 1995); many allow a basic contradiction between feminist ideology and practice but provide little direction for coping with practical quandaries (e.g., SAFE's public-private dilemma) aroused by this tension. Pluralist theory examines how organizational forms might be grafted together toward innovative, enabling possibilities; it highlights dilemmas that arise from attempts to hold seemingly indispensable yet incompatible projects together. Thus, it complements current efforts to develop contradiction-centered perspectives on organization (e.g., Hatch, 1997; Putnam, 1986; Trethewey, 1999). Organizational communication studies can gain much from this conceptual shift. Next, as SAFE practice speaks back to feminist theory, I consider three specific ways in which my analysis challenges feminist theory and builds a foundation for a pluralist account of empowering work relations.

First, the SAFE case reveals how the complex relationship between private and public may be articulated and/or interpreted in multiple forms and degrees. For example, SAFE retained its concern for several private issues, even as it banned intimate relationships. Members continued to openly integrate emotions (e.g., about clients) into decision making and to consider how SAFE could be more responsive to women's lives (e.g., benefits for part-time work, child care accommodations). Celebrations of lesbian identity persisted, although oddly juxtaposed with the marginalization of cur-

rent member couples. Moreover, SAFE's ethical communication may be read in contradictory terms: as a counterbureaucratic move to redefine private and public through bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992) or as a bureaucratic form of legal-rational authority that legitimized supervisory control as mere enforcement of (feeling) rules (Ashcraft, 1998). Thus, it seems likely that (a) feminist organizations do not wholly integrate public and private selves, just as bureaucracies do not wholly sever them; and (b) either of these attempts, and those in-between, can produce empowering and disempowering consequences for members. Again, I do not mean to imply that these effects are equivalent and, hence, should be understood as a simple trade-off. On the contrary, I see a qualitative difference between system "bugs," localized and erratic inequalities, and the systematic control and exclusion of particular groups. Rather, I contend that much ambiguity surrounds the feminist call to personalize work relations, and actual efforts to enact it appear to vary widely and to prove polysemous and/or conflicted. Instead of blanket calls to personalize the professional, perhaps we can speak of more enabling private-public relationships, necessarily understood as shifting, contextually contingent (e.g., in relation to an organization's work), and thoughtfully open to feminist, bureaucratic, and other organizing principles.

Second, SAFE practice sparks important questions about the nature and viability of bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). SAFE's dilemma of relationship boundaries underscored the darker side of what many organization theorists know as a key resource for power: informal coalitions based on exchanges of favors and/or friendship networks (e.g., Pfeffer, 1992). SAFE's dilemma suggested that bounded emotionality (e.g., ethical communication) can invite the formation of subtle alliances that stifle empowerment. If so, what provisions or feeling rules might minimize the development of informal, coercive, political structures? The SAFE case also prompts questions about *work feelings* and *feeling rules*. Can we speak of parameters to work feelings? To what extent do these borders, however fluid, and the very notion of work feelings, invite members to preserve the

separation of public and private? What constitutes a feeling rule, and when do these essential limitations become emotional labor? For instance, although ethical communication entailed feeling rules to enable community, its mandate to disclose "spontaneous, emergent" feelings bordered on emotional labor. And although SAFE's boundaries policy imposed severe, if not paradoxical, restrictions (e.g., squelch spontaneous, emergent work feelings that are unprofessional), some participants perceived the policy as an extension or clarification of feeling rules to protect and preserve community. Together, these reflections suggest a need to revisit the notion of intimacy at work. Although SAFE members acknowledged only two kinds of intimacy (i.e., romantic/sexual and friendship), their practice implied a third. Because participants never questioned the emotional, self-reflexive relations enacted during the boundaries debate, it appears that they distinguished this practice from the intimacy precluded by the policy. A crucial contribution of bounded emotionality may be a novel form of closeness implied by the concept of work feelings: "work intimacy." Future research can clarify the distinctive features of this form, particularly as it seems to elude popular discourses of intimacy.

In addition, SAFE practice demonstrates how bounded emotionality can coexist with and create disempowering communication constraints. On one hand, the SAFE case illustrates why "tolerance of ambiguity," virtually renounced by SAFE's boundaries policy, is crucial to sustain the empowering capacity of bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). However, SAFE practice poignantly demonstrates how intense collective anxiety may follow ambiguity about intimacy at work, pushing members to seek the comforts of more rigid structures. As such, my analysis of multiple ironies at SAFE supports J. Martin et al.'s (1998) claim that bounded emotionality may plant the seeds of its own demise. More precisely, members invoked SAFE's quest for open expression to justify the policy that inhibited it. And as they reached this impersonal end through an intensely personal process, that process was ironically employed to undermine itself. Again, it should not surprise or alarm us that bounded emotionality entails its own forms of irony, control, and resistance (Clair, 1998; Mumby, 1997). My concern is

that bounded emotionality can prove difficult to empirically distinguish from emotional labor (J. Martin et al., 1998). Perhaps the feeling rules of the former reflect greater fluidity, and those of the latter, fixedness. Yet, it is worth noting that several SAFE members cast even the boundaries policy as a set of flexible guidelines. Conceptual clarification of bounded emotionality may assist practical efforts to revise "traditional" relationships between emotion and work.

Third, SAFE's extreme, negative discourse of sexuality compels us to reconsider a prescription on which many feminists and bureaucrats agree: desexualize the workplace (Gherardi, 1995). Should and/or do feminist organizations do the same? If feminist practice is prone to personalize professional relations, does it not foster a culture conducive to sexual attraction? And if it rejects oppressive enactments of power, on what grounds would members deny sexual relationships? Although current research remains virtually silent on these provocative questions, SAFE members ventured some answers. Their universal censure of sexual intimacy brought the prevailing feminist view of workplace sexuality to feminist organizing. As reviewed earlier, hegemonic masculinity defines, devalues, and/or dismisses women's pleasure; thus, sexuality in mainstream organizations tends to dominate women (e.g., Acker, 1990; Collinson & Collinson, 1989). But a similar conflation of sexuality and oppression surfaced at SAFE, despite the organization's prolesbian discourse and democratic vision of superiors as obligated to subordinates. Perhaps SAFE members merely appropriated feminist views of sexuality as sinister, or perhaps their frequent contact with clients who suffered abusive sexuality predisposed them toward this perspective. Future research can shed light on the rationale(s), desirability, and consequences of proscribing sexuality, especially in settings that presumably, are less subject to hegemonic masculinity.

This discussion signals related questions about the relationship between organization, sexuality, power, and gender. Do multiple forms of organizational power mirror sexualities of dominance and submission? To what extent is heterosexuality and/or hegemonic

masculinity linked to organizational power? It is sufficient here to conclude that homosocial and homosexualized organizational systems may facilitate power abuse, although the symbols that form the vehicles of this inequality appear to differ markedly from those in "traditional" organizational communication. However, although the SAFE case extends the oppressive potential of sexuality at work, many members experienced SAFE's sweeping indictment of sexual intimacy as disempowering. This finding signals a key deficit in feminist theories of organizational sexuality: their scant concern with pleasure and resistance and, thus, their overwhelmingly negative stance (Burrell, 1992; Gherardi, 1995; Pringle, 1989). Organizational communication research and practice can benefit from theories of sexuality that better account for the complex connection of power and pleasure.

In recent years, organizational communication scholars have witnessed the rising influence of feminist critiques of mainstream organization. Thus far, we have relatively little with which to supplant dominant traditions. This article turned to feminist practice as a guide for revising gendered organization. It enacted multiple dimensions of dialogue: between parallel research traditions, between theory and practice, between feminist and bureaucratic organization. Through such conversation, I seek to revise the relationship between feminism and organizational communication, with particular reference to professional relationships. Morgen (1994) explains,

In most organizations, feminist and otherwise, the choice is not between purely bureaucratic or purely counter bureaucratic organizational practices but some kind of meaningful balance of the two. The balance is negotiated by real people who confront complex decisions as they struggle to live out their values and ideals under difficult conditions. (p. 678)

Many have scrutinized feminist practice through the eyes of pure, abstract empowerment ideals. More dynamic, pragmatically empowering theories of organization become possible when we render these ideals accountable to practice.

NOTES

1. SAFE is a pseudonym.

2. The choice to emphasize staff may be read to accept a patriarchal definition of *relevant* organization member as paid worker or internal member. It is not my intent to deny the importance of volunteer and client members. For example, although organizational discourse often characterizes clients as mere consumers of hegemonic discourse, the client-staff relationship constitutes a key site for the reproduction of and resistance to power relations (Trethewey, 1997). Certainly, we would learn much from examining how feminist practice can empower members who are less involved or invested in the organization. But my review of extant research reopens the question of whether feminist practice can empower even those members most central to producing and maintaining it. It is this question on which I focus.

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