RHETORICAL THEMES OF
EMERGENT FEMALE LEADERS

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Among the most studied aspects of small group communication
has been leadership, and within this area emergent leadership
has enjoyed perhaps the greatest attention. Leaderless groups,
according to Bormann (1975: 254), follow the "method of
residues," in which all groups' members at first are potential
leaders until the group evaluates each candidate on style and
amount of participation, topical expertise, and so forth—
slowly eliminating contenders until the strongest emerges.
Much of the research on emergent leadership has explored how
these contenders communicate in their struggles to win the
leader role. Some researchers have discovered that persons
who spend more time talking often are perceived as leaders
(Bass, 1949; Slater, 1955; Bostrom, 1970). Kwal and Fleshler
(1973), however, found that the emergence of a leader depended
on self-esteem relative to others in the group. Sharf (1978)
explored rhetorical dimensions of two zero-history groups,
one of which resolved the leadership struggle and one that did
not. She found that successful leader emergence was enhanced
by "(1) a contender's sensitivity to group compositional
differences and situational urgencies and constraints, and (2)
generation of a rhetorical vision transcendent of those divisions
most threatening to group solidarity" (p. 172).

Thus, not only a group member's relative amount of talk but
also his or her rhetorical style accounts for emergence as
leader. An eventually emergent leader will have presented

successfully a unifying "rhetorical vision" that emphasizes cohesion, coordination, conciliation, and team work, while minimizing differences or divisions within the group.

It is important to point out that Sharf's (p. 161) "stabilized group" (which successfully resolved their leadership struggle) was made up of six females, while the group failing to resolve their leadership struggle (the "non-stabilized" group) was made up of four females and three males. Although Sharf (p. 172) admits sex composition may have been part of the "rhetorical situation" with which "leadership contenders must attempt to cope," little attention was given to gender as a variable. In fact, research relevant to the communication of female emergent leaders has been scarce. Yerby (1975: 168), for example, pointed to a "bias against women in leadership roles" and found that attitudes toward female leaders and group sex composition affect a group's responses toward female leaders.

Bormann et al. (1978) identified female dominance and male responses to female leadership as important elements in explaining zero-history classroom organizations. These researchers found that "women rose to positions of leadership," and that "no male emerged as a task leader within the small groups or within the organization" (p. 150). They focused primarily on the male responses to female leadership and secondarily on how these females became leaders. Male responses to "female control" included: (1) withdrawal from active participation; (2) attempts to achieve leadership, which failed and resulted in a "serious blow to their self-image"; and (3) remaining active and influential within groups, without attempting to achieve leadership (Bormann et al., 1978: 150).

The predominant explanation for leadership emergence focused on a fantasy theme analysis of dramatized sexual metaphors linking leadership with male potency (see Bormann, 1972). The emphasis was illustrated through a scenario in which a male struggled to gain leadership, lost to a female, and in so doing lost his sexual potency and metaphorically became "castrated" (Bormann et al., 1978: 154). As intriguing as these

descriptions are, however, stressing male responses to female leader emergence overshadowed the specific literal rhetorical styles of these female leaders. The mere fact that only females emerged as leaders also needs to be examined. In fact, in my last two years of teaching public speaking, interpersonal, small group, and oral communication fundamentals courses, 18 out of 20 leaderless, mixed-sex task groups revealed female leadership emergence. Thus, this question emerges to guide this study: "What are the rhetorical themes used by females who emerge as leaders of small task groups?"[1]

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Three leaderless groups as part of an upper-division small group communication course in a private university in the northwestern United States were studied. During the first week of the semester, students were asked to form groups of their choosing that were about equal in the number of females and males. No other criterion was used in forming these groups, and group formation appeared to be guided by seating proximity, with some persons selecting groups because of previous relationships. Most were not communication majors. Most were juniors or seniors.

All groups were to complete the task of solving or improving some aspect of campus life in the three months allotted. Each group selected its own task, and met in and out of class at least weekly throughout the 12-week semester, with the final goal being the presentation of results to the class during the final week. Of the 21 students in the class, three groups formed. Group 1, composed of three females and five males, chose a task of designing and presenting a campuswide career orientation fair. Group 2, composed of two females and five males, chose to conduct a school alcohol use survey. Group 3, composed of two females and four males, chose to investigate potential improvements of the student union building.

Each member kept an ongoing group log in which he or she reported the group's progress, physical setting, group roles, interaction patterns, leadership development, and feelings about the group.[2] Moreover, at the end of the semester, each member wrote an 8- to 10-page paper as a cumulative analysis of the group experience. The written logs and analysis papers were the primary data of the study. These 544 pages of student descriptions and inferences were treated as texts that offered discourse about group communication and leadership. These texts were clustered by groups and interpreted by the researcher with an emphasis on the common and discrepant views of leadership emergence among group members. The central focus, however, was placed on the specific interpretive themes of discourse[3] and perceptions of group life through the eyes of the eventual leaders of the groups. Thus, leadership emergence was determined primarily by the joint perceptions of all members, although the researcher's nonparticipant observation of group meetings also aided this determination, as Bormann et al. (1978) have recommended. The researcher's observation included class group meetings, and face-to-face and telephone conversations with the group leaders and members.

RHETORICAL THEMES

Two rhetorical themes held in common by the three females who emerged as leaders are interpreted here.

THE RHETORIC OF THE "HARD WORKER" AND LEADING BY DEFAULT

Perhaps the most common path to leadership was through the emerging leaders' "work." To lead was to outwork all other group members, especially when leaders perceived the group as "sluggish" and "unmotivated." Exerting extraordinary "effort" and even "sacrificing" were common leader perceptions. For

example, in Group 2, the female leader G expressed how her group had "stalled": "I don't feel like anyone else is willing to give the impetus to work, so I'm doing it."

Throughout their meetings G kept all the notes, recorded the group's schedule, and "made sure things got done." On one occasion, after she had "mentioned getting back on track in our discussion," one of the males made "snide remarks" about G being "task all the time." G commented: "I feel like if I'm not task, who will be? I'm wondering if we'll be able to get this thing off the ground." Her frustration and desire to have a good group project motivated her to fill the leadership vacuum by outworking the others. In her words: "For the amount of time and effort I put into this thing, for the times I came prepared, for the extra responsibility I took, I truly believe I deserve a full-fledged 'A.'" Others in G's group agreed with her perceptions, as one male noted: "G was continually volunteering herself for everything and was also competing for conversation time with me. She likes a leadership role, that's where she works best." He went on to note that "many times I wanted to interject and tell G that she was volunteering herself too much. But I knew how much she wanted to be a leader."

G's leadership was established based on her excessive work and the perception shared within the group that no one else wanted to lead. She made most of the phone calls necessary for her group project, kept all notes, was present, and started and ended each meeting, and did "more work than all the rest" of her group. It can be said, then, that G earned her leader role through hard work, but not through a process of elimination. Unlike Bormann's (1975) "method of residues," in which members compete to eliminate contenders until a single leader emerges, G rose to leadership by simply doing more of the group work than all others in a climate that saw others unconcerned with obtaining leadership.

The rhetoric of "hard worker" comprised many forms of communication. For example, in Group 2, the female S noted how G scheduled meetings and "was very amazed at how well

she talked." Another male also pointed out the phrases G used to begin each meeting: "Well, now . . ." as her "famous opening sentence." Moreover, in all three groups, the females who emerged as leaders in virtually every group meeting recorded notes. For example, in Group 3, the female leader K was described by a male member as "always the first person to take out a pad of paper and take notes throughout the meetings," which "aided in establishing her position as leader." He continued: "She was constantly writing things down and reviewing out loud what had occurred, what had been done with respect to the goal and then making a brief statement on what had been said about those aspects." K seemed to be aware of her position, as she wrote:

> Due to the fact that both H and I were the only females within our group, we were instantly labeled as organized, task-oriented people. From the very first meeting when I made an automatic response and pulled out a sheet of paper and pen to make notes on, B announced, "So you're organized and ready to go!" From that point forward, B and M made further comments in reference to women's sense of organization and inherent leadership qualities. Thus within our group, it was regarded as an unwritten law that males did not need to bother taking notes, or attempting to structure the group meetings, for as long as women were present, it would be taken care of.

As already mentioned, all three female leaders "took notes," but this note taking extended beyond the mere tracking of group events. Leader K wrote, duplicated, issued agenda memos that detailed each member's tasks, and set the next meeting. Leader J in Group 1 also produced such memos, noting that "the feeling was one of 'tell us what to do and let's get it over with.' " In summary, then, the three female leaders perceived themselves as doing most of the group work. They assumed this "extra responsibility" chiefly because, as K wrote: "None of the guys were willing to hold up their end." In fact, as one male observed of the two females in his group: "I think being the only two females in the group they both had the drive

and the pushiness to really kind of enforce their will."

Females assumed leadership not by contention with others, but by filling the leadership void with excessive work, since "someone had to do it." Although most males viewed themselves as *allowing* the females to lead, they also admitted that this leadership had been earned through diligent effort. What is most intriguing, however, is that these female leaders attempted to avoid the label "leader."

THE RHETORIC OF "NOT LEADING"

It should be kept in mind that all three groups held clear, unanimous perceptions recognizing their respective female leaders, and the researcher's observations concurred. Each female leader, however, openly or implicitly worked to shed the label "leader." Leader K in Group 3, for example, felt she had "taken the initiative to be the leader," despite the fact that often she was "reluctant to accept this label (due to the inherent overall responsibility attached to the name)." On the other hand, leader G in Group 2 knew she was the leader, and yet by assuming the title she would become alienated from the group: "I just hope I don't come across too bitchy." Toward the end of their group project, G felt like a "slave driver" and also like "a first-class 'witch,' but sick of feeling like the whole project rests on my shoulders."

It was clear that much of G's frustration emerged from being in a bind. She knew she was a capable leader and was even complimented by males and females alike on how well she had organized the group. She also perceived the repercussions of her leadership—that she would be viewed as a "pushy," "bitchy" female, a "slave driver" and as a "witch." G's remedy was to deny she was leader:

> I put my role as organizer or coordinator. If someone says I was leading—I wasn't—or that I was organizing things, when I wasn't.

But she later added:

> When someone missed a meeting, they'd call me. Maybe being the leader—the slave driver—sometimes isn't always bad—sometimes it isn't. It's important to recognize your strengths and the organization was there.

G used the euphemisms "organizer" and "coordinator," although in the latter passage she seemed to be persuading herself that being the "leader" also was acceptable.

Leader J in Group 1 also insisted on being called "coordinator." She felt "like a leader—but a coordinator-leader, not dominant or absolute." The term "coordinator" appeared to diffuse the perceived harshness inherent in the term "leader." In fact, J used several language strategies to diffuse or "soften" her role as "leader." First, she viewed the group leadership as a team effort. She and the female R together "made a good team," and "collectively we formed a good 'leader' or a 'leading unit.' " "Our leadership was combined," she noted, "I'm the task and she's the helper." Second, J developed the term "cohesive" as the "motto for our group":

> It was a word that meant "settle down and get involved." This definition was picked up by the members of the group to whom it was directed and they used it as a joke or tension release. They were returning my original comment with a newfound feeling of solidarity of or unity. This was their way of expressing a desire for cooperation and friendly submission to my request for cohesiveness.

Indeed, this "request for cohesiveness" was merely an "inside joke," as one male put it, to ameliorate or mask J's obvious task leadership. An overemphasis on "cohesiveness" and "togetherness" allowed J to appear to the group as more of a "coordinator" and less of a "leader." Emphasizing "togetherness" would allow any leader to melt into rather than stand out from the group. J wrote a song in her log to depict the "tone" of her group:

Pulling together
Working together
Just *building* together
That makes you strong
If things go wrong
We'll still get along somehow
Living and *growing*
Together.

These three females explicitly were labeled "leader," but appeared to view the term as a stigma to be avoided. They avoided the label by coopting others (usually another female) to share the role, by labeling themselves as "coordinator" or "organizer" and by exaggerating the perception of "cohesiveness" and "equality" in their group as a way to diffuse their singular leading performance.

DISCUSSION

These two rhetorical themes used commonly by three female leaders appear to be paradoxically inconsistent. On the one hand, these women became leaders by default: "Someone has to do it." On the other hand, they seemed to shy away from an acceptance of the label "leader." Thus, these leaders had the task of leading without seeming to lead. Theirs was a most difficult task—perhaps accounting for such high levels of reported "frustration." They had tacit acceptance as "leaders," but worked equally hard to maintain a distance from such a label. The obvious question is "Why did these females avoid being called 'leader' when they obviously were in such a role?"

One response to the question is that such "nonleading" further facilitated their grasp on the leader position. What better way to enhance one's leadership than to deny modestly, publicly that one is the leader? It is difficult to challenge one for the role while it constantly is being denied. A rhetoric of "not leading" carries a symbolic aura of egalitarianism and fair-

minded treatment of the group. Hence, these leaders appeared to enhance their empirical leadership position by denouncing their hold on the role.

A second response to this denial of the term "leader" is directly linked to the leaders' gender. It may be that these females avoided the label because, as women, they would not be accepted explicitly in the role. Put another way, they perceived "leaders" as men, and "organizers" or "coordinators" as women. "Leader," therefore, was not perceived as a generic term, but one attached to males. An acceptance of the label "leader" by these women might have meant more of a threat to the male members than otherwise was felt.

A marked contrast can be seen between the rhetorical styles of the female leaders in this study and those discovered by Bormann and his associates (1978). They quote one female's view of female leadership: "Women should get used to being seen as a bitch and a castrating woman" (p. 154). In their study, a confrontational style of female leadership, in which the term "leader" is fully embraced and perhaps even flaunted, resulted in male withdrawal and loss of male self-esteem. Female leaders appeared to intuit that by avoiding the title they would enlist the full support of the group and avoid the kind of "castration" scenario with the group's males as discovered in the Bormann study.

In conclusion, some tentative interpretations of female leadership in mixed-sex groups were offered. Women emerged as group leaders when they maintained a subtle, yet hard-working, ethic. They noticeably outworked all others by accepting more tasks and responsibility than their male counterparts. Furthermore, females consciously strived to emerge as the "organizer" and "coordinator" as a modest proclamation of being a "team" player. Females spent considerable effort in creating rhetorical themes of "cohesion," egalitarian partici-pation, and "togetherness"—even when such a climate is not apparent. Their efforts to avoid the stigma of "leader" served to strengthen their hold on the role, rather than to invite contention for the role. Thus, females jumped to an early lead

in the "race" for leadership by their extraordinary hard work and solidified their grasp on the position by emphasizing a rhetoric of modest, but paradoxic, "nonleading."

NOTES

1. I am using the term "rhetorical" to follow Burke's meaning of "inducing cooperation." Thus, I am interested in the thematic uses of language by female leaders as a means to achieve group leadership. See Burke (1969: 43).

2. No detailed format was given for the logs except that students could include any insights based on class lecture-discussions, films, and readings. The two texts used in the course were Patton and Giffin (1978) and Scheidel and Crowell (1979). Students were given the "Group Process Observer Report Form" created by Pfeiffer and Jones (1969: 49-50) as the only structured guideline for their logs.

3. In a broad sense, I have followed Bormann's (1972) "fantasy theme analysis" here, except that literal meanings replace his dramatistic "fantasies" and occur in the present time, rather than removed in space and time from the "here-and-now." For a similar kind of thematic analysis see Owen (1982).

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