

Why Were the Thomas/Hill Hearings So Divisive?

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This article appeared in **FOCUS**, published by Carnegie Mellon University,
Volume 21, No. 3, November/December 1991

Why were the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings so extraordinarily divisive? Why does the episode still arouse fierce emotional conflicts among people (regardless of gender) who normally can work through their disagreements or set them aside? Why, in serious newspapers and magazines (as well as in television sitcoms and comic strips) are people still arguing about who was or wasn't telling the truth?

Now that Clarence Thomas has taken his seat on the Supreme Court, the "whom to believe" questions no longer have any practical value. For better or worse, the particular situation is over, and we will never know "the truth." Nor will we ever be able to know with any certainty whether or to what extent this episode may affect Thomas's performance on the Supreme Court. So I mention these questions only in order to dismiss them, because there is nothing we can do about them.

But if we can answer the question of *why* this situation has been so divisive, maybe we will be just a bit closer to healing some of the rifts it has caused. This is my purpose in this essay: to share my ideas about why it has been so divisive with others who may share my frustration and sorrow.

This issue has divided many men and women, even those who share close professional and personal ties. It has had similar effects among men and among women. Realizing that the reactions can't be neatly classified along gender lines helped me to see two important points:

- The crucial issue is power in the workplace, not sex.
- The division is between people who, on the one hand, are frustrated by their lack of power in the workplace and those who, on the other hand, fear a dilution of their existing power.

Let me try to explain by means of three analogies from my own professional domain of language and communication. The first two are about attempts to equalize power among vendors and consumers; the third moves on to the relationships between gender and power.

I'll begin with the "plain-English laws" that several states have passed in recent years. In general, these laws require that mortgages and loan agreements, sales contracts, insurance policies, warranties, and other similar documents be written in language that the people who must sign them—the customers—can understand. The purpose of these laws is to help consumers protect themselves in these transactions that often involve huge amounts of money. Who would object to the passage of these laws? If you answered "lawyers," you're right. Their argument is that the legal complexities and distinctions are too complex to be put into simple language that ordinary consumers can understand. Most consumers, however, believe that the lawyers are worried more about defending their turf than they are about legal niceties.

My second example also involves the issue of consumers' rights to protect themselves—this time to protect their own bodies. Various consumer groups have called for prescription package inserts written in language that patients can understand. These provide information about how the particular drug works, what its potential side effects are, how it might interact with other drugs, how the dosage should vary with age or weight, etc. (I think the FDA now requires that such inserts be provided with oral contraceptives.) Who would oppose providing this kind of information with all prescription drugs? Some physicians and pharmaceutical manufacturers contend that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, because it will lead people to over- or under-dose themselves or frighten them out of taking a drug they need. Once again, many patients suspect that these doctors and pharmaceutical people are resisting having to share some of the knowledge that makes them the powerful figures they are to most of us.

My final example also has to do with the relationship of language and power, but this one will bring us right back to where we started: the divisiveness of the Hill-Thomas situation. Paralleling the movements to change the language of legal and financial documents and of medical and pharmaceutical descriptions is the attempt by many women (and some men as well) to change our everyday discourse so that it reflects actual changes in our society. Since women as well as men now own, run, and work in businesses, why not speak of "business owners" or "business people" or "executives" rather than "businessmen"? Similarly, since women as well as men now deliver mail and fight fires (to name just a few, basic examples), why not refer to "mail carriers" and "fire fighters" rather than to "mailmen" or "firemen"? Why not, indeed? Why, when this issue comes up in my business communication classes, does all hell break loose? Why do male students proclaim angrily that these designations are trivial, that as long as women are doing these things, it doesn't matter what they are called?

There are valid, theoretically-grounded reasons that it does matter, but explaining I.A. Richards' "semantic triangle" doesn't change my students' minds on this issue. I have learned another way to help them understand (if not accept) that it is important that our language reflect life as it is, not as it used to be. I ask them to play some word association games in which they draw a picture of what comes to mind when I say certain words. I say, "if I were to say 'mailman,' how many of you would draw a female letter carrier?" "If I were to say 'policeman,' how many of you would draw a woman police officer?" Usually they agree that they would draw male figures in response to those words, but some protest that if I were to say "letter carrier" or "police officer," they would still draw men. But one or two say "No, because you *didn't* use 'mailman' or 'policeman,' I would realize that you were reminding me that I could draw a man or a woman."

The lesson taught (and learned by a few): changing the language does help to reinforce the idea that the *reality* has changed. And that is precisely why my male students are so vehemently opposed to changing the language—for the same reasons that lawyers resist "plain-English laws" and medical professionals resist prescription inserts written in lay language. In each case, the people who by custom and tradition have controlled society's institutions are expressing their resistance to sharing that power. Such resistance is understandable; nearly all of us, regardless of gender, enjoy whatever power we have. But when one person's power prevents another person from achieving basic rights, the situation is potentially dangerous and divisive. That's how, at long last, we come back to the Thomas-Hill situation, which many professional

women see as an illustration that they are still second-class citizens in the workplace (and which many men see as another assault on their existing power in the workplace).

I said earlier that the Hill-Thomas situation itself is over, so there is not much point in worrying about what was "true." What is not over and what still troubles me is that during the hearings and since, so many people have worked so hard to *discredit* Anita Hill, to find flaws or inconsistencies in her account or to attribute her statements to an unrequited personal interest in him. Why haven't people worked equally hard to discredit Clarence Thomas or to find flaws or inconsistencies in his account? One answer is that he didn't give an account. He denied all allegations and refused to answer questions. As a result, people say "in the absence of proof to the contrary, we'll take his word for it." In the abstract, that seems fair, but when Anita Hill produced some evidence in the form of impressive corroborating witnesses, people said "in the absence of 100% proof of *all* of it, we won't take her word for *any* of it."

This is also the point at which this becomes very much a professional and managerial women's issue—particularly troublesome to women in fields and institutions where traditionally the people in power (e.g., the "executives," the "partners," "the deans") have been male. Now women MBAs want to be executives, women lawyers want to be partners, women academics want to be deans. In order to reach these positions, they sometimes do the same things that many men have done and continue to do: rightly or wrongly, for better or worse, they put up with exploitative and unfair behavior from the people in power. For example, Hill says she followed Thomas to the EEOC because she feared for her job at Education after he left. She made a professional decision to follow a boss about whom she had personal reservations. Now, many years after the fact, we are told that she was a "Schedule B" employee and, therefore, her job would have been safe; *ergo*, many people say, "she is lying about why she followed him, and anyway, his personal behavior couldn't have bothered her that much or she wouldn't have gone, despite her personal ambition." What frightens and frustrates professional women is the suggestion that because she may have made an erroneous professional assumption (about her future at Education), her testimony—stated in rather direct and simple English—is not credible in any way. Men who hitch their futures to a boss's rising star sometimes make wrong or unnecessary choices, too; but their poor judgment does not destroy their overall credibility. Men also toady to their bosses' whims and pet peeves (I am thinking of specific examples I've heard from some corporate executives, not making a generalization); doing so is perceived as "serving your time until you can make your move."

So the Thomas-Hill situation reminds professional women that they are held to different standards of behavior than are their male colleagues. It also reminds them that they are perceived by their colleagues in those professions first and primarily as women and only secondarily as lawyers or professors or executives. That is hard to take, and it explains why professional women in particular have reacted so strongly in this case. (I am speaking as a woman, but I am aware that many men share these perceptions). Professional women have the same education, qualifications, and experience as their male colleagues; they have been prepared to take their place in the managerial hierarchies of their professions and institutions. When they perceive that their female gender outweighs all of that preparation, blocking the path to their share of the power their professional education, qualifications, and experience supposedly entitle them to, their frustration manifests itself as it has in this case.

What do I mean when I say that many men perceive their female professional colleagues first as women and only secondarily as professionals? Here is a very relevant example. On the day that Anita Hill testified before the Judiciary Committee, I was working with four participants in an executive education program; my session was at mid-day. Their morning session had begun before Anita Hill made her opening statement, so when they emerged, they asked the first person they saw to tell them what happened. That person, another corporate executive, gave them a very general description of the morning's events but refused to tell them any of the specifics of Hill's allegations. Why? Because one of the four participants in the group was female, and he said he could not bring himself to report what Anita Hill had said in the presence of a woman. So her gender got in the way of her receiving information that he was prepared to share with the others, despite the fact that all four of them were corporate executives participating in the same program.

Apart as this example is, I almost didn't use it, because it could contribute to the very divisiveness I deplore, if the reluctant speaker were to read this. I say that because I know that he wasn't consciously trying to exclude the female executive. More than that, I know that he has made and continues to make genuine and sincere efforts to overcome behaviors and attitudes that could be called "sexist." So he could understandably be distressed that I identified him as an example of the problem.

That's why the issue is so divisive. The Thomas-Hill case reminds many professional women that they are still being excluded because they are women, so they are angry and bitter. On the other hand, many men are puzzled and confused, because they have tried and continue to try to be supportive of women in their organizations. And what happens? Women are still angry. But that's just the point. *For most men in most institutions in our society, their gender has never stood in the way of achieving legitimate power.* That is why it is difficult for men to realize how and why women get frustrated at actions that men make as acts of respect (such as an executive's refusal to use certain language in front of a woman). It is why men who were trained by their parents to stand up when a woman enters the room now don't know whether they should or shouldn't stand up *and* why the women for whom they stand up aren't sure how to react when they do.

It's also a dilemma for both genders because men and women do want to interact socially as well as professionally, do want to meet people with whom they want to have personal relationships. That is another reason the Hill-Thomas case has triggered arguments among women and among men as well as between the genders. For every woman who reacts negatively to a personal compliment from a man with whom she has a solely professional relationship, there is another who has no objections. For every man who pays that personal compliment to a professional female colleague, there is another who is sensitive to the problem, whose friendly small-talk is about last night's television show or this morning's beautiful weather. No wonder people are confused and no wonder the Thomas-Hill episode has been so divisive: it brought out into the open some highly sensitive issues that all of us in the workplace—men and women—have been struggling with. It forced us to examine in painful public detail aspects of our professional and our personal relationships that we're not accustomed to questioning or discussing.