The Controversial Martha Stewart

Linda A. Krefting
Rawls College of Business,
Texas Tech University,
Lubbock, TX 79409, USA.
Tel.: 806-742-2157; fax: 806-742-2308
Email: linda.krefting@ttu.edu

Abstract

Controversies are useful sites for exploring social tensions. Strong or emotional reactions to women beyond traditional roles is one indicator that gender remains a source of tension (Fletcher, 1999). Martha Stewart, founder and head of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, has been among the most controversial figures in the U.S. business press during 2002. Under investigation for possible insider trading in ImClone Systems stock, business press coverage of her investigation has been more extensive and prominent than coverage of ImClone Systems or its executives who face far more serious legal charges. The discrepancy in coverage has itself become the subject of editorial commentary and business cartoons. But this is not the first time Stewart's treatment in the media has been questioned. In years past, the snide tenor of news accounts of Stewart’s success in building her enterprise has also been noted. Editorial speculation on why her success might be treated in this fashion has been highly varied.

A large body of scholarly work explores the inconsistencies between perceptions of women and perceptions of managerial or executive work and their implications for women in high-level positions. Similarly, research on media coverage of women, including women executives, characterizes their portrayal as "fractured." Even within a context of controversy, however, the treatment of Stewart seems particularly unusual.

The proposed paper would subject media coverage of Martha Stewart including both recent and past controversy to critical discourse analysis. The paper will make a case that has not yet been made, that Stewart is particularly contentious because of her success in making domesticity, the private sphere, visible, celebrated and profitable. Her accomplishments are acknowledged so grudgingly for challenging not only the masculinity of the public realm (as women executives routinely do) but also the social system in which it is taken-for-granted that work women traditionally have done should be "disappeared."

Critical discourse analysis of media coverage is particularly appropriate to the concern for integrating theory and practice with regard to gender in management. This perspective helps recover the activism of early second wave feminism through emphasis on the salience of everyday language and activity to the social construction of gender and gender relations. Feminist perspectives on discourse that allow possibilities for agency provide definite avenues for individual empowerment as well as for negotiating broader social change.

References


Thomas, Paulette, 1999 (Jan. 11). Gender confusion: America has long shown profound ambivalence about women and work. Wall Street Journal, R30.