Reifying the private/public divide: examining rhetorical strategies in the debate on maternity leave policy in the USA

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Abstract
Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore the rhetorical strategies women use as they debate the efficacy of maternity leave policies in the USA, and how these strategies reflect the public/private divide.

Methodology/approach: Using rhetorical analysis, we examine the characteristics of women’s discussion in an online forum. Our findings suggest that participants rely on two primary strategies: 1) “public” strategies (e.g., employing facts, logic, statistics) for most of their discussion and 2) “private” strategies (e.g., relating personal experiences) as a strategy of last resort when the public strategies fail. Further, their personal recountings lack detail and ultimately limit the ability to strengthen the posters’ arguments.

Keywords: Rhetorical analysis, Women, Maternity leave, Public/private divide

This paper explores the rhetorical strategies women use as they debate the efficacy of maternity leave policies in the USA and how these strategies reify the public/private divide. Using rhetorical analysis, we examine the characteristics of women’s discussion in an online forum. Our findings suggest that participants rely on two primary strategies: 1) “public” strategies (e.g., employing facts, logic, statistics) for most of their discussion and 2) “private” strategies (e.g., relating personal experiences) as a strategy of last resort when the public strategies fail. Further, their personal recountings lack detail and ultimately limit the ability to strengthen the posters’ arguments.