

Appendix

Are There Really Differences in Gender Communication Styles?

Many of us have had conversations with others about how different the “other” gender communicates. Countless books have been written claiming they have the answer for understanding the opposite gender. But what have we really learned about gendered ways of communicating? This section talks about language, the purpose of communication, patterns of talk, and nonverbal communication in relation to our gender.

Language

Generic “He”

It is likely that you have been told when you write or speak to use what is referred to as gender-neutral language. This is an attempt to get away from the generic “he” and move toward inclusive pronouns. For example, using “he” when we mean “he or she.” Using gender-neutral language tells us to select the latter option. Another popular way this issue presents itself is with the use of titles that contain gender markers. Words such as “policeman,” “fireman,” “mailman,” and “chairman”; all suggest that the people who hold these positions are male. Over time it has become more common to replace the above titles with gender neutral ones such as “police officer,” “firefighter,” “mail carrier,” and “chairperson.” The linguistic change has two main implications: 1) We don’t know the gender of the person being discussed, and 2) Both males and females can perform these jobs. Since we have learned that language influences perception and constructs our reality, it is important to use language responsibly to reflect nonsexist attitudes (Beal; McConnell and Fazio; Mucchi-Faina; O Barr; Parks; Stringer & Hopper). In recent years, our language has been progressing even further. Instead of simply using she/he and men/women, we recognize that not every person will identify within those categories. Now we see it is more appropriate to use the term “people of all genders” to be more inclusive.

Defining Men and Women

A second way in which language is biased against the feminine is the way it is used to define women. One such way is to use descriptions based on accomplishments or actions to define males, while defining females in terms of physical features or their relationships to men. As First Lady, Michelle Obama received a lot of press coverage about her choice of clothing for public events. Her personal accomplishments with our nation’s school system as a political figure were either downplayed or used against her as evidence that she was not properly filling the role of First Lady. Another way language is used to define men and women is through the slang terms commonly used to refer to one sex or another. What are some common ones you hear on your campus and within your circle of friends? Are women “chicks?” Are men “dudes?” What about explicit sexual references to women as a “piece of ass” or men as “dicks?” These are just some ways in which sexual terms are used to define us. Numerous studies have

shown that there are many more sexual terms used for women than men, perhaps reflecting the male tendency to objectify females.

Case In Point

Vagina Isn't a Dirty Word

While driving in the car with our two young girls, the four year old asked, “If boys have a penis, then what do girls have”? We were taken aback by the question since they were able to name the correct body part for male genitalia but not their own. We told them that girls and women have a vagina. They smiled and then started screaming, “Vagina, Vagina, I have a vagina!” over and over again. We both laughed, saying Eve Ensler would be so proud.

Eve Ensler is the playwright of *The Vagina Monologues*, a collection of over 200 interviews of women of diverse sexual orientations, racial, class, age, religious, and professional backgrounds. Her play has become an international hit and is performed every year on college campuses and local theatres. It has spawned the V-Day movement which seeks to end sexual violence against women and girls.

One of the key themes in the play is communication, specifically how we communicate about vaginas. In one monologue the woman explains, “Let’s just start with the word “vagina.” It sounds like an infection at best, maybe a medical instrument: “Hurry nurse, bring me the vagina.” “Vagina.” “Vagina.” Doesn’t matter how many times you say it, it never sounds like a word you want to say. It’s a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word. If you use it during sex, trying to be politically correct—“Darling, could you stroke my vagina?”—you kill the act right there.”

By reclaiming the word “vagina” through challenging the connotation that it is a dirty, unsexy, or clinical term, Ensler attempts to create a positive way of thinking about “vaginas”: an accurate and loving way to refer to girls and

women. Her efforts and success demonstrate the power of language to name and create reality.

Naming Reality'

The final way language influences the ways we understand gender is in the reality it creates for us. In the same way that the term “fireman” suggests that only males can do this job, creating terms to name experiences (or not having such terms) defines what we can or cannot experience. Undoubtedly, you are familiar with the term “sexual harassment” and may be familiar with your campus policy for reducing its occurrence. Did you know that this term did not come into existence until 40 years ago? Did sexual harassment occur prior to 40 years ago? Of course it did! The point is that until there was a term for such behavior (emerging in 1970s) there was no way for women (as they are the most common victims/survivors of this behavior) to either talk about what was happening to them or to fight against it. Imagine the difficulty inherent in trying to create a policy or law to prohibit behavior when there is no term for such behavior! With the advent of the term and the publicity about this issue generated by the bravery of Anita Hill when she testified against current Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, most organizations have policies to protect employees from sexual harassment. Without the language, this would have been impossible to accomplish: “the development of a vocabulary with which to accurately describe one’s experiences is an important process during which one needs to reflect on the political implications of that experience” (DeFrancisco & Palczewski 119).

The use of a generic or universal he, the use of nonparallel descriptors for different genders, and the lack of vocabulary are just some of the ways language influences our experiences as one gender or another. See if you can think of other examples.

Purpose of Communication

Starting in childhood, girls and boys are generally socialized to belong to distinct cultures and thus, speak in ways particular to their own gender’s rules and norms (Fivush; Johnson; Tannen). This pattern of gendered socialization continues throughout our lives. As a result, men and women often interpret the same conversation differently. Culturally diverse ways of speaking can cause miscommunication between members of each culture or speech community. These cultural differences are seen in the simple purpose of communication.

For those socialized in a feminine community, the purpose of communication is to create and foster relational connections with other people (Johnson; Stamou). Female communication has been called “rapport talk,” while male communication, with its instrumental focus, has been called “report talk.” The goal for men’s communication is to establish individuality. This is done in a number of ways such as indicating independence, showing control, and entertaining or performing for others.

Although our previous discussion of feminist movements for women and men indicates that gender roles are changing, traditional roles still influence our communication behaviors. Because men have traditionally been expected to work outside the home to provide financial support for the family, they need to demonstrate their individual competence as this is often the criterion for raises and promotions. Conversely, because women have been expected to work inside the home to provide childcare, household duties, and other social functions the need to create interpersonal bonds is crucial. Thus, it is important to understand the cultural reasons and pressures for the differences in communication, rather than judge one against the other devoid of context.

Patterns of Talk

One way to think of gender communication is in terms of co-cultures or speech communities. A speech community is a “community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech” (Hymes 54). Muted group theory (Kramerae) explains the societal differentiation of gender and its corresponding language development. This develops on two levels:

1. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men.
2. Women’s perceptions differ from those of men because women’s subordination means they experience life differently. However, the words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women’s experiences (1).

Thus, when discussing patterns of talk we conceptualize them as occurring in different speech communities or co-cultures based on historical, cultural and economic expectations of a given co-culture. For the different genders, we develop different patterns of talk based on expectations placed on us.

Feminine Speech Community

When cultures have different goals for their communication, this results in unique communication strategies and behaviors. When the goal is connection, members of a feminine speech community are likely to engage in the following six strategies—equity, support, conversational “maintenance work,” responsiveness, a personal style, and tentativeness.

Showing equity in conversation means showing that you are similar to others. To do this one might say, “That happened to me too,” or “I was in a similar situation.” Showing support conversationally involves the expression of sympathy, understanding, and emotions when listening or responding to others. Sotirin suggests “women use bitching to cope with troubles by reaffirming rapport; men address troubles as problems of status asymmetry and respond with solutions. The characterization minimizes the political import of women’s bitching; it’s not political but interpersonal; not transformative but cathartic” (20). Have you ever felt as if you were the one in the conversation who had to keep the conversation moving? This is conversational maintenance at work. This work is performed by asking questions and trying to elicit responses from others. A typical family dinner conversation might begin with one of the parents asking their children, “What happened in school today?” The purpose is to initiate dialogue and learn about others to fulfill the purpose of communication—to maintain connection with others.

When listening to others we often respond in various ways to show that we are attentive and that we care about what the other person is saying. Responsiveness includes asking probing questions such as, “How did you feel when that happened?” or, “Wow, that’s interesting, I’ve never thought of that before.” Displaying a personal style refers to all the small details, personal references, or narratives that a person uses to explain

her/his ideas. A professor explaining the stages of friendship development might supplement the model with how a particular friendship developed in their life.

The final quality, tentativeness, involves a number of strategies and has invoked a multiplicity of interpretations. A student might say, “This is probably a stupid question, but...” as a way of qualifying her/his question. Turning statements into questions is another way of showing tentativeness. This is done with tag questions or intonation. Tag questions are phrases tacked onto the end of a sentence. In the statement, “I liked the film, didn’t you?” the “didn’t you?” is the tag. If you have studied French, this is similar to the use of “n’est pas.” When we use our voice to make a statement into a question (intonation) our voices go up at the end of the question. For example, if your roommate asks you, “what do you want for dinner?” you could say “pizza” to make it a question (“pizza?”) or a statement (“pizza.”) Another way to show tentativeness is through verbal hedges such as, “I sort of think I was too sensitive.”

Generally, scholars have offered four explanations for tentativeness. First, is that this style represents a lack of power, self-confidence, or assuredness on the part of the speaker. Lakoff theorized that the powerlessness in speech mirrored women’s powerlessness in the culture. Wood theorized that tentativeness is a strategy to maintain communication and connection. A final interpretation is that to understand tentativeness we must examine the context in which such speech occurs. The relative power between two speakers may cause the one with less power to communicate tentatively to the other. Do you use markers of tentativeness when speaking with those in power such as your boss, teachers, or parents?

Masculine Speech Community

When the goal is independence, members of this speech community are likely to communicate in ways that exhibit knowledge, refrain from personal disclosure, are abstract, are focused on instrumentality, demonstrate conversational command, are direct and assertive, and are less responsive. Showing knowledge in conversation gives speakers the opportunity to present themselves as competent and capable. If someone has a problem at work one might respond, “You should do this ...” or “The best way to

deal with that is ...” This strategy is sometimes referred to as a “communication tool box.” While some may interpret this as bossy, responding in a manner that tries to fix a problem for someone you care about makes a lot of sense.

The next two features—minimal personal disclosure and abstractness—are related. When we refrain from personal disclosure we reveal minimal or no personal information. While giving a lecture on communication anxiety in a public speaking class, a professor may use examples from famous people rather than revealing her/his own experiences. Likewise, when we speak in less personal terms our conversation tends to become more abstract. Think back to the traditional roles for men and women for a moment. Since men typically have been more involved in the public rather than the private sphere, it makes sense that their communication would be more abstract and less personal.

A masculine communication style tends to be focused on instrumental tasks. This is particularly true in the case of same sex friendships. Like the “tool box” or a problem solving approach to communication, when talk is instrumental it has a specific goal or task. It is used to accomplish something. Take baseball or football, for example. The talk that is used in these activities is strategic. In the case of male friendships it is more likely that men will get together to do something. Whether the activity is rock climbing, going to lunch, or helping someone move, the conversation is instigated by a particular activity. While female friends also like to engage in activities together, they are much more likely to get together “just to talk.”

Conversational command refers to the ability to control or manage conversation. This can be done by controlling which topics are discussed, interrupting, or being the one to control the turn taking in conversation. A popular stereotype is that women talk a lot, but most research shows that men talk more than women. More talk time is another way to demonstrate conversational command.

Directness is another feature of masculine communication. This refers to the use of more authoritative language and minimal use of tentativeness. Finally, men generally perform “minimal response cues” (Parlee). Response cues include saying, “mmm” or

“go on” while nodding when listening to others. Fewer verbal indicators of sympathy, empathy, or understanding are likely to characterize this style of talk. While members of this speech community may be less likely to verbally express sympathy or other similar emotions, this is not the same as saying the members of the community do not feel such emotions. People of different genders feel and care for others in a variety of ways. The difference is how they are communicated, not if they are communicated.

As you were reading about the feminine and masculine speech communities you were probably thinking to yourself, “Hey, I am a woman but I have a lot of masculine communication traits,” or “I know some men who speak in a more feminine style.” As you think, reflect more on these ideas you will realize that all of us are capable of speaking, and do speak, the language of multiple gender cultures. Again, this is one of the reasons it is important to make a distinction between gender and sex. Our gender construction and the contexts in which we speak play a large role in the ways we communicate and express our gender identity. Both men and women may make conscious choices to speak more directly and abstractly at work, but more personal at home. Such strategic choices indicate that we can use our knowledge about various communication styles or options to make us successful in many different contexts.

Differences between Feminine and Masculine Speech Communities		
	Feminine Speech Community	Masculine Speech Community
Goal:	Connection	Independence
Characteristics:	Equity	Exhibit Knowledge
	Support	No Personal Disclosure
	Maintenance Work	Abstract
	Responsive	Instrumental Tasks
	Personal Style	Conversational Command
	Tentativeness	Direct
		Less Responsive

Nonverbal Communication

Because you know how important nonverbal communication is to the production of meaning you may have wondered about the gendered nature of nonverbal communication. Below we discuss seven areas of nonverbal communication and the role of gender in each. We will discuss: Artifacts, Personal Space and Proxemics, Haptics, Kinesics, Paralanguage, Physical Attributes, and Silence

Artifacts

Earlier in the chapter we mentioned the pink and blue blankets used to wrap girl and boy babies after birth. These are examples of artifacts that communicate gender. Simply speaking, personal artifacts are objects that humans use to communicate self-identity. The jewelry we choose to wear (or not wear) communicates something about our personal tastes and social roles. Our clothes indicate a preference for certain designers or fashions, or may be used to subvert dominant fashion trends and expectations. An American male who wears a skirt or sarong may be trying to challenge the cultural norm that says pants and shorts are the only appropriate clothes for men.

Artifacts that are an early influence on gender construction are the toys we are given as children. What are typical girl and boy toys and what kind of play do they inspire? You are probably thinking of dolls for girls and cars and trucks for boys. Just walk through the aisles of your local toy store and you will have no difficulty discovering the “girl” aisle (it’s pink) and the boy aisle (it’s darker colors). Typically toys for boys are more action-oriented and encourage competition. Girls’ toys, on the other hand, encourage talk (Barbies talk to each other and role play) and preparation for traditional female roles (playing house). If you think products (toys) are only gendered at a young age, pay close attention when you watch television commercials and look through magazines. What kinds of products do women typically sell? What do men sell? How are gender-neutral products (cigarettes for example) sold to both women and men?

Personal Space and Proxemics

As you recall, the study of space and our use of it (proxemics) has two important dimensions. First, we understand space as our personal space, or the bubble in which we feel comfortable. When someone stands or sits too close to you, you may react by pulling away and describe the interaction as “they invaded my space.” Second, space can be thought of in terms of the kinds of physical spaces we have access to. Were some rooms in the family home off limits to you as a child? Relative to both kinds of space is power. People with more power in society are able to invade the space of those with less power with few repercussions. Those with more power also have access to more and better spaces. For example, the upper-class often own multiple homes in desirable locations such as the beach or high-priced urban areas.

What does all of this have to do with gender? Go back to the creation of power and ask yourself, “Which gender in American society holds the most power?” While there are exceptions, most of the time the masculine gender holds the most powerful positions in our culture. Thus, males typically have access to greater space. In the homes of many heterosexual couples, the father has a den and a garage that was for his use only. Mothers are often limited to shared space such as the kitchen and living areas. Not only is there a lack of private space, but also the tasks associated with each (cooking in the kitchen) are work as opposed to the hobbies that take place in the garage (rebuilding cars). What are some ways that space was gendered in your family?

Haptics

People of all genders in our culture use touch to communicate with others. However, there are differences in both the types of touch used and in the messages conveyed (Lee & Guerrero; Guerrero). Women are more likely to use touch to express support or caring, such as touching someone on the shoulder or giving them a hug. Men are more likely to use touch to direct actions of another. The relative power of men to women, coupled with a greater level of social power that can manifest itself in unwanted closeness or touching, have been linked with the problems of sexual harassment and domestic violence (May; McLaughlin). However, men do not use touch only to show control. Men use touch to display affection and desire to romantic partners, to communicate caring and closeness to children, and to show support to friends. Since men are culturally sanctioned for showing caring through touch, especially to other men, a choice to do so is a conscious choice to challenge gender stereotypes for men. Another strategy for touch between men is to create contexts in which it is acceptable such as wrestling, play punching or fighting, or football.

Kinesics

Like haptics, men and women use body language differently and to convey different meanings. Coinciding with cultural messages, men use their bodies to signal strength and control while women use theirs to communicate approachability and friendliness. Women, for example, smile more often than men and Caucasian women do this more than African-American women (Halberstadt & Saitta). Whether the cause is social or biological, men tend to take up more space and encroach on others' space more often than females.

Paralanguage

Consistent with a communication goal of maintaining and fostering relationships with others, women tend to use more listening noises or back-channeling. Such noises are “mmm,” “ah,” and “oh” and are often accompanied by nodding the head. Often they mean, “I am listening and following what you are saying. Keep going.” While men also make listening noises, they do so less frequently and often the meaning is “I agree.” Hopefully, you can see how this could cause some miscommunication between the

sexes. Likewise, being aware of this difference can reduce miscommunication. For example, when two people (Courtney and Juan) talk, Juan will often ask Courtney, “are you saying ‘mm hmm’ because you agree, or are you just listening?” In doing so, he is trying to determine which gendered approach to listening paralanguage Courtney is employing.

Physical Attributes

Another area of nonverbal communication that has gendered implications is physical attributes—the most common one for gender being body size and shape. If you were socialized in America you probably know how men and women are “supposed” to look. Men should be larger and physically strong while women should be smaller—very thin. These cultural pressures cause both men and women to engage in dangerous behaviors in an attempt to achieve an ideal physical body. Women are more likely to engage in dieting to become thin and men are more likely to weight-lift to excess, or take steroids, to increase muscle mass. The cultural messages for both sexes are physically and emotionally dangerous. Too severe dieting or steroid use can permanently damage the physical body and too much attention to appearance can harm one’s self esteem and take time away from pursuing other activities such as school, career, hobbies, and personal relationships.

Silence

A final area of nonverbal communication that has had large implications on gender is silence. Throughout history women have been silenced in all cultures across the world and this continues today. In chapter 4, we were introduced to one of the early Greek female rhetoricians, Aspasia. We don’t know much about her and her work because women have been systematically left out of our traditional history lessons. Women’s work has often been discredited, published under a male pseudo name, or males have passed it off as their own work. More recently, there’s a great episode of *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* entitled, “Sisters of the Sun,” that demonstrates women making large strides in the study of stars in our galaxy, yet they are rarely mentioned in our history books. Historically, achievements of females have been silenced.

This systematic silencing of women has led many women to hesitate against speaking out against sexual assault, harassment, violence, or rape that they have experienced. They are often silenced due to uneven power dynamics, the fear of victim blaming, threats, and a countless number of forces. Fortunately, technological and social media efforts of today are working to break this silence. In October 2014, a new hash tag on Twitter was trending in the US and Canada that reads #BeenRapedNeverReported. Rape victims tweet about past experiences they felt they could not talk about and include the hashtag. One tweet reads, “I’ve #beenrapedneverreported because he was military, and I am a vocal feminist slut. Who would the media believe? Not me. #DoubleStandards.”

In another instance Jatindra Dash reports, women in India who suffer from domestic violence tend to keep quiet because they are “scared of ... [their] husband, mistrustful of the police and worried what ... family and neighbors would think.” India is trying to combat this silence with an ATM-like machine that allows people to report their testimony into a microphone that the police station receives, contacts the person who reports it, and may make an arrest. Today’s technology and media may just help disrupt the long history of silence faced by women either placed on them by others or by themselves.