

1.6.4: Attitudes and Gender Communication

Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast how gender might impact communications styles



Starting in childhood, girls and boys are generally socialized to belong to distinct cultures based on their gender and thus speak in ways particular to their own gender's rules and norms (Fivush; Hohnson; 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 based on gender can cause miscommunication between members of each culture or speech community. These cultural differences are seen in the simple purpose of communication.

Although gender roles are changing and gender itself is becoming a more fluid concept, traditional roles still influence our communication behaviors. For those socialized to traditional female gender norms, an important use of communication is to create and foster relational connections with other people (Johnson; Stamou). In contrast, the goal of men's communication is primarily to establish identity. This is accomplished by demonstrating independence and control and entertaining or performing for others.

Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics and the author of multiple books on gender and language, provides the following examples of differences in men's and women's communication:

- "Men engage in report talk, women in rapport talk."
 - Report talk is used to demonstrate one's knowledge and expertise.
 - Rapport talk is used to share and cultivate relationships.
- Women request; men direct.
 - For example, in communicating a request, a female manager might say: "Could you do this by 5 PM?" A male manager would typically phrase it: "This needs to be done by 5 PM."
- Women are information focused; men are image focused.
 - For example, women are willing to ask questions to clarify understanding. Men tend to avoid asking clarifying questions in order to preserve their reputation.
- Empathy is not apology.
 - Women often use the phrase "I'm sorry" to express concern or empathy. Men tend to interpret this phrase as an acceptance of responsibility for the situation, which it is not.
- Women are judged by their appearance; men are judged by what they say and do.^[1]

As in all things, it's important to remember that while these differences exist between groups, all individuals will fall somewhere along a spectrum of these tendencies. Additionally, you may run into men who demonstrate more "feminine" tendencies in their speech or vice versa.

Gender in the World

Traditional gender roles also influence how women are heard, as Tannen alluded to above. The *Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organization* notes that the historical marginalization of women is still in practice today, with media coverage of women leaders often focusing on fashion sensibility rather than on the strength of their leadership. There is a "Catch-22" for women: "to be 'too feminine' is to risk being perceived as weak and emotional or as manipulative and devious when exercising leadership; to be 'insufficiently feminine' generally results in being labeled as masculine, abrasive or pushy."^[2]

Thus, gender not only impacts the language we use but the language used to describe us.

Although changing demographics and social trends have begun to erode the base of white male privilege, there are still strong cultural norms that resist this change in the status quo. Additionally, the composition of executive leadership still remains predominantly white male, and organizational culture and communications are largely designed to support that dominance. We see the legacy of that dysfunction in a variety of modes, from pussy hats to the #metoo movement.

✓ James Damore

We see this struggle playing out at Google, where efforts to include more women in technical roles are meeting with some resistance. The conflict surfaced when James Damore, a white male engineer, posted a ten page critique of Google's diversity efforts titled "[Google's Ideological Echo Chamber](#)" on an internal discussion board. One of the most inflammatory points made was that "biological differences between men and women might explain why we don't see equal representation of women in tech and leadership." In his memo, Damore states his belief that women are better attuned to aesthetics and people rather than ideas and that this, as well as their "higher agreeableness" (versus aggressiveness) and "neuroticism," rather than sexism accounts for gender gaps. The "manifesto," as some call it, resulted in Damore being fired for violating Google's code of conduct by "advancing harmful gender stereotypes in our workplace."

Google CEO Sundar Pichai responded to the memo. [Read Pichai's note to employees here](#). His memo includes this excerpt: "To suggest a group of our colleagues have traits that make them less biologically suited to that work is offensive and not OK. It is contrary to our basic values and our Code of Conduct, which expects 'each Googler to do their utmost to create a workplace culture that is free of harassment, intimidation, bias and unlawful discrimination.'"

In a development that reflects the nation's sociopolitical polarization, it appears Damore's firing, rather than ending the issue, has turned him into what a *USA Today* writer terms a "hero of a resurgent conservative movement." Damore has since [filed a lawsuit against Google](#), claiming the search giant discriminates against white, conservative men. In a development worth watching, Damore and David Gudeman, another former Google engineer, are being represented by Harmeet Dhillon, the Republican National Committee's committeewoman for California. Her law firm is seeking class action status for the plaintiffs.

✓ Gendered Language at Princeton

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Princeton University is an example of an organization that has a clear commitment to inclusivity in both policy and practice. However, it has also met with resistance in moving toward an inclusive campus. In a rather controversial 2015 memo announcing its new communication policy, Princeton drew the distinction between gendered and gender inclusive language, explaining that "gender binary is the traditional view on human gender, which does not take into consideration individuals who identify as otherwise, including and not limited to transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming and or intersex." In contrast, "gender-inclusive language is writing and speaking about people in a manner that does not use gender-based words."^[3]

Some media interpreted the guidelines as an attempt to suppress free speech. Princeton's clarification: "No words or phrases have been banned at the University, which places a high value (on) free expression."^[4]

Conservative factions also interpreted this statement as an attack. For example, CampusReform.org, a conservative blog, presented the college's new gender policy as another example of liberal bias and "abuse against conservatives on America's colleges and universities." In a post titled "Princeton students can choose any—or every—gender identity" the author, Matthew Penza, closed with a call for donations to support Campus Reform's "investigative journalism," stating that "College campuses are no longer bastions of higher learning. Professors indoctrinate students with their agendas. They even silence conservative students with their attempts to suppress free speech."^[5] For perspective, Campus Reform is a project of [Leadership Institute](#), an organization whose mission is to teach conservative Americans how to influence policy through direct participation, activism, and leadership.^[6]

1. Bucher, Richard D. *Diversity Consciousness Opening Our Minds to People, Cultures, and Opportunities*. Pearson, 2015, p 130.

2. David D. Day, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

https://books.google.com/books?id=_iqTAAQBAJ&pg=PA735&lpg=PA735&dq=gender+bias+language+nancy+pelosi&source=bl&ots=SzNkjbn7-&sig=kQoD7GfBYJDX_fujtCZXqkV8t2c&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiGh7qcj8faAhULbK0KHxg7D9kQ6AEIRzAF#v=onepage&q=gender%20bias%20language%20nancy%20pelosi&f=false

3. Curran, Philip Sean. "Princeton: University's Gender-Neutral Language Guidelines Come to Light." Centraljersey.com. August 18, 2016. Accessed August 5, 2019. www.centraljersey.com/news/princeton-university-s-gender-neutral-language-guidelines-come-to-light/article_b7567958-657d-11e6-b018-438c69ef92ac.html
4. Ibid.
5. Penza, Matthew. "Princeton Students Can Choose Any – or Every – Gender Identity." Campus Reform. July 31, 2017. Accessed August 5, 2019. <https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=9513>
6. "About the Leadership Institute." Leadership Institute. Accessed August 5, 2019. <https://www.leadershipinstitute.org/aboutus/>

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