
CHAPTER OUTLINE

Communication

Verbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication

Why Should Gender Be Related to Communication Patterns?

Friendship

Friendships between Women

Women's Friendships with Men

How Friendship Patterns Reflect Social Context

The Australian scholar Dale Spender (1989), informally investigating the degree to which her male colleagues tended to dominate conversations, tape-recorded a series of conversations between female and male academics at her university. Upon reviewing the tapes, she was annoyed (but not particularly surprised) to learn that the woman's side of the conversations was always shorter than that of the man she was speaking with: Women spoke for between 8 percent and 38 percent of the conversational time. Furthermore, each of the women involved stated, before knowing the results of the investigation, that she had had a *fair* share of the conversation. Clearly, women are so unaccustomed to holding the floor in interactions with men that they feel satisfied with much less than half the speaking time. As Spender noted, "[I]f she tries to talk for half the time[, it] feels unfair, rude, and objectionably overbearing" (p. 10).

Spender herself reported that, try as she might, she had never been able to keep the floor for half the interaction with a male academic colleague because when she employed the strategies necessary to keep the floor, no man stayed to talk with her for the 3 minutes she had set as the minimum interaction time. In her "best score" conversation, she determined to claim her half of the speaking time. Doggedly, she refused to be interrupted, to give up the floor before she was finished speaking, to say less than she wanted to say in order to yield speaking rights to her male colleague. By the end of the conversation, she felt uncomfortable and somewhat guilty—as if she had been rude and ungracious to her colleague and had demanded more than her share of the conversational dominance. He too was uncomfortable—and somewhat irritated, accusing her of being unreasonable and of not listening to him. Is this what it takes, Spender wondered, for a woman to claim her fair share of attention and speaking time when she converses with men? But her discomfort quickly turned to anger when she reviewed the tape of this conversation and found that, her male colleague's aggrieved accusations notwithstanding, she had managed to control only 44 percent of the speaking time! Clearly, what both he and she had learned to think of as "normal" in male-female discussions was weighted heavily in the direction of male talking and female listening.

The notion that gender is socially constructed has been raised frequently in earlier chapters. How we think we should be and behave as women is a set of ideas that is gradually shaped and articulated as we grow from childhood to old age—largely as a function

of cultural expectations about femininity, masculinity, and their interrelationship. If we are concerned, as we are in this book, with the question of just *how* gender is constructed and maintained by our interactions with one another, we must focus on the processes of communication.

Communication with others is a major way that cultural expectations are transmitted, acted out, and reinforced. Thus communication both creates and sustains gender. The way we communicate reflects social norms about gender and the ways we, as individuals, have internalized those norms and made them part of our own identities and habits. As researcher Julia Wood (1996a) notes, "When we observe a specific man interrupt a particular woman and see her allow it, we are witnessing a concrete performance of gender. He assumes he should assert and dominate, which is consistent with social prescriptions for masculinity. She displays deference in keeping with social views of women" (p. 11).

Communication also reflects and embodies cultural expectations and distinctions based on race and class and the ways these variables interact with gender. When we assert that femininity involves deference to men, are we universalizing an observation that is actually based mainly on middle-class White women and men in the United States? Perhaps. For example, some researchers have shown that African American women are less deferential than European American women—less likely to smile at and defer to men (Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987). And studies of nonverbal communication in a variety of cultures do not always reveal parallel gender differences (Hall, 1984). It is important, as noted many times in the preceding chapters, to look beyond blanket statements of gender differences to investigate more carefully the differences among women. Such investigations are likely to make it increasingly clear that there is nothing *essentially female* about deference or *essentially male* about dominance. Rather, each cultural group produces and sustains gender in its own way through the interactions of its members, and the differences vary from context to context.

Furthermore, we must keep in mind that gendered patterns in particular behaviors may not mean the same thing when observed in different groups. For example, we have already noted the research suggesting that African American women show less verbal and nonverbal deference to men than European American women do. Does this mean that African American women have more confidence and/or more power relative to men? That is one possible interpretation; however, as bell hooks (1996) notes,

in traditional southern-based black life, it was and is expected of girls to be articulate, to hold ourselves with dignity. Our parents and teachers were always urging us to stand up right and speak clearly. These traits were meant to uplift the race. They were not necessarily traits associated with building female self-esteem. An outspoken girl might still feel that she was worthless because her skin was not light enough or her hair the right texture. (p. xiii)

Hooks argues that the propensity to speak up is not necessarily a sign of female empowerment among African Americans, and she laments: the tendency of researchers to assume that such behaviors have similar meanings across cultural groups.

We begin this chapter with an examination of the role of gender in the processes of communication, both nonverbal and verbal. Does gender shape the ways we look at, touch, gesture to, and make room for one another? Does it affect the ways we speak to one another: how and how much we talk, what we talk about, and how much we reveal about

ourselves in those conversations? How do race and social class figure into these patterns? And how similar are the patterns across cultures?

Communication is the basis of getting acquainted and forming friendships. This chapter focuses next on women's friendships—with one another and with men. And since there are many differences among women, we will examine not only the various ways women of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups define and act out friendship, but also the challenges and rewards of women's friendships that bridge such boundaries.

Communication

We communicate whenever we ask a question, give direction, exclaim in anger, refuse to meet someone's gaze, move over to let someone sit down, or gesture impatiently at a person who is in our way. Whether or not words are involved in such interactions, messages are sent and received and information about feelings and/or thoughts is conveyed. In **verbal communication**, we use words to get our message across; in **nonverbal communication**, we use a variety of other means: facial expression, tone of voice, gesture, posture, touch, eye contact. In both forms of communication, gender plays a role.

Verbal Communication

Chapter 5 noted that when children play in separate same-gender groups, they tend to socialize one another into gender-specific styles of interacting—different “communication cultures.” In other words, they develop some shared assumptions and understandings about how to communicate and how to interpret one another's communications—at least within the context of their own group. These gendered patterns of interaction are likely to persist into adulthood. Among adults, these gender differences are evident in some aspects of verbal communication, such as **conversational dominance**, and less frequently observed in some other aspects, such as language style.

Conversational Dominance North American researchers have typically found that men try to control conversations; they are concerned with using conversation to establish status and authority, compete for attention and power, and achieve instrumental status and goals (Wood, 1996b). Women tend to use communication to build connections with others, to be inclusive, supportive, cooperative, and responsive to others. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that men tend to talk more than women do and to try to hold the floor, even when they are not saying anything, by using **filled pauses**—nonwords such as *um* or *ah* (Hall, 1987). In many situations men also tend to interrupt women more often than women interrupt men, and these interruptions often effectively silence women (DeFrancisco, 1991; Tannen, 1990). This gender difference is most obvious in **intrusive interruptions**—interruptions aimed at taking away another speaker's turn to speak. Whereas men often seem to interrupt in order to take control of a conversation by stating an opinion or changing the topic, women more often interrupt to show support and agreement to the speaker (Anderson & Leaper, 1998). Anderson and Leaper also found that men's intrusive interruptions of women were more likely to occur in naturalistic than in laboratory or office settings and in unstructured than in structured activities.

Some kinds of interruptions are perceived to be more serious violations of polite conversation than others. If a woman does interrupt a man, she may become a target of disapproval, evaluated as too assertive and disrespectful (Farley, 2000; LaFrance, 1992), particularly if she is a White woman interrupting a White man. It appears that, although circumstances can moderate this effect, men's dominance of conversations and women's conversational deference mirror the prevailing cultural notion that men should be in charge.

In cultures where the general expectation of male dominance is missing or less pronounced, is the gender imbalance in conversational control so evident? Research is still silent or inconclusive on this question—perhaps because few such cultures exist. However, research comparing the social interactions of African American and European American adolescents in same-race, mixed-gender groups suggests that greater gender equality is evident in conversations among the African Americans (Filardo, 1996). In the European American groups, but *not* in the African American groups, a significantly higher percentage of the females' than of the males' utterances were interrupted and never completed. Similarly, in the European American groups, but not in the African American groups, males made significantly more influence attempts than females did. In fact, when all four groups were compared, European American women showed speech patterns that were more tentative, conciliatory, polite, and less powerful than any of the other three race-gender categories. Furthermore, the data indicates that the gender equality noted in the African American groups is not a consequence of especially facilitative or gender-egalitarian behavior on the part of the African American men. Indeed, African American men had significantly lower levels than their female counterparts of the kinds of speech forms (seeking input, consideration for the other's viewpoint) that invite or encourage participation and influence by others, and they had the highest percentage of speech that expressed commands or a lack of consideration for the viewpoint of others (e.g., "That's stupid," or "This way!") of any of the four groups. It appears that the gender equality in social interactions among these African American adolescents was due to the active and assertive behavior of the women, rather than to any accommodating behavior on the part of the men.

Listening and Conversational Maintenance Keeping a conversation going requires work: effective listening, the communication of attention, and interest. Most people will stop trying to communicate if the person they are talking to displays no sign of wanting to hear more. Girls in North America tend to learn at an early age to pay attention to others and to indicate that attention in a variety of ways: nodding their heads, maintaining eye contact, using facial expressions that say "I'm interested," and issuing an almost continuous stream of what Deborah Tannen (1990) calls "listening noises" such as "I know what you mean" and "Mm-hmm." Boys are less likely to learn such a pattern of ongoing responsiveness; although they may be listening, they do not signal it in such clear ways (Wood, 1996b). In the United States, these patterns are most obvious among European American women. Emily Filardo's (1996) study of social interactions among same-race, mixed-gender groups (mentioned above) showed that simple positive responses expressing nothing more than agreement (e.g., "yeah," "uh-huh") made up more than one-third (36 percent) of European American female adolescents' speech acts, but only between 12

percent and 17 percent of the speech acts of the other race-gender categories. African American women and men did not differ on this measure. However, there were other gender differences in the African American groups that suggested the young women were signaling "I'm listening" more than the young men were: Women more frequently sought input and/or agreement or dialogue from others. This pattern of greater female than male work at conversational maintenance persists among adult women and men; a frequent complaint among women is "He's not listening to me." This complaint can be baffling to a man who really is listening, but who has not been socialized to demonstrate his attention as women have been.

Besides communicating their attention, women also work to keep conversations going by asking questions, responding to what others say, and probing for more information. Such behavior aimed at maintaining conversations is less frequently displayed by men. In fact, researchers have found that men are more likely than women to undermine conversations by interrupting, giving no response or a delayed minimal response (such as a long pause, followed by a barely interested "Mm-hmm"), or failing to pursue a topic that another speaker has raised (DeFrancisco, 1991; Fishman, 1978).

Once again, this gender difference is likely to be related to culture. Girls and boys learn lessons about whether, when, and how to communicate interest and responsiveness, and women, more than men, learn that it is important to communicate positiveness in their interactions with others (LaFrance, 2001). In a culture that values males more highly than females, girls and women are taught to do the "work of relationships" and to communicate their support of male concerns. Boys and men, conversely, are taught to expect such support from females but not to provide it.

"Troubles Talk" Some researchers have argued that women and men tend to differ in the extent to which they provide supportive responses when another person confides a problem: that women are more supportive than men (e.g., Tannen, 1990). Others have found indications that not only gender, but also gender role (i.e., femininity and masculinity) are correlated with supportive communication—with highly feminine individuals tending to be more supportive than highly masculine individuals (Basow & Rubinfeld, 2003). Yet the notion that women and men differ in their tendency to provide supportive responses remains controversial. In one recent study, adult women and men read scenarios describing a friend as upset about a personal problem, and they were instructed to respond to the situation by talking "as if your friend was actually there in the room with you" (MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004, p. 153). The respondents' words were transcribed and analyzed for the presence of various themes, such as sympathy, offering help, and describing the emotion as a shared experience. Overall, these researchers found that men and women were equally responsive to the hypothetical friends' problems: They were equally likely to express sympathy, share similar problems with the distressed friend, and try to discourage worry. There was a small tendency for men to give more advice than women, and for women to provide support by affirming the other person and by offering help.

These researchers also found, in a separate study, that women and men did not differ dramatically in their responses to comforting messages. Although women responded more positively than men did to highly person-centered comforting messages (e.g., "I know you must be feeling down"), and men responded more positively than women to comforting

messages that were less centered on the person (e.g., "there's no reason to make such a big deal of it"), both women and men evaluated the very person-centered messages much more positively than the low person-centered messages.

These authors conclude that the overlap between women and men in their supportive communication is far more impressive than the differences between them, and they argue that the notion that women and men communicate so differently as to represent "different cultures" is false. Here, as in many realms of gender and behavior, researchers continue to argue about the extent to which differences or similarities should be emphasized.

Speech Styles Do women and men talk differently—do they prefer different words or differ in their use of tentative or direct requests, questions, or assertions? Robin Lakoff (1975, 1990) argues that the two genders show very different styles: that women are more likely than men to use qualifiers, to end their statements with tag questions (e.g., "Isn't that right?") in order to elicit signs of attention and agreement, and to be generally more polite and tentative in their speech. Evidence for these assertions is mixed, however. Some researchers report few gender differences in **speech styles** (Cameron, McAlinden, & O'Leary, 1993). Others report that women are more likely than men to use "proper" English (Adams & Ware, 1995), perhaps because women are more worried than men are about the influence they may lose by speaking in a low-status way or because men feel that the use of nonstandard language illustrates their toughness.

One study of the request styles used by female and male Korean and U.S. students found that women in both countries were more polite than men (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992). In the latter case, however, the target of the request was always portrayed as male, making it difficult to know whether the gender difference in politeness was a function of the situation (a same-sex versus other-sex target) or the gender of the person making the requests. Researchers have also found that girls and women use less contentious language than males do. For example, men use more slang and more swearing than women do (Adams & Ware, 1995). Several studies of African American girls have found that although they were very familiar with the forms of "verbal dueling" common in their communities, they used these forms with greater restraint than boys did (e.g., Folb, 1980; Heath, 1983).

Mary Crawford (1995; 2001) notes that it is impossible to interpret gender differences in speech styles and other aspects of communication without an awareness of the cultural context in which the patterns appear. Women are not a single, global category, all following the same rules of speech; rather, they are responsive to the customs, constraints, and opportunities in their own diverse communities. For example, Patricia Nichols (1983) found that speech patterns in African American communities in rural South Carolina tended to reflect occupational opportunities. In these communities, the best jobs for men were in construction and trades—jobs in which the use of standard or "proper" English was unnecessary. The best jobs for women were in sales, nursing, and teaching—jobs that required the use of standard English. Women and men in these communities *did* differ in their use of standard English; that difference, however, seemed to be driven by women's desire to gain and keep good employment rather than by a tendency to be conservative or to safeguard their influence.

Women's variable tendency to be tentative rather than assertive is likely a reaction to the social context and to what they perceive as the "payoff" for being gentle or blunt in

BOX 6.1 LEARNING ACTIVITY**Observing Gendered Patterns of Communication**

Next time you are with a group of women and men, sit back and observe the patterns of communication among them. Who does most of the interrupting? Is there a gender difference in the kinds of interruptions (supportive versus taking over the conversation)? How do people communicate that they are listening attentively to a speaker? Do women and men differ in this respect? Do men and women use different kinds of nonverbal communication?

From your observations, do you conclude that communication in this particular group is gendered? In what ways? How well did the patterns you noticed fit with the research findings that are discussed in this chapter? If they do not fit, can you think of reasons why this may be so?

their speech. For example, Linda Carli (1990), studying women and men interacting in mixed-sex or same-sex pairs, found that women were more tentative only when they were interacting with men. Furthermore, women who spoke tentatively were more influential with men, and less influential with women, than women who spoke assertively were. Thus these women seemed to be reading the situation correctly and adjusting their behavior accordingly in order to maximize their effectiveness.

When perceptions of the social context clash, women from different groups may mislabel the emotions associated with blunt speech. For example, bell hooks (1989) writes of the reaction to her first book manuscript, a treatise on Black women and feminism:

When the white woman editor at South End who was working with the manuscript first talked with me about the book she told me that members of the [publishing] collective felt it was a very angry book and were concerned that it did not have a positive bent. I responded by saying that though I had written in the direct blunt manner that is the customary mode of discourse in my black southern family, I was not angry. Our different perceptions of the implication of my speech, of my tone were important signifiers of the way in which race and class shape our ways of speaking and reading. Many outspoken black people have had an experience in which the passions, intensity, and conviction in our speech is interpreted by white listeners as anger. (p. 153)

Hooks's experience of being misperceived is not unusual in cross-racial communication. As a group, African Americans are more likely than European Americans to be forceful and confrontational in conversations among themselves (Ribeau, Baldwin, & Hecht, 1994). The different styles sometimes cause misunderstanding: Whites may view Blacks as rude or hostile; Blacks may see Whites as cold and overly reserved. African American women sometimes report that European American women seem dishonest and deliberately distant because they speak quietly and unemotionally; they just don't seem to be really *engaged* in the dialogue (Houston, 1994).

Language Topics: What Do We Talk About? When a group of women in conversation is joined by a man, or when a woman sits down at a table where two men are talking, the

Patterns of gender differentiation? Women are more verbal than men. Particular with the think of

impact on the conversation is often dramatic. Conversational topics are shifted, either from a desire to avoid sharing "gender-private" information or from a motive to include the new person in the interaction. Does this happen because, as the stereotype suggests, men are always talking about sports and women are always talking about relationships? Partly. Researchers in North America have often found that women and men talk about different things and do not understand what is important to the other gender. Women do tend to enjoy discussing feelings, whereas men are more likely to prefer talk about sports, politics, or other less personal topics (Shields, 1995; Wood, 1996b). The differences are strong enough that when 150 male and female undergraduates read transcripts of conversations between same-sex or cross-sex friends from which all gender identifiers had been removed, they could often tell the sex composition of the conversing pair simply by the topic under discussion (R. Martin, 1997). Such differences may have their roots in childhood when, as some studies have shown, parents focus on discussions of emotions more with their daughters than with their sons (Kuebli & Fivush, 1992) and reinforce daughters and sons differently for expressions of emotions such as sadness and fear (Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002). The differences may also spring from social contexts in which women and men, searching for common ground with their same-sex peers, gravitate to topics that they assume will be acceptable, given the cultural expectations for women and men.

Men and boys may learn to emphasize shared activities as the route to closeness; women and girls may learn to value shared self-disclosure (McNelles & Connolly, 1999). A small but reliable gender difference in self-disclosure has been found, showing women revealing more about themselves and their feelings than men do (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Some researchers, however, have shown that when same-gender friends are communicating with each other, men actually disclose more than women do (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995). Women's and men's responses to self-disclosure in such situations were different, however: Men were more silent and women were more verbally supportive in response to friends' self-disclosures.

There are apparently some situations in which men and women self-disclose equally. In particular, when women and men meet for the first time, they seem to disclose the same amount about themselves (Clark et al., 2004). This may be because each is trying to make a good impression on the other person—and it works: In this study both women and men were rated more favorably by their partners the more they self-disclosed. Both women and men believed that self-disclosure would generate positive reactions in their partners, but men seemed to believe this more strongly. So perhaps men in this situation self-disclose to women in hopes of "gaining points" with their new acquaintance by violating the masculine stereotype of being tight-lipped.

Whatever gender difference in disclosure of feelings may exist, there appears to be a general pattern of shared interests between North American women and men. For example, Bischooping (1993) reports that in informal conversations among students recorded in public places on campus, *both* women and men spent the most time talking about work and money, a category that included such topics as studying, jobs, and career goals. Yet men were still more likely than women to talk about sports and entertainment activities, and women talked about men 4 times as much as men talked about women!

In the context of heterosexual relationships, the different communications topics favored by women and men often lead to misunderstanding and hurt feelings. Women

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BOX 6.2 MAKING CHANGE**Challenging Sexist Language**

Many major publishers now have guidelines for avoiding sexist language, so it is unlikely that you will find language that is obviously sexist in your college textbooks. However, such language still lingers in many areas: organizational brochures, advertisements, newsletters, publications by community groups, even college catalogs. Be alert for sexist language in your own writing and that of others. For example, if you find male pronouns or "man" being used to indicate "all people," point out the problem and ask to have it changed. The Web Resources list at the end of this chapter contains a site that provides tips for nonsexist writing.

like to talk about the relationship in order to increase its intimacy; men often see no point in talking about it unless something is seriously wrong (Wood, 1996b). When the man avoids discussing the relationship, the woman may believe he does not care about it. Furthermore, women enjoy talking about the details of their daily lives in order to enhance their sense of connection with others (Becker, 1987); men often regard such talk as boring since it is unrelated to achieving a goal or "getting to the point." Here again, women may experience men's lack of interest as a lack of concern about them or about the relationship.

Language as a Way of Making Masculinity the Norm "Each student should leave his books at the door." "The candidate for the degree must schedule his oral examination before the deadline." "Every taxpayer should know his rights." Do these sentences apply to males only, or would it be safe to assume that they include female students, degree candidates, and taxpayers? Most people would guess that the sentences are meant to apply to both sexes, arguing that English uses the generic *he* to mean "both he and she." Linguistically, the proponents of such a view may be correct, but how does the use of generic masculine pronouns and other masculine terms to refer to people in general shape the way we think about women and men? Many scholars have argued that saying *he* all the time causes us to think about men as the normal ones and women as the unusual or different "other."

Can such simple linguistic conventions really have such a big impact on our thinking? Try these sentences on for size: "No person should let his doctor talk him into having a hysterectomy against his will." "An individual who has been raped should call the police immediately to report his experience." Why do these sentences sound so strange, if the use of the masculine pronoun does not make us think immediately of men in particular? In fact, studies on the use of the generic *he* or the companion generic term *man* show that these terms are more likely to make respondents think of men, rather than of people. For example, when students were asked to provide drawings of the sex-unspecified people in a paragraph that used either the generic *he*, *he or she*, or *they*, they were more likely to produce images of men when the pronoun used was *he* (Khosroshahi, 1989). And when asked to submit photographs appropriate for chapters of an introductory sociology text, students

were more likely to submit male-only photos when the chapter titles used the generic *man* ("Urban Man," "Political Man") than when they did not ("Urban Life," "Political Life") (Schneider & Hacker, 1973).

Of course, not every language has different pronouns for females and males. Chinese, for example, uses the same pronoun to refer to *she* and *he*. Still other languages, such as Spanish and French, apply gender labels to virtually every noun.

Language as a Way to Stereotype, Categorize, and Belittle Women In English, grown women are frequently referred to as *girls*—a label that suggests immaturity and lack of status. Parallel labeling of men is not done so frequently or so casually: Calling a grown man a *boy* is usually an insult. Apparently it is a more serious matter to trivialize men than women. When the term *boy* was used, with malice and deliberation, in the racially divided communities of the American South, it was meant to humiliate African American men and to remind them that they were not "real" men.

English usage routinely trivializes women. Karen Adams and Norma Ware (1995) note that studies of slang find many more terms for stupid and/or superficial women (*bimbo, ditz, fifti*) than for stupid, superficial men. These studies also find many more words and phrases describing women than men in sexually derogatory ways. Furthermore, the term *lady*, often substituted for *woman* or *female*, frequently conveys a subtle putdown or trivialization. A *lady professor* or a *lady scientist* sounds like someone who dabbles in her profession, in contrast to a *female professor* or a *woman scientist*, who, despite being marked as unusual by the gender label, sounds perfectly serious.

Languages in many parts of the world encode ways of belittling women. In Japan, the terms for widow are *mibojin* (not-yet-dead-person) and *goko* (after-family). A man whose wife has died is not labeled as though his life is over, and is never considered "after-family." The word for womb, *shikyu*, means "child's palace," a not too subtle reminder that it does not belong to the woman herself (Cherry, 1987).

Language as a Way of Resistance for Women The linguist Suzette Elgin (1984) wrote a science fiction novel called *Native Tongue*, in which the women, oppressed and kept isolated from one another by men, devised their own secret language. The language was meant not simply to communicate with one another, but to describe their lives in ways that were impossible in the dominant language. Her story fits well with the notion, often advanced by feminist scholars, that it would be impossible to analyze or change the way people think about women, men, and gender while constrained by a language that has been shaped by a male-centered culture.

At least one real-life version of a secret women's language exists. For nearly a thousand years, there flourished in the Hunan province of China a "women's script" that could be written and read only by women (Silber, 1992). In this script, called *nüshu*, women could record the truths of their lives for an exclusively female audience. They did not have to worry about what men would think of their writing, since men not only were untrained in women's script, but apparently belittled it and made no effort to learn it. Gathering for an evening of needlework, women would take turns singing from *nüshu* texts they had written or memorized. Women used this script to write to one another, to cement lifelong friendships, and to record their own knowledge to pass on to daughters. The Communist

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Even under difficult conditions, women have found ways to form and strengthen ties of friendship with one another. For nearly a thousand years, women in the Hunan province of China used a "women's script," which could be written and read only by women, to communicate with their friends.

revolution in 1949 brought an end to the practice of young women learning *nǚshu*, so this female literary tradition has virtually died out. Yet its long existence is a powerful demonstration of the way language can serve as a means of resistance.

A less exotic, but similarly powerful, way that language has been used by women for resistance is through humor. Humor has often been used to denigrate women, and women are often reminded of their "place" by men's pointed sexist jokes. Given that they are so often the targets of jokes, perhaps it is not surprising that women are sometimes stereotyped as having "no sense of humor." Potentially adding to the stereotype is that in order to tell a joke successfully, a person must be allowed to gain and keep the floor in conversation—something that women are often barred from in mixed-sex groups. However, as Mary Crawford (1995) writes, humor does not necessarily have to reflect and uphold the status quo. Rather, because it allows the speaker to employ an indirect form of discourse, humor can be subversive of existing stereotypes and hierarchies.

Crawford notes that women often use humor among themselves to mock existing power structures and stereotypes, to exact some small revenge on oppressive males, and to express shared meanings. For example, she cites a well-circulated U.S. feminist slogan that pokes fun at the notion of male superiority: "To be seen as equal, a woman has to be twice as good as a man. Fortunately, that isn't difficult" (p. 154); and another that mocks

the idea that a woman must have a man in order to be complete: "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" (p. 155). She also notes that when women tell sexual jokes they defy and undermine the "cultural rules controlling women's sexuality" (p. 150) by violating the norm that women are not supposed to talk about sex in any but the most demure and inhibited way. Witness, for example, the shock value of the following story passed on by Rayna Green, who studied the sexual humor of U.S. Southern women: "Once when my grandmother stepped out of the bathtub, and my sister commented that the hair on her 'privates' was getting rather sparse, Granny retorted that 'grass don't grow on a racetrack'" (Green, quoted in Crawford, 1995, p. 150).

Humor also facilitates the discussion of taboo topics by breaking the tension that surrounds them, and it can raise awareness of unexamined assumptions. Thus when Roseanne jokes, "I'll do the vacuuming when they invent a ride-on vacuum cleaner" (quoted in Crawford, 1995, p. 155), she is pointing out and making fun of, among other things, "strong" men's need for ride-on lawnmowers in contrast to "weak" women having to push a vacuum cleaner across the rug.

Crawford notes that a growing body of feminist humor helps women as a group to resist and defy subordination. This humor can be a source of shared empowerment for women in many circumstances. It is one way that communication need not reproduce and reinforce dominant conceptions of gender.

Computer-Mediated Communication Increasingly, large segments of people communicate through the computer, using e-mail, chat rooms, and bulletin boards. Many educational institutions have begun to offer courses online, relegating student-to-student communication to these electronic modalities. As many of us have begun to rely increasingly on **computer-mediated communication**, some have wondered whether this type of communication would be gendered, or whether the lack of face-to-face (or at least voice-to-voice) interaction would erase distinctions between women and men in their habits of communication. Researchers have been quick to investigate these questions; however, the answers are not yet clear. Some research comparing computer-mediated interactions in female-only versus male-only groups has shown females and males developing different patterns of communication in this medium. Female-only groups have been observed to send more words per message, use more individually oriented language, and be more satisfied with the group process than males (Savicki, Kelley, & Lingenfelter, 1996a; 1996b). In one study, the examination of 2,692 e-mail messages sent by 1,208 individuals in 27 different online groups revealed that participants in female-only groups were more likely than those in other groups to establish online presence through self-disclosure, by using "I" statements, and by directly addressing their messages to other group members. By contrast, participants in male-only groups tended to ignore the social aspects of the group and to engage in monologues instead of dialogues. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants in the latter groups were less satisfied with their experience (Savicki & Kelley, 2000).

In mixed-sex groups, the patterns of gender differences in computer-mediated communication are somewhat suggestive of male conversational dominance. For example, in one study of the communications of postgraduate distance learners, men sent more messages than women and wrote messages that were twice as long as those of women. However, women contributed more interactive messages than men (Barrett & Lally, 1999).



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Another study of a small group of graduate students showed that the women produced more messages and expressed more opinions and agreements in face-to-face communication conditions than they did in computer-mediated conditions (Adrianson, 2001), suggesting that women may be more comfortable with traditional face-to-face interactions.

Nonverbal Communication

Communication is often unspoken. It includes the way we look at and touch one another, the way we carry ourselves, our gestures, even the ways we occupy and control the space around us. Here too, gender expectations shape communication and are reinforced and reproduced by the patterns of give-and-take that make up nonverbal interactions. In fact, nonverbal communication may sometimes be the mode through which *real* messages about gender are transmitted. For example, a woman and a man in formally equal positions of power may be engaged in a verbal dialogue that implies equality between them. Yet the man may stare off into space when the woman talks; the woman may smile and nod whenever the man makes a point. The man may sit in a relaxed and expansive posture whereas the woman perches on the edge of her chair. The underlying message about who has the greater power is clear, despite the apparent contradiction from the verbal aspect of the interchange. This message is conveyed through a variety of channels.

Gaze In middle-class North America, looking at someone while she is speaking communicates attentiveness and the attachment of significance to her words. It is a sign of politeness and respect. Not surprisingly, high-powered people tend to look at their subordinates while speaking to them and tend to look away when listening to them, a phenomenon referred to as **visual dominance** (Dovidio & Ellyson, 1985). This pattern shows up in cross-gender interactions: One study showed that in mixed-sex pairs, expertise was associated with visual dominance for both women and men, but when there was no difference in expertise, men showed greater visual dominance than women did (Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, & Brown, 1988). In the absence of other cues, gender becomes the most relevant one and people behave according to gender-related norms of male dominance and female submission, probably without being aware that they are doing so.

Eye contact can mean different things in different cultures, so gender-related patterns in gaze may vary or require different interpretations across cultures. For example, a high degree of eye contact has been reported as having positive connotations by Arabs, Latin Americans, Indians, and Pakistanis, but as conveying anger or insubordination by Africans and East Asians (Smith & Bond, 1993). Much research remains to be done on the interaction of gender and culture in nonverbal communication.

Touch In North American cultures, people tend to “touch downward” in a status hierarchy (Henley & Freeman, 1995). People of high status are freer to touch their subordinates (such as putting a hand on a shoulder, holding an arm) than vice versa. Touch seems to communicate or mirror dominance as well as (or instead of) affection or intimacy. In fact, the interpretation of touch may be confusing for this reason. An employer who puts an arm around the shoulder of an employee may intend to communicate liking;

however, the fact remains that the employee (regardless of the affection that may exist between the two individuals) is less free to put an arm around the shoulder of the employer.

Researchers also report that men are more likely to touch women than women are to touch men—an asymmetry that suggests touch can be an expression of male dominance as well as affection or intimacy. Furthermore, men are often in positions of higher status than women, which further complicates the issue. When a male manager touches his female secretary or a male professor touches his female student in a casual way, what is being communicated? Power? Affection? Sexual interest? Perhaps all of these, whether intended or not. But the person who is touched reacts as if it means *something*. Research shows that when a 10-second touch on the wrist by a stranger occurs without any obvious reason, it produces a physiological reaction: increased heart rate and blood pressure (Nilsen & Vrana, 1998). The largest cardiovascular increases are found with women being touched by men, perhaps because a woman who is touched in this way can interpret it in so many ways. In some contexts, a touch may be interpreted as sexual harassment, leading to feelings of threat and anger.

The patterns of touching between women and men seem to vary according to relationship context. One study based on observations of 4,500 dyads interacting in public places in the Boston area showed that in younger couples, males touched females more, but in older couples, females touched males more (Hall & Veccia, 1990). This pattern might mean that male dominance is acted out more strongly in younger couples, or that length of relationship is related to changes in the ways both power and affection are expressed.

The groundwork for patterns of touching that vary by gender and ethnicity may be laid in infancy. Some North American research has suggested that parents tend to touch infant boys less often and more roughly than infant daughters and that daughters are handled more gently and protectively (Wood, 2001). However, when ethnicity and other variables such as maternal depression are taken into consideration, this pattern is not so clear. For example, Stepakoff (2000) found that maternal ethnicity and maternal depression were related to the ways female and male infants were touched by their mothers. Among her findings were that Black, nondepressed mothers touched sons more than 7 times as often as daughters, and that Latina depressed mothers engaged in rough touch more than 20 times as often with boys as with girls. The findings indicate the importance of attending to ethnicity as well as gender in studying communication and suggest that cultural differences in the way we communicate by touch may be maintained and passed on through the mother-infant dyad.

Posture Starting at a young age, females in North America sit, stand, and walk differently from males. Females adopt a more constricted stance, keeping their legs together and their arms and hands close to their bodies. Males spread out, occupy more space, sitting and standing with their legs apart. This pattern may signal that males feel entitled to more space, that females have absorbed the message that being “ladylike” or “feminine” involves adopting a dignified posture, that females’ clothing is more restrictive than males’ clothing, or that females begin early on to feel that they are objects of scrutiny to males and so learn to sit and stand in ways that protect their privacy. Probably each of these factors plays a role.

In other cultures, similar gender differences in posture apparently exist, as suggested by studies of photographs and paintings from a variety of countries (Frieze & Ramsey, 1976).

Facial Expression A woman I know was taken aback and irritated one day when, walking down a busy street deep in thought, she was stopped by a strange man who urged her, "Smile! You'll look so much prettier!" Without realizing it, this woman had been breaking a "rule" for women in North America: Women are supposed to smile.

Researchers report that women do, in fact, smile more than men (LaFrance & Hecht, 1999), as revealed, for instance, by studies of photographs in magazines and yearbooks (Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Regan, 1982) and of strangers interacting in groups (Frances, 1979). This research is, however, largely based on European American women; African American women smile less than European American women (Wood, 2001). When White women do not smile, they are judged as less attractive, less happy, and colder—judgments that are not made about men who fail to smile (Deutsch, LeBaron, & Fryer, 1987; Stoppard & Gruchy, 1993). White men can get away with being somber and serious without creating negative reactions; their female counterparts cannot.

Perhaps because there is so much pressure on them to smile, many women smile even when they do not feel particularly happy or friendly. They smile to please others or to cover their discomfort (Frances, 1979). Their smiling has a good effect on those they are conversing with: As every lecturer knows, positive nonverbal responses encourage speakers and elicit more confident, competent behavior from those speakers. When interacting with men, women are more often the sources than the recipients of such nonverbal encouragement.

Personal Space Each of us maintains a "comfort zone" of **personal space** around us—a space that others, unless they are intimates, may not breach without causing us uneasiness. There is some evidence that females set smaller personal space zones, approaching others more closely than males do, and that people of both sexes approach females more closely than they do males (Hall, 1984). Culture and gender are both important factors in individuals' preferred use of space. For example, Arabs are often reported to favor closer proximity than Americans, at least when interacting with acquaintances (Smith & Bond, 1993), and many researchers have noted that women in general are often comfortable with closer interpersonal distances than men are. Yet one study of Egyptian and U.S. students found that Egyptian female students wanted males, both friends and strangers, to keep a greater distance than the U.S. women did (Sanders, Hakky, & Brizzolara, 1985). This difference between Egyptian and U.S. women may reflect the strong emphasis in some aspects of Egyptian culture on women maintaining their respectability by keeping separate from men.

Why Should Gender Be Related to Communication Patterns?

Explanations that have been suggested for the relationship between gender and communication patterns include gender differences in social power, childhood socialization, current cultural context, and physical size. As a subordinate group, women may find their well-being depends on understanding and pleasing men. This necessity to understand and to



Culture and gender are both important factors in individuals' preferred use of space.

please may account for some of the observed gender differences in listening, encouraging other speakers, smiling, and deferential posture and gestures. On the other side of the coin, men's tendency to dominate conversations and to occupy more space than women may stem from a sense of entitlement that goes with their higher social power.

Childhood socialization may play a role in orienting individuals to such power differences. Awareness of power differences is probably only one part of the reason for gender-related differences in communication, however. As we have already noted, much childhood socialization is done by same-gender peers. For example, girls seem to learn to be cooperative in their speaking patterns in order to get along well *with other girls*, not with boys. What is responsible for the development of cooperative norms for communication among girls and competitive ones among boys? One contributing factor may be the

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parental emphasis that girls, not boys, pay attention to emotions. Another may be the pervasiveness of norm-appropriate models presented to girls and boys in the media and other aspects of the culture. And once a set of norms becomes established, social psychologists know that it seems to take on a life of its own, shaping behavior even if there is no particular logic to it. This phenomenon can be readily seen when comparing cultures on dimensions such as gestures, rules of politeness, and so on. The same gesture means different things in different cultures; different rules of politeness govern communication between females and males in different societies. The particular behavior gains its meaning in large part from the significance attached to it by people in the culture.

Finally, a simple explanation for some gender-related differences, particularly in non-verbal communication, may be physical size. Males may take up more space because they are larger, and their size also prompts others to stand further away from them. Their size makes them more easily intimidating to others than women are, perhaps contributing to deferential speech and gestures on the part of women.

There is no single explanation for the relationship between gender and communication patterns. The issues are multifaceted, suggesting a role for power and status differences between males and females, socialization and cultural norms, and the stimulus value of gender. As we turn to a discussion of the friendship bonds that are forged through communication, it becomes apparent that communication shapes relationships and vice versa, perhaps leading to different kinds of friendships for women and men, as well as for women from different cultural groups.

Friendship

The British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, writing in 1792 on women's rights, declared that friendship was "the most holy bond of society" and "the most sublime of all affections" (quoted in Rose, 1995). A person without friends is considered unfortunate in the extreme, or even flawed in some serious way. In North America, friendships tend to be spontaneous and informal; however, this is not true in every culture. The young Chinese women who practiced the "women's script" discussed above often used it to arrange and promise a permanent, formalized "best friendship" with another woman (Silber, 1992). Among the Bangwa people of Cameroon, parents often arrange a lifelong best friendship for their children in the same way they arrange a marriage (Brain, 1974, cited in Rose, 1995).

Friendships between Women

Despite the generally agreed-upon importance of friendship, women's friendships have often been trivialized and mocked, and women have been portrayed as incapable of true friendship (Rose, 1995). Yet both the historical and psychological research on women's friendships indicates that, far from being trivial and fickle, such friendships tend to be deep, intimate, and enduring. For centuries, women have formed passionate, close friendships, as women's private letters and diaries attest. These relationships have emphasized self-disclosure, emotional closeness, and empathy, and have often been a core part of women's emotional lives (e.g., Faderman, 1981; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975).