



# Gender and Communication: Are There Decisive Differences?

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication can be defined in a few words, but comprises a gamut of nuances that are hard to capture in one mere sentence. To start with a generic definition, communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior” (Communication, 2020). Petkeviciute and Streimikiene (2017) point out that, aside from a process of information exchange in multiple environments and through myriad means, communication should also be considered from the perspectives of both, the sender and the receiver. For each of the constituents, the process requires several sequential processes such as encoding and decoding, which brings along the process of interpretation. In addition, communication can be manifested through multiple modes, such as linear, cyclic, triangular, or spiral.

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In their analysis on the origins of sex differences in human behavior, Eagly and Wood (1999) associate men with characteristics of power, success, achievement, leadership and control, while they link women with emotions, relationships, and communication. Interestingly, communication is generally considered to be a core aspect in leadership, even though the connection between communication and leadership is not always explicit (Cunningham, Hazel, & Hayes, 2020). While some sources may describe communication as a transactional process in leadership behavior—where leaders use communication to accomplish their goals—it is becoming more apparent that communication also works transformational, as it can serve communal goals, and address as well as resolve social challenges such as “political discourse, political unrest, persistent social inequalities, and uncertainty brought on by new realities such as climate change” (Cunningham et al., 2020, p. 23).

The mere way communication is perceived, and the weight it gets assigned, differs based on professions. Bloksgaard, Fekjær, and Møberg (2020) for instance, find that, while many police recruits in Scandinavia don’t agree on stereotypes of men being more competent at handling violence and women being better with care and communication, there is still a decent percentage that believes the stereotypes have merit.

## COMMUNICATION AND GENDER

The next section of this chapter will discuss some gender-influenced communication modes and a number of perceived stereotypes, as explained by multiple scholars over the past decades. A stereotype is a representation of a social group that accentuates a characteristic or a set of characteristics, which may give rise to a uniform impression of that group (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2009). Stereotypes entail simplified symbols, accepted by large parts of a community, influencing the way members of social groups are perceived (Gauntlett, 2002). As for gender stereotypes, Browne (1998) describes these as general beliefs about specific qualities and roles attributed to psychological characteristics and behaviors of men and women. Kotzaivazoglou, Hatzithomas, and Tsihla (2018) add a caveat that we should be mindful about the concept and context of gender, as this is an organic process. In other words, with the changing implementations of masculinity and femininity, gender roles may shift.

When considering communication within the scope of gender, we find that there have been differences registered in the way men and women process information, apply emotional intelligence, display leadership traits, use skills, and interpret communication (Jones et al., 2018). Pearson (1981) presented the terms masculine rhetoric versus feminine rhetoric, with the first one being decisive, direct, rational, authoritative, logical, aggressive, and impersonal, and the second being cautious, receptive, indirect, emotional, conciliatory, subjective, and polite (Baker, 1991). Several other resources (Leaper, 1991; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Wood, 2009) have confirmed that women are more prone to use communication as a relationship instrument with other people, while men focus their communication more on dominance and power exertion, and outcome expectations. Augustahealth.com (2017) discussed gender differences pertaining to verbal centers and memory. It states that “female brains have verbal centers in both hemispheres with more connections between words, memories, and feelings, while male brains tend to only have verbal centers in the left hemisphere with fewer connections between words, memories, and feelings.” Although this may lead to the assumptions that women use more words than men, it could also offer insights into the lack of confidence and competitiveness women may exhibit in the workplace. Since women have more connections between memory, feelings, and words, they may be more inhibited due to more vivid memories of past failures, consideration of potential failures, and over analysis and calculation of risks. Based on their research, Jones et al. (2018) observed that women seem to be more detailed and apologetic, while men get to the point more directly; women use communication to develop relationships and focus on the needs of others, while men are more geared toward giving rise to an impression of confidence.

The following two interesting side notes on gender communication styles may provide some insights in how these styles translate in professional success.

1. Juodvalkis, Grefe, Hogue, Svyantek, and DeLamarter (2003) found that men with dominate communication styles were more likely to be hired over comparable female applicants. The cause for this to happen may have its foundation in the very structure of job interviews, where problem-solving skills are high on the priority list, thus skewing the balance in favor of the direct and authoritarian communication styles of men.

2. Lammers and Gast (2017) found that today's era, promoting "soft skills" as most desirable and effective, and with that, a more feminine communication style, still does not propel more women into leadership positions. At the same time that female, people-centered leadership skills, such as empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence, are encouraged in corporate suites, there seems to be an undermining campaign toward affirmative action which includes hiring more women at the C-level. Several studies have found that the expected increase of women in leadership positions due to harboring the right skills has created renewed efforts to sustain gender inequality, indicating that even positive stereotypes confirming that women are particularly well qualified for leadership can hurt them in their ascent to top positions (Lammers & Gast, 2017).

### *Gender and Virtual Communication*

Jones et al. (2018) noted that communication styles don't significantly change through communication platforms. In online communication, these authors have noted the stereotypical divergence, with women frequently coming across as politer and more appreciative than men, and being more concerned about care-related issues, while men seem to be more focused on bring about change. An interesting, related finding came from Baruh, Chisik, Bisson, and Şenova (2014), who discovered that greater online information disclosure from males was perceived in a more positive light, and led to greater connectivity desires, while this was the other way around with females: the more information they disclosed about themselves, the less attractive they seemed to come across. Baruh et al. presented the potential explanation that conventional gender perspectives may be foundational here, with males being considered the action oriented ones, taking more initiatives, while females are considered to be more reserved and discreet.

### *Gender and Nonverbal Communication*

Gender influences are also registered in nonverbal communication. In several societies, males are depicted as aggressive, controlling, and having a take-charge attitude, while females are perceived as sensitive, emotional, and passive (Phutela, 2015).

Women are more expressive when they use non-verbal communication; they tend to smile more than men and use their hands more. Men are less likely to make eye contact like women. Men also come off as more relaxed, while women seem tenser. Men are more comfortable with close proximity to females, but women are more comfortable with close proximity with other females. In terms of interpreting non-verbal signals, women are better than men. (Phutela, 2015, pp. 46–47)

Crowley and Knowles (2014) largely concur with the above by affirming that there are lower expectations for women to regulate their emotions in social settings as there are for men, because women are often trained from an early age to avoid conflict and communicate in an overtly pleasant and agreeable manner. These authors also agree that smiling is more expected from women than from men, pointing out that a smile is sometimes perceived as a token of appeasement from those with less power. Conversely, Crowley and Knowles (2014) underscore that there is a higher expectation for men to show aggressive behavior, such as anger and contempt, since society seems to consider these negative emotions more appropriate for men. Bringing these behavioral cues within the realm of mental health, Crowley and Knowles posit that men more often express negative emotions but also experience higher levels of violent behavior, while women more often suppress negative emotions yet experience higher levels of passive-aggressive behavior.

### *Gender and Information Processing*

In regard to the processing of information, Chua and Murray (2015) highlight some differences that can be useful in optimizing the effectiveness of intra-organizational communications. The research of these scholars yielded that men appear to respond best to messages that are thematic, containing attribute-based features that emphasize the distinctive characteristics of a product, while women appear to prefer advertisements that are detailed, descriptive and have a tendency to compare products. Goldman (2017) states that a woman's hippocampus, critical to learning and memorization, is larger than a man's and works differently. This may offer insights into why women prefer more detailed communication styles as it is more easily stored into learning and memory parts of the brain. Men, as stated by Goldman tend to have a larger amygdala,

which is associated with the experiencing of emotions and the recollection of such experiences. This may also offer insights into why men take more risks than women. In work environments this could lead to the recommendation that women may prefer leaders that are highly detailed in their communication, while men may prefer short communications that highlight the areas of importance and how the information concerns them.

It seems, however, that the aging process mellows many of the gender-based communication discrepancies. In a study comprising 153 men and 151 women over the age of 40 focusing on sex differences in the communication values of mature adults and what the possible influence of psychological gender (masculinity versus femininity) was therein, MacGeorge, Feng, and Butler (2003) found that older men and women value affective and instrumental communication skills to a very similar degree. The main significance in divergence that these scholars found was that women placed somewhat more value than men on conflict management and comforting skill, while men placed somewhat more value than women on persuasive skill.

## CONSIDERING GENDER COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

In the sections above, a range of gender-based communication perspectives were shared, including differences. The general consensus seems to be that the following are some of the most frequently mentioned differences in gender communication: (1) women are more vocal than men; (2) women are more verbally skilled than men; (3) men are more action oriented in their use of language, while women are more relationship oriented; (4) Men are more competitive in their language use, while women are more cooperative; and (5) the above differences lead to regular communication frictions between men and women (Cameron, 2007). Some other communication differences often highlighted are, that men mainly communicate to support their prominence, while women do so to build relationships; men smile less than women, women use more paralinguistic (nonverbal indicators of listening and understanding) than men do; men will use communicative touching more to confirm their dominance (pat on the back or shoulder), while women will touch for connection (arm-touching or offering a hug), and women use more eye contact than men (Admin/Public Relations ..., 2017).

It needs to be underscored here that stereotypes are not always congruent with reality, as there will be many members from each gender who cannot identify with the stereotypes their group has been ascribed to. Additionally, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, gender expectations and implementations change over time, meaning that even stereotypes have a dynamic nature and change over time. Let us now review the above-listed stereotypes and reflect on their legitimacy in modern society.

### *Are Women More Vocal Than Men?*

Taking the persistent claim that women talk more than men into consideration, Hammond (2013) reviewed multiple sources over time on this subject, and found that there is no consistency in findings, and that the allegation is therefore not validated. Referring to a long-standing and often repeated allegation that women express an average of 20,000 words a day, while men only utter about 7,000, Hammond discussed a wide range of studies made of children (boys versus girls) and adults (men versus women) and reported that, while in some studies the female cohort did express some more words than the male cohort, the differences were fairly insignificant. Yet, she also presented a series of findings in which men were the bigger talkers. Aponte (2019) draws a similar conclusion and warns for falling prey to holding on to stereotypes that may turn out to be unsubstantiated and harmful to some. Roeder (2014) specifies that women may speak more when in larger groups, but in general the talk volume is determined by contexts, and can therefore not explicitly be attributed to men or women.

### *Are Women More Verbally Skilled Than Men?*

Swaminathan (2008) took a deeper look into this stereotypical assertion, and found that it is factual. There is also a scientifically proven reason for this to be, since girls seem to display greater brain activity when tapping into their linguistic skills than boys. Boys seem to need more illustrative assistance in learning language than girls, while girls have a greater ability to spell and determine the meaning of words, resulting in greater language accuracy.

While the verdict is not completely out, there have been scientific conversations about testosterone being a potential instigator of poorer verbal skills in men. Tests with transgender men have shown that their

verbal skills diminished during the testosterone intake process, but this finding has so far been refuted as unsubstantial. While neuroscientists and psychiatrists are still debating whether there is a difference between male brains and female brains, with some confirming and others discounting it, Barclay (2015) concludes that more studies will be needed to solidify this assertion. In an article debunking several gender stereotypes, Fulbright (2011) admits that a wide range of studies show a moderate advantage of women over men in this regard, but also asserts that there has been very little difference found in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and verbal reasoning between the genders.

*Are Men More Action-Oriented and Women More  
Relationship-Oriented in Their Language Use?*

In a study among Iranian graduate students (male and female), Pakzadian and Tootkaboni (2018) found that women showed more acceptance and facilitation in conversations, while men demonstrated a more assertive mode, and used different strategies such as interruption, topical changes, criticizing, and engaging conflict to establish or maintain their conversational dominance. One may take into consideration the cultural influences in a male domineering society that may have skewed the findings of this study. In a 2005 study University of California, Irvine, gathered findings that “men have approximately 6.5 times the amount of gray matter, while women have nearly 10 times the amount of white matter.” Gray matter allows for more task-focused actions, while white matter allows for easier multitasking. These finding may explain while men are more drawn to business-oriented fields with a compartmentalized focus, while women tend to operate from a broader focus when considering choices and behavioral actions (*Intelligence in Men and Women...*, 2005). In a senior thesis at Claremont Colleges, Merchant (2012) cites several authors to support her statement, “[o]verall, women are expected to use communication to enhance social connections and relationships, while men use language to enhance social dominance” (p. 17). Women have utilized the “tend and befriend” communication style for centuries. Women communicate to strengthen relationship bonds, while men communicate to solve problems. To balance out this stereotype, Ni (2020) points out that masculine and feminine communication styles are not gender-specific, and that there are both men and women adhering to masculine and feminine



styles. Ni stresses that regardless of one's gender it is best to be comfortable with both, feminine and masculine styles of communication. Upon clarifying this important side note, Ni (2020) lists the masculine communication style as power-oriented, self-g geared, verbally dominant, action, goal and issue focused, and the feminine style as relation and human-connection oriented, inquisitive and focused on others, affirming, mindful toward others' emotions, and humane. Addressing some weaknesses of each style, Ni (2020) emphasizes that the masculine style may be considered destructive to relationships, cause separation and isolation, may seem narcissistic, and disconnected from genuine emotions, while the feminine style could be seen as self-sacrificing, repressive of own wants, needs and feelings, subject to becoming dominated, and losing a sense of true self.

*Are Men More Competitive and Women More Cooperative in Their Language Use?*

The Harvard Women and Public Policy Program created an online Gender Action Portal, in which it confirmed study findings that men are more competitive than women. The portal posits that, while gender-based behavioral differences are factual in childhood, puberty, and adulthood, the stereotypes are perpetuated in the professional realm through a mix of discrimination and job preferences among women, based on requirements. This, then, may be the foundational factor behind why there are only 2.5% of the highest paid US executives being women. The Portal further explains that women may turn away from the long hours that executive jobs require, while they may also be turned off by the high degree of competition needed to succeed in such positions. (Harvard Kennedy School, 2019). Sharing the study findings, the Portal highlights that, while women hold the ability to be equally competitive as men, they often deliberately turn away from competitive choices.

The above perspective is verified by Niederle and Vesterlund (2011), who also found that women, while equally capable, often differ in willingness to compete. Niederle and Vesterlund add that part of this trend may be attributed to the fact that, aside from a greater passion for competition, men tend to have more confidence in their abilities than women. The above affirmation does not clarify whether the lesser degree of willingness could be related to childrearing, and gender role stereotypes and whether the assertion also applies to unmarried, childless women.

### *Is There a Difference in Communication Philosophy Between Men and Women?*

In an insightful article, Kinsey Goman (2016) reiterates several of the earlier made points about gender related ways of communicating. She considers verbal and nonverbal communication cues, and highlights strengths and weaknesses of each. Females, she asserts, focus their communication on reading body language, listening, and displaying empathy, while men have a more commanding physical presence, are more to the point, and know how to display power. Referring to the weaknesses in their communication, Kinsey Goman (2016) warns that women may come across as overly emotional, not getting to the point, and unauthoritative, while men risk the chance of making an overly blunt, insensitive, and too self-assured impression. Also similar to earlier cited authors, Mohindra and Azhar (2012) link gender communication differences to the ways the sexes are generally raised, with girls often being taught to “use their manners, play quietly, and be ladylike,” and boys being allowed to “use rough language, play loudly, and be rambunctious” (p. 18). In line with other authors, Kinsey Goman alerts us that in work environments we need an appropriate balance of the masculine and feminine style to be considered positively. The trick is, that there is no recipe for this balance, as it will be determined by circumstances, needs, and audiences.

### *Do Women Smile More Than Men?*

In a 2017 article, McDuff et al. stated that women are known to exaggerate their facial expressions more, resulting in them laughing more often. McDuff et al. found, from a study with 708 males and 863 females, that a higher percentage of the participating women smiled more and often longer than the male participants.

### *Do Men and Women Touch in Communication for Different Reasons?*

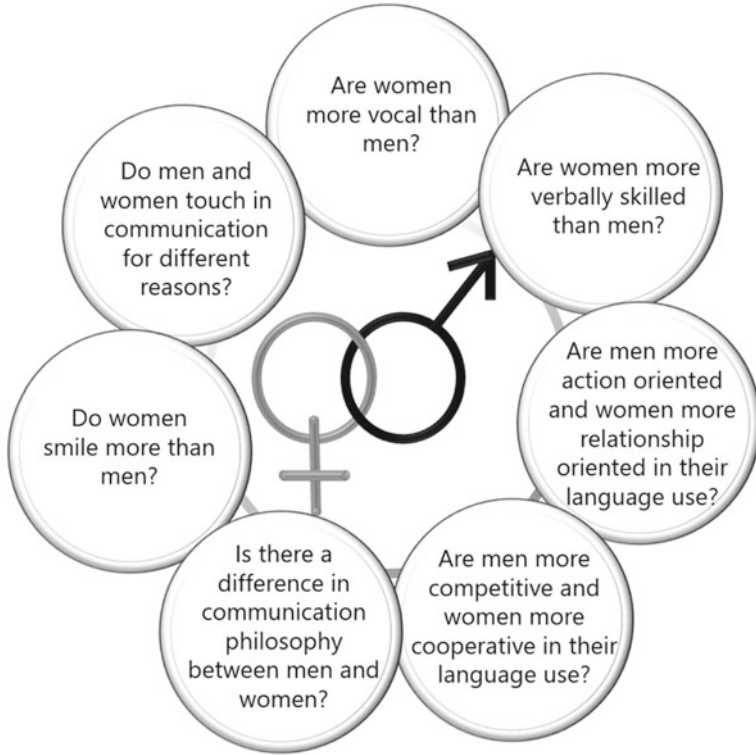
Touching is a form of nonverbal communication that varies based on individuals’ aggression, comfort, sympathy, and love. At best, this way of communicating can be called ambiguous, as it varies, even between the genders (Major, 1981). DiBiase and Gunnoe (2004) add culture and age to the parameters that determine the degree and application

of communicative touching. When considering human interactions, it becomes apparent that touching is more widely accepted when initiated by a person with a higher status toward one with lower rank, such as manager with employee, doctor with nurse or customer with waitress (Major, 1981). Henley (1977) posits that nonreciprocal touch is associated with power, may represent the balance of power in a relationship, and can serve as a cue symbolic of power. Since most C-level positions, till date, are held by males, this type of touching, represented by pats on the back or touching shoulders, have been predominantly assigned to men, leading to the general impression that men professionally touch to confirm their dominance, while women, often in less powerful positions, and attributed with greater expressiveness of emotions such as empathy and interest, touch for connection. Henley (1973) confirms the above by stating that the frequently occurring status difference (in work settings), gives men a touching privilege, which, in turn, contributes to their domination of women. DiBiase and Gunnoe (2004) add that men are more prone to touch with their hands, while women touch more with other body parts. These authors also caution that touching patterns should not be generalized without caution, as male and female touching patterns are not universal, so they are unlikely to be the result of biological predispositions only (Fig. 4.1).

## ADDRESSING GENDER COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

As several authors cited in this chapter have indicated, gender stereotyping is complicated due to the ever-changing nature of humans and the ways they behave within and perceive genders. As social dynamics change, and certain professions and behaviors become more accepted across genders, stereotyping may increasingly gain the reputation of a slippery slope. Other important contributors to the fading stereotypes may be the changing ways boys and girls are raised, with deliberately less emphasis on their gender, while cultural aspects may also become diluted in our increasingly interconnected world with growing exposure through social and other media.

As has also been mentioned in this chapter, there is still debate among various streams of scientists about the issue of brain differences between males and females, with some sources claiming that there is no such thing as a male or a female brain, and others vehemently defending the



**Fig. 4.1** Overview of the gender communication differences discussed

divergences in, for instance, the uses of language skills, and sensitivity awareness.

It is, indeed, not an easy task to discern where certain communication trends originate from, and the most acceptable answer to this question may be that we will learn more as cultural, social, and professional dynamics shift.

We may consider ourselves fortunate that contemporary times dilute many of the gender stereotypes, thus reducing the opportunity to nurture biases toward behaviors of men and women. That said, it is critical to end this chapter with the cautionary statement that the magnitude of “typical” gender assigned behaviors remain at the individual level, and will continue to be applied or defied as such.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- Several sources relate males with characteristics of power, success, achievement, leadership and control, and females with emotions, relationships, and communication.
- The way communication modes are accepted among male and female counterparts is often influenced by factors such as upbringing, culture, and work environments.
- We should be mindful about the concept and context of gender, as this is an organic process. With the changing implementations of masculinity and femininity, gender roles are shifting.
- Several resources have confirmed that women are more prone to use communication as a relationship instrument with other people, while men focus their communication more on dominance and power exertion, and outcome expectations.
- Communication styles don't significantly change through communication platforms. In online communication, women frequently coming across as politer and more appreciative, while men seem to be more focused on bring about change.
- Gender influences are also registered in nonverbal communication. In several societies, males are depicted as aggressive, controlling, and having a take-charge attitude, while females are perceived as sensitive, emotional, and passive.
- In regard to the processing of information, women may prefer leaders that are highly detailed in their communication, while men may prefer short communications that highlight the areas of importance and how the information concerns them.
- Addressing some commonly listed differences in gender communication:
  - *Are women more vocal than men?* There is no clear evidence that such is the case. Much of the talk volume is determined by contexts, and can therefore not explicitly be attributed to men or women.
  - *Are women more verbally skilled than men?* While the verdict is not completely out, a wide range of studies show a moderate advantage of women over men in this regard, but also asserts that there has been very little difference found in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and verbal reasoning between the genders.

- *Are men more action-oriented and women more relationship-oriented in their language use?* Masculine and feminine communication styles are not gender-specific. There are both men and women adhering to masculine and feminine styles. Regardless of one's gender it is best to be comfortable with both, feminine and masculine styles of communication.
- *Are men more competitive and women more cooperative in their language use?* Studies have found that men are more competitive than women. The stereotypes infused in the raising process are often perpetuated in the professional realm through a mix of discrimination and job preferences among women, based on requirements. While women hold the ability to be equally competitive as men, they often deliberately turn away from competitive choices.
- *Is there a difference in communication philosophy between men and women?* Females generally focus their communication on reading body language, listening, and displaying empathy, while men have a more commanding physical presence, are more to the point, and know how to display power. In work environments we need an appropriate balance of the masculine and feminine style to be considered positively. There is no recipe for this balance. It will be determined by circumstances, needs, and audiences.
- *Do women smile more than men?* Studies found that a higher percentage of women smile more and often longer than their male participants.
- *Do men and women touch in communication for different reasons?* Touching is more widely accepted when initiated by a person with a higher status toward one with lower rank. Since most C-level positions, till date, are held by males, this type of touching, represented by pats on the back or touching shoulders, have been predominantly assigned to men, leading to the general impression that men professionally touch to confirm their dominance, while women, often in less powerful positions, and attributed with greater expressiveness of emotions such as empathy and interest, touch for connection. However, touching patterns should not be generalized without caution, as male and female touching patterns are not universal, so they are unlikely to be the result of biological predispositions only.

- Gender stereotyping is complicated due to the ever-changing nature of humans and the ways they behave within and perceive genders. As social dynamics change, and certain professions and behaviors become more accepted across genders, stereotyping may increasingly gain the reputation of a slippery slope.

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