Title: Gender and communication in social work education: A cross-cultural perspective.

Subject(s): CROSS-cultural studies; SEX differences; COMMUNICATION -- Sex differences

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Source: Journal of Social Work Education, Winter95, Vol. 31 Issue 1, p75, 7p

Abstract: Discusses the differences in the ways men and women communicate. Implications for social work education; Gender-based communication differences as cultural differences; Faculty-student interaction.

AN: 9508082904

ISSN: 1043-7797

Persistent link to this record: http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9508082904&db=aph

Database: Academic Search Premier

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GENDER AND COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Contents

Gender Differences

A Cross-Cultural Interpretation

Training Students to Be Practitioners

Communication among Faculty

Faculty-Student Interaction

Conclusion

REFERENCES

Two Conditions
Differences in the way men and women communicate verbally and nonverbally impact social work education in at least three areas: training social work students, interaction among faculty members, and faculty-student interaction. The author of this article suggests that it may be helpful to view these communication differences as cross-cultural in nature. She examines each of the three areas using this framework and makes suggestions for change.

Communication is the most important tool we have in social work for teaching, interviewing, and developing relationships. Gender-based differences in communication have been thoroughly reviewed by several sources (Borisoff & Merrill, 1992; Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991; Stewart, Stewart, Friedley, & Cooper, 1990). The purpose of this article is to explore gender differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication from a cross-cultural perspective, and to discuss the impact of such differences in three major areas within social work education: the training of social work practitioners, communication among faculty members, and faculty-student communication in and out of the classroom.

**Gender Differences**

When men and women listen, they use different behaviors and may, in fact, listen for different things. Men tend to listen for the bottom line, for some action to be taken or decision to be made; women tend to listen for details to fill in the full picture. Men use less eye contact and head nods; women ask more questions and tend to work at maintaining the conversation. Although women tend to initiate topics of conversation, men tend to control the topic ultimately selected by the way in which they respond—for example, by failing to respond or by giving minimal responses. For their part, women tend to pick up on topics introduced by men (Stewart et al., 1990). Research has found that men generally talk more than women and interrupt more. Women tend to engage in more self-disclosure, display more empathetic behaviors, and be more adept at decoding and translating nonverbal behavior into meaningful messages.

The reasons for these differential patterns of communication have long been in dispute. Some have explained the differences through biological theories—viewing them as innate; some have looked to psychological theories—believing the differences stem from cognitive stages of development or reinforcement procedures; some have posited social role theory—maintaining that we learn to act and talk in ways consistent with role expectations for masculine and feminine behavior; and some have looked to theories of societal development—hypothesizing that male dominance was built into the social structures, and that these structures determine communication patterns. Although all of these theories may explain some gender differences in language, a more recent interpretation may provide a fuller explanation: gender-based differences may be understood in the context of cross-cultural communication.

**A Cross-Cultural Interpretation**

Maltz and Borker (1982) contend that American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures having learned different rules for engaging in and interpreting conversation. The idea of distinct female and male subcultures is especially apparent in cultures such as those in the Middle East where women and men live more segregated lives. We may wonder if American women and men interact with one another too often to possess different cultures. However, an examination of how children learn language in the U.S. provides a different picture.

The rules of language are learned early in life, long before adulthood. Maltz and Borker
(1982) assert that friendly conversation is learned while children play in same-sex groups. Children, through preadolescence, work and play primarily in homogeneous groups in which they learn from one another very different rules for friendly conversation. For girls, closeness and equality is of major importance. Girls have "best friends" and tend to play in smaller, more exclusive groups. These friendships break up and change on a regular basis. So as not to feel rejected and to have a friend available, girls learn to read subtle cues of liking, to establish and keep close friendships, to be cooperative and affiliative and to read any danger signs of an imminent breakup of a relationship.

Boys, on the other hand, also working and playing in same-sex groups, use speech for the expression of dominance (Maltz & Borker, 1982). They play in larger and more hierarchically organized groups than do girls. Status in this hierarchy is the overriding concern, and so boys learn the verbal behaviors of dominance--directing and winning an argument--and, since the hierarchy is always changing, how to handle victimization. Boys learn how to use words to gain and keep an audience, to tell stories or jokes; they also learn how to act as an audience member in these storytelling situations, to assert themselves and their opinions. Boys tend to make challenging side comments rather than supportive comments. Although there are differences in gender-based communication patterns across various U.S. subcultures (e.g., among urban blacks, rural Virginians, and urban blue-collar whites), the same three features characterize communication among males: storytelling, arguing, and verbal posturing (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

Therefore, during the time when children are relating primarily to the same sex, they are also learning the rules and assumptions about friendly conversation. By the time adolescents begin communicating across gender, these rules and assumptions are established and not easy to change. Women's and men's speech patterns show continuity with those of girls and boys. As men and women converse together, verbal and nonverbal communication and interpretation occur according to the rules learned in same-sex groups or cultures (Maltz & Borker, 1982); this often leads to miscommunication.

For example, women have learned to use head nods to facilitate and encourage others to speak; men associate head nods with the expression of agreement (Borisoff & Merrill, 1992). If a woman nods her head when a man speaks, he tends to think she agrees with what he is saying. If a man does not nod when a woman speaks, she tends to think he is not listening. Another example of gender-based differences is that women tend to use questions to initiate topics and encourage conversation; men use questions to get information (Aries, 1987). When a woman asks questions, a man tends to assume she lacks knowledge and so proceeds to supply answers, even if the topic is one on which she is known to be an expert. When a man asks questions to get information or the bottom line, a woman tends to give more details or the whole story because she assumes that he is interested. In operating under different assumptions about conversation and in interpreting one another's behavior accordingly, men and women often miscommunicate and feel misunderstood.

**Training Students to Be Practitioners**

The data on gender differences in eye contact, encouragements, empathy, decoding, self-disclosure, and use of questions indicate that female and male students may bring different skills and needs to the academic program, particularly to the area of client interviewing. Women might be expected to bring more competency to the interview process because female conversation is characterized by some of the communication skills needed in interviewing. Men may need more practice and skill development because they tend to use fewer listening and facilitative skills--less eye contact, and minimal encouragers, head nods, and questions (Pearson et al., 1991). Also, men typically pick up less on the last comment made by another, although that behavior is very important in social work practice. Men
should also be educated on the importance of appropriate facial expressions in communicating with clients; and should be discouraged in their tendencies to interrupt others or control the topic of conversation (Borisoff & Merrill, 1992), as these behaviors run counter to the needs of practice in many instances.

Social work education can help men learn appropriate communication skills and identify where they may need to switch communication styles based on the situation, called code-switching (Aries, 1987). Thus, a more female style of speech may be more appropriate to use in interviewing and social work practice, while a more male style may be more appropriate for administrative situations or in business negotiations.

Research studies analyzing gender differences on decoding (giving meaning to nonverbal behavior) and expressing empathy have yielded varied results. According to Hoffman's (1977) analysis, empathy has two components: a cognitive awareness of another's feelings and a vicarious affective response to another's feelings. He found that both sexes were equally adept at perceiving another person's affective state, but that females of all ages offered a more vicarious affective response. In a series of studies by Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, & Miller, 1989; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987), the findings showed that females tended to report more emotional responses than did males, particularly on self-report measures of empathy, but that females did not differ markedly from males in nonverbal (e.g., facial expression) and physiological reactions. Based on these and other results, the researchers hypothesized that males and females do not differ greatly in their tendencies to respond emotionally to others' emotional states, but rather in how they process and interpret their own emotional reactions. Males may be more likely to defend against experiencing such emotional reactions, and females may be more likely to attribute their reactions to sympathetic concerns. It is also possible that the behavioral response to another's distress differs by gender. Males may think of alternative actions rather than empathize in interpersonal situations (Hoffman, 1977), and may tend to use distracting techniques when recognizing that a person is in distress (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

Social work may, in fact, attract men who tend to be empathetic and to use a communication style somewhat closer to the female model. One study on empathy differences, for instance, showed that male nursing students were more empathetic than female nursing students (MacDonald, 1977). The research did not reveal, however, whether the field of nursing attracted more empathetic males or whether that behavior was learned in the program. In the case of social work, the field probably attracts males who are more empathetic than average; however, some males may need additional help with communication skills not generally practiced in the male culture.

In methods classes, male students may find it helpful to receive additional practice in the development of empathetic responses—that is, reflection of feeling, paraphrasing, and decoding. Practice in imagining what is being felt by clients and projecting appropriate facial expressions and verbal responses could be important for men. Men may need to check their learned response to find alternative actions until empathy has been expressed.

In management and policy courses, where action and solution behaviors are important, women may need disproportionate help. In administration and supervision courses, the study of gender styles of communication would help students determine its effect on informal and formal communication among staff. Because men are over-represented in supervisory and administrative positions, the communication style permeating the agency is likely to be more male-like, creating a disadvantage for women to initiate and express ideas. Because women tend to be more verbal under informal, nonhierarchical, and accommodating conditions—a structure more like the gender culture in which they learned to communicate—
classroom discussion should touch on the importance of the agency’s organizational structure, as well as administrative style and meeting formats.

Finally, since the practice of social work in all areas depends on communication, students should be made aware of the biases and assumptions that characterize acculturation into a gendered use of language. Specific content on the gender-based differences in communication should be integrated into discussions on communicating with clients, in staff and board meetings, and when supervising or administering.

**Communication among Faculty**

Gender-based communication differences also affect discourse and relations among faculty members. Eakins and Eakins (1976) conducted a much-cited study on verbal turn-taking, interruptions, and overlaps in faculty meetings. They audiotaped and analyzed seven faculty meetings of the same faculty. They found that the average number of verbal turns per meeting for males was far greater than for females; in fact, the man with the fewest turns had twice as many as the average number of turns for females. The authors found that persons with more power (defined as rank, seniority, and importance) tended to take more turns. In terms of average speaking time, all males spoke longer than any female did. Males interrupted more and females received more interruptions. The male who was interrupted the most was lowest in rank, but even he was interrupted less than any female.

**Two Conditions**

Another study of mixed-sex faculty committee meetings found two styles of "taking the floor" (Edelsky, 1981). The first was orderly, with turn-taking and one person speaking at a time; the second was more informal, with two or more people talking at once, jointly building an idea, with deep overlaps. Men talked more under the first condition, and took longer turns, although not more of them. Women talked more and as frequently as the men under the second condition. Men joked, argued, directed, and solicited responses more under the first condition; women did more under the second. Edelsky concluded that when taking the floor is an informal and collaborative venture, women become more active. When taking the floor involves hierarchical interaction and the floor is lost and won among turn-takers, women are less active. Women and men vary their style of interaction based on the situation or, according to the hypothesis of cross-cultural communication, based on the rules of communication learned from their separate cultures.

All of this means that in faculty meetings, committee meetings, and other mixed-sex faculty interaction we need to be mindful of these gender/culture differences. It is not enough simply to say that women tend to speak up less and men tend to take the floor more under a hierarchical condition. Instead, faculty should analyze the context and work at changing it to be more advantageous—particularly to women.

**Some Demographics**

Current statistics published by the Council on Social Work Education (Lennon, 1994) on faculty members by gender show that women are under-represented in higher ranks and over-represented in lower ranks. Statistics from 1993 reveal that, in graduate and joint programs, 29.2% of male faculty and only 10.4% of female faculty were full professors; 23.0% of the men and 16.7% of the women were associate professors; 17.0% of the men and 24.7% of the women were assistant professors; 19.7% of the men and 29.2% of the women were instructors or lecturers; and 11.0% of the men and 19.0% of the women were classified as "other." At the baccalaureate level a similar picture exists. Male faculty also
tend to have more seniority and to be older than their female counterparts (in fact, the average age of female faculty has dropped over the last several years).

These demographics suggest that males have more status and power on social work faculties than do females. This differential may compound gender-based communication differences, and female faculty will tend to speak less, be interrupted more, and initiate and be credited for fewer ideas in faculty meetings. The over-representation of males in power positions also means that those holding the most power will communicate in a more male style, which may have the effect of limiting the verbal contributions of female faculty.

To the extent that any of this happens, an important resource is lost to the field. More sensitivity to the female style of communication is needed to heighten women's contributions. In particular, programs might benefit from faculty training sessions on gender-based communication styles, with the objective of developing ways to change the atmosphere of committee and faculty meetings to facilitate a more representative flow of ideas.

**Faculty-Student Interaction**

In 1993, female students accounted for 84.8% of the students in baccalaureate social work programs and 82.2% of those in masters' programs (Lennon, 1994). Since about half of classroom/field faculty in combined programs are men, much of the teaching of the female students will be conducted by male faculty who need to bridge the gender gap in communication. In addition, the dominant model of teaching is still geared toward men. Despite the fact that women learn better in accommodating, interpersonal environments, the university as an organization is male-like with characteristics of objectivity, separateness, competitiveness, and hierarchical structure (Cooper, 1993).

Studies on college teaching in general show that faculty members tend to call on male students more often than female students, ask less difficult questions of women than men, give more feedback to men than women, interrupt women's responses more than men's responses, and establish eye contact more often with men than with women (Hall & Sandlet, 1982). Although most research confirming these tendencies does not take into consideration the sex of the instructor, one study found that female students ask fewer questions than male students in courses taught by males (Pearson & West, 1991). Data on faculty-student communication in social work classes is not available; however, there is enough general data to warrant a close look at patterns in our programs' classrooms. Do faculty call on male students more than female students? Do male students talk more frequently and longer? Are female students reinforced for speaking? Do any of these patterns change based on the sex of the instructor?

As educators it behooves each of us to be aware of how our gender might affect classroom interaction with students. We can make an effort to draw females into theoretical discussions and help to change communication patterns that exclude women—for example, if male students and the instructor comment and build on each other's points, but ignore relevant comments offered by female students. We can monitor patterns of interruption to determine if female students are interrupted more by students or faculty and, if necessary, intervene in the process. We can make eye contact with female students after asking a question and watch for nonverbal behavior that might indicate their readiness to respond, such as leaning forward, and then encourage a response.

Outside the classroom, in individual sessions and advising situations, faculty also need to be aware of the effect of their gender on students. By adopting a less authoritarian, less formal
style of communication, and avoiding gender-based assumptions, male faculty members can encourage female students to speak their minds.

**Conclusion**

What we have found with gender differences in communication is that women and men may be viewing and evaluating their behavior in light of cultural ideas of femaleness and maleness. These behaviors have been learned so early that they are part of one's self-image and difficult to change.

In conceptualizing gender-based communication differences as cultural differences, we can suspend values of right or wrong and try to understand the differences between men and women as our profession strives to understand differences among racial and ethnic cultures.

Communication affects all areas of social work practice. Social work students need to be aware of the potential impact of their gender and that of the client in the interviewing process. The effect of gender composition will also impact staff and board meetings, the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and management activities. As social work educators we need to present material in class on the nature of gender differences in communication and the impact of such differences. Using a cross-cultural prospective can help discourage stereotyping and finger pointing, and free the communication style of women from devaluation by both sexes.

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Accepted 6/94.

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Item Number: 9508082904