

Exploring the Impact of Gender Differences on Nonverbal Communication: An In-Depth Analysis with Impression Management Theory

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Abstract: *Various researches have detected small but significant gender differences in non-verbal communication among adults and children. But do these differences play an important role in acting as an obstacle to effective communication? This paper attempts to find how gender differences affect nonverbal communication with the impression management of Erving Goffman as the theoretical framework. The study was conducted with primary data collected on nonverbal communication differences among genders, supported by secondary data findings. For an extensive analysis, besides communicational, feminist, biological, psychoanalytic and socio-cultural theories were taken into account. There are various established nonverbal gender differences for behaviour and skill showing like smiling, facial and gesture expression. However, primary research findings point out that (among the educated youth) in most cases, there seems to be little to no gender difference. However, there are contradictions in the encoding and decoding of nonverbal communication between sender and receiver of different genders.*

Keywords: nonverbal communication, gender, impression management, effective communication

1. Introduction

Nonverbal communication is the exchange of signs, other than words, that are directed and used with some degree of violation as part of a message (Burgoon et al., 2016). At the same time, gender is a social construct which is constantly evident and relevant in societies. People respond to gender, think about it, and enact it in myriad conscious and unconscious ways (Hall & Gunnery, 2013). Even though numerous ethnicities and cultures exist around the world, it is rare to find a society without gender differences in nonverbal communication.

Gender is an important human character and significantly influences nonverbal communication because of the believed or appearing differential presentation rules to be in effect for men and women (Hall, 1990). These differences are commonly identified in vocal patterns, intensities, length of speaking turn, eye gazing and contact, amount and timing of smiling behaviour, posture and movement, spacing, and the amount, initiation, and area of touching (Blahna, 1975). This paper addresses the issue of how nonverbal communication differs among gender (confined to women and men because of limited study)

2. Literature Survey

Communication is a process of transmitting and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages. It is considered as effective when it achieves the desired response or reaction from the receiver (Murphy et al., 1997). Effective communication is often subjugated by different obstacles and noises. One of the first domains psychologists looked at gender differences was nonverbal communication (e.g. Gates, 1923). Since then, extensive literature has grown that describes both nonverbal behaviour, that is, nonverbal cues available to the senses (e.g., can be seen or heard) and accuracy in sending and receiving nonverbal cues.

In his essay "The Nature of deference and demeanour" (Goffman, 1956), Erving Goffman states that in the interaction of superordinates and subordinates, there are nonreciprocal relations, which is expressed through the mode of touching (e.g., higher status people initiated touching more often than lower status people). This was important to some researchers in creating a model for interpreting differences in gestures of men towards women and women towards men. By the 1970s, feminist scholars became interested in how differences in the forms and understanding of communication can be reflected among men and women.

Studies in kinesics have shown that women show more facial expressions, predominantly positive ones like smiling (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978), but these may not necessarily represent the felt emotions. Smiling is considered the most common emotional mask (Ekman & Friesen, 2003). Tactile studies show that women are more touched than men from infancy, and women initiate more touch (Hall, 1990). Studies of gender differences in the use of space or proxemics indicate that men are more expansive in the use of space around them (Henley, 1977), and men stand or sit farther apart from each other than women (Hall, 1990). In studies concerning paralanguage, more variability in pitch and more expressiveness were found in women's voices. Women also had more precise pronunciation, whereas men's speech had more disturbances like errors and pauses (Hall, 1990).

Expressions and gestures are often considered to be outward manifestations of internal states. Some believe these expressions' gendered differences are biologically rooted (BRODY, 1999), and others propose they are learned through socialisation (Epstein, 1986). Birdwhistell claimed that gendered differences in kinesics are culturally formed to "organise gender" or to make it recognisable to be male or female by position, movement and expression (Birdwhistell,

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2007). In her theory of innate biological differences, Dianne McGuinness points to female superiority in language skills and better fine - motor coordination and says these are independent of culture (McGuinness, 1975).

Problem Definition

The purpose of the study is to examine the interactive effect of gender in nonverbal communication. The research questions set forth to guide this study were: What are the gender differences existing in the non - verbal communication of men and women? How does gender difference act as an obstacle in nonverbal communication?

3. Methodology

Primary research was conducted, with a sample size of 156 men and women (64 men and 86 women) and 6 who prefer not to disclose their gender (whose data is not considered as the study is limited to gender binary). Respondents were mainly undergraduate students of various colleges in India.

The primary data collected is presented in a tabular form.

Nonverbal communication	Women	Men
Keeping eye contact with communication partner	80%	68%
Showing facial expressions while in conversation	95%	84%
Nod your head while communicating	64% show desire to listen to a person	63% show agreement with subject
Type of touch you have with same sex communication partner	53% arm touches and hugs	100% placing a hand on a shoulder, patting on the back
Usual sitting posture	45% closed position	46% open position
Lean forward during conversations	76%	63%
Remembering others appearance and attire	60%	54%
Voice	64% shrill voice	72% flat voice
Monochronic or polychronic person	56% polychronic	63% monochronic

Against the anticipated results, the differences in nonverbal communication between men and women were often limited to 10 - 15%. It was surprising to find out how 56% of women responded to sitting in open positions and 54% of men responded to sitting in closed positions, which conflicts with earlier studies on the same topic (Hall, 1978). This may be because of the change in cultural and gendered roles among educated upper middle - class youth in India from whom the data was collected. Tactile communication and paralanguage showed the highest gap between gendered communication, adhering to earlier research (Hertenstein & Keltner, 2010; Hall, 1990). Overall, there was a considerable difference in the nonverbal communication between men and women.

5. Result and Discussion

What everyone knows to be true turns out not to be true (Merton, 1984). One of the commonly studied nonverbal gender differences was how women make more eye contact (Hall, 1990) and show more facial expressions like smiling (LaFrance et al., 2003). However, the primary data show almost similar responses from both genders. However, there are gendered differences in decoding these nonverbal cues. Analysing these differences in the impression management framework shows that men keeping eye contact can be associated with the dimensions of power as it more likely symbolises dominance over the other. In contrast, women

A questionnaire was circulated with close - ended questions on generally ascertained nonverbal communication differences among men and women. Respondents were asked to choose how they usually communicate. Further interviews were conducted through a simple random sampling method to understand their view and personal experiences on whether nonverbal communication differences in gender act as an obstacle to effective communication. Privacy to their answers was assured to encourage honest opinions, and no personal information except the gender of the respondent was collected. Primary data was analysed under the theoretical framework of impression management, which was substantiated through various secondary research data (Hall, 1978; Epstein, 1986; Burgoon et al., 2016; Blahna, 1975; Hall & Gunnery, 2013; Briton & Hall, 1995; McGuinness, 1975; Henley, 1977; Hall, 1990; Goffman, 1959)

4. Data Analysis

gaze over their partner more when listening to show empathy (Brown et al., 1990). Similar gender differences can be interpreted in tactile communication (Henley, 1977) and body orientation during communication (Hall, 1990). Recent data shows that women now speak more in a flat voice than they did half a century ago. One of the main reasons for this change is that lower pitch indicates strength and dominance, whereas high pitch is associated with small size and submissiveness (Cartei & Reby, 2011). Even the voice, which was considered entirely biologically rooted (McGuinness, 1975), is proven to be not so. This ties into impression management theory, which suggests that people control their behaviours, particularly nonverbal behaviours, in order to create desired impressions of themselves (Goffman, 1959). This self - presentation of oneself may also be because of the pressure to adhere to societal gender roles.

6. Conclusion

Men and women show subtle differences in their nonverbal communication. However, this does not imply that a particular behaviour is the norm or is superior to the other (Hall & Gunnery, 2013). On the contrary, often, nonverbal messages are decoded with men as standard and women as aberrant categories. This gendered implication of nonverbal communication should be viewed under the traditional and cultural practices which treat women and men differently.

With a continuous shift in how gender is defined, with respect to time and place, the nature and interpretation of these differences are also changing (Weitz, 1976).

One should not prejudice and stereotype another based on their nonverbal behaviour (Briton & Hall, 1995). Instead, try to have a general understanding of the nonverbal differences among genders, learn the behavioural nuances and ask the sender directly for clarification instead of making inferences to have an effective communication.

7. Future Scope

Understanding nonverbal communication differences among genders is essential for effective communication and better interpersonal relationships. It is also vital for a better comprehension of gender and cultural studies. Developing a nuanced understanding of nonverbal communication among gender also contributes to enhanced interpersonal skills, leadership abilities and communication competence.

There can be limitations in the nature of the data collection method and analysis, including small sample size of data collected, study mainly confined to women and men, culture and other biases of population and most of the sample being confined to the age group of 20 - 29, which may result in variability in the results produced.

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Eva Maria Johnson is a postgraduate student at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, specialising in Development Studies. Her academic pursuits are driven by a profound passion for Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sustainable Development. Eva Maria is dedicated to exploring the intersections of these fields and contributing to meaningful research and discourse in these areas.