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Argument Use In Gendered Contexts

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ABSTRACT: It has been accepted for some time within Communication Theory that there are identifiable differences in how men and women communicate. This acceptance obtains both within the academic world and even more so within the realm of folk Communication Theory. I argue that the gender-identified differences run along distinct poles. The first major pole concerns the objectives meant to be achieved by argument: is it deciding who is right? Or, what the issue really is? Or, how a disagreement can or should be resolved? The second major aspect concerns the communicative tools used in settling differences and understanding positions. If the genders have different rules of communication, which rules will be followed? What sorts of arguments and evidence will be allowed? If classically masculine criteria are applied, then how can classically feminine voices be heard? It is argued that these issues do not loom nearly so large when gender is not confused with sex.

KEY WORDS: argument, emotion, gender, multifactorial

PROLOGUE

I'm going to begin this talk with a few stories, and the first is the story of a fight.

Ellen's boyfriend Ray had a lifelong friend named Steve. It seems that one night Ray and Steve, along with Steve's girlfriend Cindy, were out partying. Very late, about three a.m., Steve was driving them all home when Ray announced he was hungry. They stopped at a pizza place so Ray could go in and get a slice. When Ray came back out they were gone, and he had to make his way home alone with no money and well after the buses stopped running. Ray was furious, and cut his old friend out of his life. Two years later, Steve phoned Ray and suggested they get together for a beer. Ray told him to get lost. A week later, Steve phoned again and repeated the invitation, reminding Ray how long they had been friends. Ray relented, and later that week they got together.

Now we come to the point of the story. A week following the reunion, Ellen came to dinner at her mother's house along with her brother Larry. Ellen told them the story, and went on to explain how the night of the old friends' reunion she could hardly wait until Ray got home to find out what had happened. When she quizzed Ray about how the meeting went, he said it went fine. So, Ellen asked, what happened when you talked about the night you'd been abandoned? Oh, Ray said, we didn't talk about it. Well, what did you do? Do? We had a beer.

Ellen looked across the table at her mother and brother, and asked if that wasn't amazing and incredible. While her mother, Karen, agreed, Larry looked puzzled. What's your point? he asked Ellen. Point? she said, they had a fight that lasted two years! How could they not talk about it?

What's to talk about? Larry said.

Are you serious? If they were women, Ellen explained, there would have been tears and hugs and at least a three-hour dissection of what happened and why. Don't forget, her mother added, at least 50 emails, hours of consultation with other friends, and a hundred phone calls. How, the two women asked Larry, could they not talk about it?

Well, he explained, they didn't have to. Steve showed he was sorry by calling twice. Ray accepted the apology by going for a beer. Besides, he added, if they started rehashing it, who knows where it might have led. Good way to spoil a pint, Larry concluded.

Here's another story. It involves some adult education teaching I did many years ago. The course was entitled, 'How to Win an Argument', and it was very popular. I noticed very quickly that there was one group who consistently appeared in the course well out of proportion with demographics, viz., lawyers' wives. It seems their husbands invariably ran circles around them whenever they argued and they were looking for help. Gladly rising to the challenge, I always spent one session explaining the nature of legal argument and how to respond to it. The women, armed and empowered, invariably had a wonderful time watching their surprised husbands lose their advantage.

SEX & GENDER

Stories such as these underlie and substantiate our Folk Communication Theory view of the ways in which the genders view, discuss, and relate to the world of messaging and communication. Our folklore, as well as a considerable amount of real research, lends support to the belief that, by and large, men and women have different communication styles, different vocabularies, different topics of conversation, and separate rules for linguistic behaviour. Rather than list and reiterate what is largely familiar to most of you, I refer instead to Verbiest (1995, p. 367) for a concise summary and list of references. In a nutshell, men use language and communication *instrumentally*, to achieve position and dominance, to obtain goals, while women use language and communication *expressively*, to maintain relationships and cement contact. For example, when exploring troubles talk', (Michaud & Warner) write that,

In general, women were more likely to offer sympathy than men; men were more likely to change the subject or to tell a joke than women. This is consistent with the generally accepted stereotype about the communication styles of women and men and the predictions made by (Tannen, 1990) and others, suggesting that women are more likely to be supportive and men are more likely to be avoidant. (Michaud & Warner, 1997)

To use Gilligan's terminology, women reason and communicate relying upon the ethics of care, while men rely upon the ethics of justice. According to this line of thinking, to cite just one example, when a woman tells a story about a problem or difficulty, another woman will give her sympathy and recognition, while a man will offer a solution. The offering of a solution indicates a superior, knowledgeable position, while offering sympathy and recognition occurs between connected equals (Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990) (Timmers et al.) investigated and found support for these claims.

The findings of this study suggest that men and women report different motives for either expressing or suppressing emotions. These different motives confirm the idea that women are less reluctant than men to display powerless emotions because they are more concerned than men with relationships with others and less concerned about being judged as emotional. Men, on the other hand, are more concerned with power-

based motives, such as being seen to be in control over the situation, in the sense that they want to create a self-confident impression. (Timmers et al., 1998, p. 977)

Having said that, it is crucial to add the strongest caveats possible. First of all, each of the identified differences varies depending on situation and context. Female to female dyads, i.e., two women interacting, are different from male to male dyads, and both of those differ from mixed interactions. Moreover, cultural, social and geographic factors can play a major role in how someone communicates (Tannen, 1984). So there are any number of factors other than the participants' sex that must be taken into account.

While there are numerous identifiable differences that obtain between the sexes, one of the most interesting and well documented differences is that women *express* emotion more than men do. Note that the term used is *express*: there is no evidence that women *experience* more emotion than men. That is, Kring and Gordon write:

Although there is some disagreement in the literature as to whether women are more expressive of all emotions or just a subset, the majority of studies have found that women appear to be more expressive of most emotions compared with men. (Kring & Gordon, 1998 p. 687)

Another issue that must be mentioned is Lakoff's concept of code-switching (1990). Women, she argued, use different forms of language in different situations, so that a business-woman may speak and interact one way when at the office and differently when with friends. Using the same line of reasoning, we may imagine female academics, lawyers and politicians who can argue in a 'logical', critical, and linear mode with the best, but who change their style of communication when not at work. The point of this caveat, then, is that observations of people behaving in, say, a masculine manner in certain situations does not mean they are way off the curve. Moreover, differences in education are more profound, when examining argument styles, than is sex. In their study, Carrillo and Benitez (2004) found that in comparing groups by literacy level the males and females in each competency group were closer to each other than to the same sex in an adjoining group.

I also suspect that there would be interesting differences observed in people talking within different, mixed groups. That is to say that an individual speaking with friends is very likely to use different communication techniques and language than that same individual when speaking to employees or to a manager. Indeed, I believe that Lakoff's notion of code switching is an important concept that applies in many more situations than the initial very marked one that motivated her. To take a familiar example, virtually every philosopher married or partnered with a non-philosopher learns that the argumentative styles and techniques we take for granted when talking with colleagues must, to put it mildly, be toned down. We quickly discover that disagreement is not nearly so cherished outside of our ivory towers as within, and that our partners, family and friends are not at heart Popperians and much prefer to be told they are right and not wrong. This suggests that Lakoff's notion of code-switching may apply more broadly than just to females who find themselves in male environments. Goffman (1959), according to O'Keefe, argued that 'social conduct always enacts a social identity and social identities are constructed within relationships. In acting, one encodes not simply propositions or illocutions but also one-self' (1995, p. 786). We adopt the persona to fit the situation in which we find ourselves.

One very important variable in all this is the range of encoding any given individual will undertake. Some individuals may have neither the need nor the ability to alter their communication style, some the need but not the ability, and still others might have ability but no need. In

several articles, Barbara O'Keefe, along with various colleagues has discussed the concept of Message Design Logic [MDL], wherein people view language as having distinct structural possibilities. The three logics she identifies begin with the most simple and basic, viz., the Expressive MDL for whom the function of communication is to get across one's thoughts and feelings. The Expressive is literal and will, typically, not pay great heed to context. The second MDL is the Conventional. The Conventional holds that communication is a procedure governed by rules, i.e., a game, and requires cooperation between the persons involved. The context is relevant as it may vary the appropriate set of rules to use. The final MDL is the Rhetorical. The Rhetorical MDL holds that the individuals involved in the communication are what defines the context, that they are variable, and that they actually constitute the reality of the situation. The Rhetorical MDL believes that the interaction is the reality, and 'the fundamental message function is negotiation' (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 88). I have not been able to find evidence on this, but I would suggest that we would find that there are more women than men who are Rhetorical MDLs. Women, in our culture, are expected to be able to play a number of quite distinct roles, several of which are best undertaken with differing communication techniques. As a consequence, it might be expected that we would find more women with Conventional and Rhetorical MDLs.

Following this line of thought we can now import into this mix some feminist thinking as we may see that women may well be *pushed* toward the rhetorical Message Design Logic for political reasons. That is, most women's preferred mode of communication, involving expressiveness as opposed to instrumentality, may not serve well in any number of male-dominated contexts resulting in the need to acquire skill in alternate communicative forms. Gilligan (1982), Nye (1990), Lakoff (1990), Ruddick (1990), to name a few theorists, all make arguments that women's 'natural' mode of reasoning and communicating is different from that of men. Leslie Brody's research on gender differences has shown her that there are significant separations in the way arguments can proceed. She writes:

In particular, women express more anger in their close heterosexual relationships than do men, including being more quarrelsome and critical than their male partners ... Men more frequently call for a logical, non-emotional approach to problems..., and engage in a pattern in which they 'stonewall' their wives' anger by inhibiting their facial action and minimizing their listening and eye contact. (Brody, 1997, p. 369)¹

At the same time that Brody is making her point about anger, Rancer and Baukus' findings

suggest that females to a greater degree than males hold the belief that arguing is a hostile, combative communication encounter. In addition, females to a greater degree than males, hold beliefs about arguing which suggest it is a communication act employed as means of controlling and/or dominating another. (1987, p. 165)

Does this mean that there is an important difference between the *expression* of anger, and the ensuing argument concerning the cause of the anger? If we recall the first story concerning Ray and Steve, what was remarkable to Ellen was that they did not show or discuss their anger, did not talk about the issues between them, and simply went about their business. Had the anger been expressed, then they would have had to deal with it one way or another. The choice, then, was not to express the anger in order, presumably, that it not have to be dealt with. For many women, this would be nearly unthinkable. By that I mean that having a falling out with a close friend, fol-

¹ No fewer than eight references have been omitted from this quote. The reader can find them in the original essay.

lowed by a reconciliation would entail not forgetting the mishap, but repairing the damage. And repairing the damage could only happen through discussion, sharing, and, yes, maybe tears and hugs. This might even mean that the differentiation of expressivity and instrumentality affect the very concept of friendship as well as other relationships.

Are we then at an abyss? On one side we have an emotional woman whose every feeling is flashed across her face, and on the other a stony-faced man who feels lots of emotions, but never shows any of them. This raises in an emphatic way the two questions that are central to this paper. First, do men and women have distinct goals in argumentative contexts? That is, are there different conceptions regarding the objectives meant to be achieved by argument: is it deciding who is right? What the issue really is? How a disagreement can or should be resolved? When women and men enter into an argument they may have different communicative styles, but those styles are related to the goals and objectives most highly cherished by each sex. How does this play out for Argumentation Theory? The second question follows upon the first. If there are different goals and techniques, who gets to lay down the rules? Whose game is it? Is it all right to express emotion? Is it forbidden to be stony-faced?

GENDER & ARGUMENT

One obvious difficulty with answering these questions is the degree of generalization they assume. The picture that Folk Communication Theory draws requires a remarkable degree of similarity between all women and all men, the problem is that we are all aware of myriad exceptions. There are any number of women who can hold their ground in the fiercest of arguments, either personal or abstract, and a plethora of men who are in touch with their feelings and unafraid to express them when in a disagreement. Recent theorizing offers some interesting explanations for this difference in argumentativeness. Infante, et al, points out that,

Rancer and Dierks-Stewart (1985, pp. 69-70) explored both biological (sex) and psychological (gender) differences in argumentativeness. Although no biological differences were found, significant differences in argumentativeness were observed when individuals were classified according to psychological gender orientation. Individuals (regardless of biological sex) classified as *instrumental* (i.e., stereotypic masculine) were significantly higher in argumentativeness than those classified as *expressive* (i.e., stereotypic feminine), androgynous or undifferentiated. The individuals with a 'stereotypically masculine' psychological sex-role orientation exceeded all others in argumentativeness. (1996, p. 321)

In other words, gender rather than sex was the most important factor in determining argumentativeness.

We know, for example, that male teachers, therapists and social workers, most often have communication characteristics associated with females, and that their levels of expressiveness rank high on the male continuum. Indeed, there is interesting evidence that focusing on *feminine* and *masculine* traits can be more scientifically relevant than sex, i.e., male and female, as a predictor for verbal behaviour (Lippa, 2001), and I will have more to say about this below.

How does this help us move away from an abyss that is, after all, fairly well cherished in popular culture and folk psychology? Well, we can shrink the abyss dramatically when we introduce the idea of masculine and feminine as multi-factorial characteristics. Rose Marie Hoffman explains.

Until the mid-1970s, it was commonly believed that masculinity-femininity was bipolar and unifactorial By this it is meant that masculinity and femininity were conceptualized as opposite ends of a single contin-

uum along which every individual could be placed; a person was deemed either masculine or feminine, for the most part. (Hoffman, 2001, p. 473)

There were always questions about the unifactorial approach (Constantinople, 1973), but later work, while not abjuring the existing tests that measure masculinity and femininity, came to see that the two characteristics were independent variables, and one could have different measures of each (Spence, 1985, 1993) The meaning of this is that individuals have independent scales of masculine and feminine, because the two represent sets of characteristics that are not exclusive. One can, and often does, have a measure of each. Brody cites occupational differences in support of this hypothesis.

The argument that gender roles and not biological gender affect the quality of emotional expressivity is supported by studies of men and women who have gender roles which are atypical for their own sex. For example, when men engage in child care, their emotional expressiveness resembles what we stereotypically associate with women. Men who take primary responsibility for raising their children express more nurturance, affection, and disclose more feelings than men who do not. (Brody, 1997, p. 376)

At the same time, the vast majority of people have no gender identity confusion:

One's gender identity, or sense of being male/masculine or female/feminine, is maintained largely by focusing, albeit unconsciously, on one's characteristics or qualities that one includes in her or his personal definition of what it means to be a woman or a man and not attaching great importance to those gender-associated characteristics that one does not have. (Hoffman, 2001, p. 474 [citing Spence])

In short, independent of an individual's ranking on either scale, most people still have no difficulty in seeing themselves as masculine or feminine according to their sex. This is accomplished by simply focusing on particular characteristics of the property set, (e.g., being a mother, liking football,) as the most important or central.

Let me now return to Barbara O'Keefe's notion of Message Design Logic [MDL] and suggest that one of the stylistic practices that can vary with a Rhetorical MDL is the level and emphasis of feminine or masculine communication characteristics. This would explain why some men can be capable of communicating in an expressive manner, and some women able to code-switch (to use Lakoff's term). Of course, not every woman who communicates in a strongly masculine style is a Rhetorical MDL, and many may *not* be able to slide from one style to another, but, I suspect, that many can. The Rhetorical MDL relies upon the context to determine the role to be played, and playing the role as more or less feminine and more or less masculine would very naturally be one of the major scales. A propos of this, Kring & Gordon came up with an interesting result showing that those people scoring high on both the masculine and feminine character traits were the most expressive of all.

Both male and female participants endorsing a high number of characteristics traditionally associated with both masculinity (instrumentality) and femininity (expressivity) were more facially expressive and reported being more dispositionally expressive than those participants only endorsing a high number of masculine characteristics and those participants only endorsing a high number of feminine characteristics. (Kring & Gordon, 1998, p. 699)

Please don't misunderstand me. There are definite correlations between sex and communicative practice for the very simple reason that there is a definite correlation between sex and gender. What I am trying to show is that the variations from those norms are not hard to explain.

Indeed, there is interesting evidence that focusing on *feminine* and *masculine* traits can be more scientifically relevant than sex, i.e., male and female, as a predictor for verbal behaviour (Lippa, 2001). And, as our society moves further away from rigid gender stereotyping we can expect that more women will be able to utilize instrumental characteristics, and vice versa for men. This is not always done without cost. As recently as 1996 Daniel Infante, et al, found that when two women acted out a scripted argument the audience saw them as more aggressive than two men acting out the exact same script (p. 332; Andrew S. Rancer & Baukus, 1987). We may also speculate that a man who shows emotion may be seen as more emotional than a woman showing the same amount of emotion. The gender stereotypes that control our daily lives are not going to loosen or go away on their own. Only the ultimate elimination of sexism contains the possibility of freeing gender from sex and opening more options for everyone.

USING GENDERED ARGUMENT

Let me return now to the opening questions. First, do women and men have different styles of communicating? It seems that Folk Communication Theory holds that most men and women have difficulties communicating, largely because of the differences the genders hold in world views. Books *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen, 1990), and *Men are from mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), became bestsellers because the readers recognized themselves, recognized their styles of communicating, and, most of all, recognized the sorts of difficulties they themselves fell into when having cross-gender conversations. These books suggest that if we can learn each other's styles, goals and world views, then we can communicate better. (And that's why so many wives made so many husbands read those books.)

I, however, want to suggest that the answer depends very much on just what we mean by 'women' and by 'men.' If by those terms we mean biological females and biological males, then, I suggest, the answer is that the question involves a category mistake. Females and males, that is to say egg producers and zygote producers, are just not the sorts of things that have, construed as groups, communication styles. But, someone might respond, in point of fact, in our language 'women' and 'men' are most often used to refer to 'females' and 'males.' If there is an insistence on this semantic linkage, then I suggest we say that there is no reliable and inherent difference in communication style between women and men. Folk Communication Theory is simply conflating feminine and masculine into women and men, and that conflation is ill advised. When we think of feminine and masculine as multifactorial characteristics that are held independently by individuals, the range of communication styles becomes much more complex and much more independent of sex. Folk Communication Theory gets its force from the not surprising idea that more women are more feminine than most men, and vice versa. But, when we add to the category of sex the ideas of context, training, ability, inclination, education, and a host of other factors we may come to realize that we are better off looking at individuals rather than groups.

In the first story I told at the beginning of this talk, I described Ray and Steve's non-conversation about their falling out. That was the style they chose in the context they found themselves. However, when Ray and Ellen, a romantic heterosexual couple, had an argument they did not typically forget it and walk away. They sat and talked it through, sometimes until late in the night, and sometimes even with hugs and tears. Ellen's idea of resolving an argument with Ray was distinctly different from Ray's idea of resolving one with Steve – and Ray was able to accommodate both styles. In the second story concerning the lawyer's wives, it was a wholly different matter. In this situation the women were unable to hold their own because they

were unfamiliar with the rules of the particular style being brought into play. When they were taught how to draw out a warrant from the data and the claim, they were then able to participate in the style their husbands preferred to use.

There are various ways one can go here, but time does not permit me to do so. Let me just mention that, as I have argued elsewhere (Gilbert, 2004), paying more attention to the Pragma-Dialectic notion of the Opening Stage of argumentation can be very useful here insofar as it provides a conscious opportunity to create the ground rules for an argument (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, p. 84ff). In addition, the awareness of alternative forms of argument and modes of communication can allow us to be freer to adapt our style to the situation. I don't think there was anything wrong with Ray and Steve's resolution, and I also think that if Ellen and a friend had resolved a similar falling out by sitting up until three a.m. rehashing it and having emotionally cathartic moments, that, too, would be fine. The rules, to answer the second question, should change with the players. It's the players who choose the game, and the most important issue is that they both understand the game they are playing and the rules of that game. The difficulty, as I have argued elsewhere, arises when there is no negotiation of rules, and they are, as it were, laid down from on high without consideration for the needs and preferences of *all* the participants (Gilbert, 1994). The goals of Argument (with a capital 'A') vary markedly depending on the who, the where, and the why. The expectation that an argument involving issues of intimacy will have the same structure and follow the same rules as a critical inquiry seems to me to be assuming that they have the same goals. But when we are in an intimate argument it's often not about the facts as much as about the feelings.

I suggest that we have a responsibility to be clear that there are numerous ways to proceed in an argument, and that it is important to let the context, the situation, and the participants determine the best way to proceed. Most of the methods we present to our students are organized around the dialectical model or the idea of a critical discussion, and this is both fine and important. Yet many of the underlying assumptions on which these approaches rest contain many of the indicators of hierarchical and linear thinking point out by Warren (1988) and Nye (1990) to name but two commentators. So wouldn't it be good if we put more emphasis on the sorts of arguments that occur so frequently in our lives where truth and facts do not play a major role, but feelings and personal history do? Emotion, as everyone will agree, plays an important role in argumentation. Depending on the context of the argument, whether it is professional and abstract, or personal and intimate, or some combination of those, emotion can be expected to be present minimally or maximally. It seems that men experience as much emotion as women, but that men, aside from anger, express considerably less. We need to teach and learn more about emotion in argument and how it can be used constructively and creatively rather than instrumentally and manipulatively. We need to be sure that we are providing techniques for having profitable arguments that use techniques and styles not only peculiar to the highly masculine style, but also to the more feminine. It's fine for Ray and Steve to take a 'nuff said', approach to their dispute, but when one partner to a disagreement is not comfortable with that, then other methods of communicating should be available to the participants.

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