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Theory Probe: Genderlect Styles

Communication is one of the most commonly used buzz words when it comes to relationships, especially romantic ones, those in which a man and a woman come together in an attempt to merge their lives together into one. Many seasoned couples advise the value of communication in any dating relationship or marriage. What many fail to realize, however, is the fact that this emphasis on communication implies the merging of two cultures, regardless of each individual's religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. That is right – a man and a woman who share the same religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status still have a cultural barrier to overcome when it comes to communicating with one another. Communication among males and females occurs between more than one culture, yet many do not acknowledge this as a cross-cultural encounter.

According to Christian Parham's Journal of Communication Research "Communication Theories in The Office: Relational Dialectics and Genderlect," we need not look any further than the beloved television show couple Jim and Pam Halpert from *The Office* to find Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Theory exemplified. The show displays the theory in the way this couple navigates their entire relationship, from friendship to dating relationship, to engagement, and eventually marriage (Parham 54). The differences in the communication styles of each individual proves to be a hurdle to overcome during the progression of their relationship. Parham describes, for example, the way in which Jim and Pam face tension in their marriage relationship when they

disagree over Jim's career choices. While Jim is more focused on the family's future, Pam prefers that Jim works closer to home to help her care for their child (59). Listening styles and other forms of nonverbal communication were cause for miscommunication between husband and wife, furthering in severity when Jim proceeds with his decision without sufficient communication between he and his wife. This instance demonstrates what proves to be one of the most frustrating cultural differences between males and females today.

The Genderlect Styles Theory is based on the premise of the statement ““Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication”” (Griffin 384). This claim comes from Deborah Tannen's book titled *You Just Don't Understand*. The Genderlect Styles Theory does not seek to elevate one gender's communication skills over the other. It rather approaches the two cultural communication styles as distinct, with neither presented as inferior or superior (Griffin 384). Categorizing them as such would come with the danger of discrimination, favoritism, or simply false offenses and accusatory statements. None of these are productive when it comes to understanding each other and communicating well.

Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Styles Theory claims that males typically desire status, while females most commonly long for connection (Griffin 385). Though a man and a woman might grow up with the same ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic surroundings, their perceptions of the world around them will differ, thus it could be said that they have been raised in different subcultures. From an early age, children are treated distinctly based on their gender. Parents will talk to a daughter differently than they will communicate with a son. As they grow up, children themselves will treat each other differently based on gender. While groups of young males playing together often results in hierarchical definition among the group, young females will stereotypically choose games that are less hierarchically definitive or competitive (Rathmayr

11). It must be made clear that gender stereotypes are not the basis for this theory but rather the formation of the stereotypical behaviors supporting observable facts. These do not fail in asserting the claim that males and females have different aspirations when communicating. Katrin Rathmayr's bachelor thesis describes this as "The verbal battle for female intimacy and male independence."

In their article "Genderlect and Participation in the College English Classroom," published in the Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, three members of Delta Kappa Gamma study the Genderlect Styles Theory in the context of a classroom of college students. What they found aligns with the basics of the theory. They concluded that males had a tendency to dominate class discussions. Drawing from Deborah Tannen's research, these three women asserted the female's "more private and personal sociolinguistic experience" and the male's "more competitive sociolinguistic experience" (Galvin 24). Put it this way, and men appear to have an advantage, or at least a dominance, in the classroom. Perhaps this is a reason for educators to consider the Genderlect Styles Theory in their classroom. Now, this is not to say that women are not competitive or that they don't value status or dominance. There are many things at play in the making of these behavioral conclusions. Among these factors are confidence, fear of public judgment, peer pressure, and instructor pressure (Galvin 26-28). All of these factors, however, play into how students will interact during classroom discourse, and they speak also to the broader theories on gender-based communication styles.

Another researcher, James Elmer, approaches the Genderlect Styles Theory with the added angle of personality categorization and correlation. In his article in Weber State University's Undergraduate Research Journal, *Ergo*, Elmer addresses something that Deborah Tannen does not. He attempts to find the impact of cognitive style, something explored more

thoroughly in the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Test. This article brings to light the relationship between social preference and social need in the context of the Genderlect Styles Theory. Elmer claims that “Every individual has social need for connection and status,” rather male or female, introvert or extrovert (2). Based on his theories on social code, Elmer questions whether males are truly in need of status more than their more-likely-to-be-extroverted female counterparts. He draws on the conclusion that social preference in combination with social need results in social code, and he combines this with the idea of image maintenance. People strive to create and maintain an image that will establish their status in a relationship (Elmer 5). Feeling certainty in one’s position in a relationship leads to a greater sense of connection. In truth, much of Elmer’s research seemingly remains to be completed. Researchers have much more to explore when it comes to introducing additional factors to the Genderlect Styles Theory. Personality, needs, gender, image maintenance, and so much more determines how an individual communicates. However, James Elmer’s “Genderlect and the MBTI: Creating Social Coding Theory” skillfully introduces these many factors and the interconnectedness of it all. It reminds scholars of the implications of categorization and rash generalization based on binary characteristics, and it encourages and inspires future research.

In conclusion, Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Styles Theory offers much insight into the distinct communication patterns amongst men and women. It examines differences in social desires, listening and nonverbal communication demonstration, personality categorization in terms of social preference, as well as societal impact and treatment of each gender. Drawing from a multitude of examples, sourcing anywhere from the popular sitcom “The Office” to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a collection of researchers have sought and continue to seek understanding of one of the biggest communication phenomena of all time. The intercultural

communication between men and women, though rarely heeded, is nevertheless a cross-cultural engagement experienced by most individuals every day. While there shall always exist a hesitancy with placing people into gender-specific categories encompassing stereotypes and generalizations, there shall be equal attention given to the biological and social wiring differences between males and females. Theories such as the Genderlect Styles Theory cultivate a sense of empathy, a striving to understand. It acknowledges the need for cultural awareness and emphasizes the importance of understanding one another's social needs and tendencies when conversing with anyone, whether of the same gender or opposite. The Genderlect Styles Theory is an ongoing, ever-changing investigation, probing one of the greatest complexities of human nature in the light of sensibility to the diversity of mankind, the diversity in which God created to exist amongst us lovingly created human beings.

Works Cited

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